

A Social History of Political Cartoons in Tunisia 1881-2023

By

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the social history encapsulated within the realm of political cartoons in Tunisia, spanning from the onset of French occupation in 1881 to the contemporary landscape of 2023. Through a close analysis of a diverse body of selected political cartoons sourced from Tunisian newspapers, and online websites, this research endeavors to explore the complex historical narratives woven within these visual expressions.

Divided into five chapters, each corresponding to pivotal periods in Tunisia's history, this study scrutinizes the evolution of political cartoons as both mirrors and catalysts of societal change. From the fervent aspirations of independence to the tumultuous echoes of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, each chapter offers a view of Tunisia's socio-political landscape through the lens of graphic satire. Employing a methodological framework grounded in visual culture theories and careful visual analysis, this research dissects each cartoon, illuminating the underlying themes and stylistic nuances unique to each cartoon. Beyond mere caricatures, these cartoons emerge as potent artifacts, offering profound insights into the social history of Tunisian society at various historical junctures. Central to the findings of this study are the multi-faceted ways in which political cartoons both mirror and help to catalyze social change. Across crises and upheavals, these artists persistently wield their pens as instruments of dissent, using humor and satire to subvert authoritarian narratives and amplify the voices of the marginalized. This dissertation underscores the invaluable role of political cartoons as a dynamic and alternative material for historical inquiry. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these visual narratives serve as invaluable repositories of social history, offering a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of Tunisia's political, social, and economic trajectory.

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To the soul of Tejumola Olaniyan...

To my mother and my wife for getting me this far.

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# **A Social History of Political Cartoons in Tunisia**

## **Introduction**

The dominant practice in political cartooning in a majority of places is still the single panel, but there is nothing that recommends it other than that it is the long-established main tradition. Of course, arguments are often advanced to enforce it as the superior. Two of such arguments are that it is the more technically challenging because the cartoonist has only the single panel to make his or her point, and that it is closest to the “true essence” of cartoons as primarily a graphic art in a single frame. (Tejumola Olaniyan 12)

This dissertation unravels the intricate world of Tunisian cartooning, melding diverse theoretical paradigms in a rigorous empirical interrogation. Through the prism of style, visual rhetoric, and the vast realm of cultural studies intertwined with the social history, we navigate the nuanced interstices of Tunisian comics. This interdisciplinary engagement is not mere academic flourish; it is quintessential for decrypting the layered narratives within these selected cartoons. Central to this study is the societal narrative embedded within these cartoons, complemented by an examination of their diverse artistic styles and thematic nuances. This study endeavors to chart not just the evolution of comic art in Tunisia, but its deep-seated relationship with societal shifts and turns. Through this lens, we not only acquire insights into the metamorphosis of cartooning over decades but also enrich our understanding of Tunisian comic art, capturing both its historical trajectories and its current-day resonances. It unveils the cultural narrations, the embedded references, and the rich tapestries that weave through different comic manifestations. Comics serve as a valuable lens through which the nuances of a society can be traced, given that they draw inspiration from the everyday lives and concerns of the populace.

Notably, there exists a gap in scholarship concerning Tunisian cartooning. There have been a small number of previous publications regarding specific time periods, artists, or themes, but no comprehensive study or reference exists cataloging the full history of Tunisian cartooning or analyzing cartoons through the lens. This project aspires to bridge this gap by highlighting the most representative cartoons from important junctures in Tunisia's colonial and postcolonial history and analyzing them through the lenses of popular culture and social history. It aims to chronicle the situations, trends, and social issues at each pivotal juncture in Tunisia's history, and to elucidate the manifestations, influences, and evolutions of a popular culture genre that has undergone various developments over time.

The research methodology employed in this project is rooted in social history theory, which advocates for perceiving the past through the lens of its own values, as opposed to those of the present (Samuel et al, "What is Social History"). This project delves into the history of Tunisian cartooning with the aim of piecing together a portrait of post-colonial mentalities, lifestyles, political and social climates, and the cultural panorama prevalent in Tunisia. To render a nuanced view and analysis across the diverse temporal epochs under scrutiny, it is imperative to consider the interplay of cross-cultural influences evident in the tradition of Tunisian comics. As articulated by Christopher Lloyd in his article "The Methodologies of Social History: A Critical Survey and Defense of Structurism", individuals examining the history of social structures — broadly encompassing economies, political systems, and mentalities — are inherently social structural historians, alternatively termed as social historians or structural historians (184). Consequently, social history leverages an array of disciplines to interpret popular culture through the vantage point of the common populace.

Emerging in the 1960s as a distinct discipline, social history has illuminated our comprehension of the artifacts emblematic of everyday life and the insights they yield about societal interactions and human experiences. In his article “The “New” Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing” Laurence Veysey articulates that the essence of social history could be encapsulated as a narrative centered around the processes impacting the vast majority of individuals in any epoch, with a pronounced emphasis on those who remain anonymously subjugated and inhabit the lower echelons of prestige and living standards (4). Consequently, social history emerges as a discipline that prominently features subject matter rooted in popular or plebeian experiences, with this project directing its lens towards cartooning and popular culture. As articulated by John Breuilly, the notion posits that history steeped in political, economic, military, and other specialized realms each unveils only a singular facet of society. The amalgamation of these diverse historical types into a cohesive framework is imperative for unraveling the comprehensive tapestry of a society – a task aptly shouldered by societal history. Hence, the methodology of social history invigorates the exploration of often marginalized elements of routine and quotidian life, seeking to discern the underlying meanings and significance encapsulated within the realm of popular culture (qtd in Samuel).

Social history does not focus on the elite or bourgeoisie, because as Olaniyan argues concerning Fanon’s ideas on this class, “the African bourgeoisie is an unoriginal class that is “not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; [but] is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type.” It is “bankrupt,” lacks initiative, and its “mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation” but to be “content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent” (Olaniyan, “contingencies” 3). Similarly, Raphael Samuel adds that “social history derives its vitality from its oppositional character. It prides itself on

being concerned with 'real life' rather than abstractions, with 'ordinary' people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events” (Samuel et al.). Therefore, the study of Tunisian cartooning should open up a window on how artists and society think at a certain time period, in addition to the often-contested relations between the religious and the secular, Arabization and Francophonie, as well as traditionalism and modernity.

Karin Barber asserts that “Cultural expressions - whether paintings, songs, novels, plays, anecdotes, cartoons or slogans printed on cloth - are not seen by these authors as ‘reflections’ of an already-constituted ‘world view’. Rather, they are part of the work of cultural production, a cultural production which produces consciousness” (6). But to navigate this cultural expression is to delve into uncharted terrain; or as John Lent asserts in his book *Cartooning in Africa* “To survive, cartoonists have become masters of subtlety, stealth, insinuation, innuendo, and the *double entendre*. Hidden meanings appear in titles of cartoons, symbols used, plots of stories, and depictions of characters” (22).

At the heart of visual communication lies a unique form—the political cartoon. These images transcend mere aesthetics; they serve as potent tools for socio-political commentary. With pointed humor, they lampoon authority, challenge norms, uncover the evils of power, and expose absurdities. Within these inked panels lie layers of symbolism—a single caricature can encapsulate complex ideas, historical echoes, and cultural nuances. Caricature amplifies, making the mundane memorable. Political cartoons are mirrors reflecting society’s joys, fears, and follies. They capture zeitgeist—the spirit of an era. Whether it’s war, corruption, or technological upheaval, these visual narratives echo the cartoonists’ mission to voice the problems of their society. In repressive regimes, cartoons become whispers of dissent. They sidestep censorship, emboldening citizens. The pen becomes a sword, slicing through propaganda and speaking truth

to power. Cartoons transcend language barriers. Their impact is immediate—a visual shorthand that transcends words. Whether in newspapers, memes, or protest signs, they engage the masses.

In Hedi Timoumi's seminal work, *The Social History of Tunisia 1881-1956*, an intricate portrait of the Tunisian character under French colonial rule is woven, articulating its facets in hues both endearing and critical. Timoumi advances the argument that the core of Tunisian identity has remained unaltered, its metamorphosis arrested by the absence of an industrial revolution. This continuity of character is exemplified in the enduring ethos of resistance—a subtle sabotage of colonist interests, marking inaction as a form of rebellion<sup>1</sup>. Such resistance, Timoumi posits, has permeated the Tunisian work ethic, casting a long shadow on craftsmanship and engendering a dismissive view of manual labor. Yet, within this character sketch, contrasts emerge as vividly as colors on a canvas. The merchant-sailor and the farmer, embodiments of divergent values, paint a tableau of a people fluid in conversation and integration, a testament to their diverse heritage – a medley of Tunisians, French, Italians, Maltese, Algerians, Jews, Muslims, and more. Tunisians, the merchant-sailors of lore, are portrayed as collectors of global tastes, their culinary landscape a mosaic of pizza, pasta, paella, and Egyptian delicacies. They are depicted indulging in Dionysian revelry, a celebration of life with opulent feasts and flowing libations, embodying paradoxes of lust and religion. Timoumi's narrative invites contemplation on how the Tunisian character, shaped by the convergence of diverse influences and a history of resistance, manifests in a multifaceted identity, both consistent and contrasting.

In the following chapters, I attempt to illuminate a selection of political cartoons that are the most representative of each historical period. The cartoons were published in periodicals and

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<sup>1</sup> Hedi Timoumi explains that because of this, today the same mentality is still widespread.

newspapers, elucidating the dynamics between those that faced censorship and those that ingeniously bypassed it. The dialectic between traditionalism and progressivism emerges as a salient theme in Tunisian cartooning, with humor and satire wielded as potent tools with noble aspirations – to decolonize minds, awaken societal consciousness to the colonial predicament, and envisage the potentialities of a post-colonial society. Furthermore, this dissertation delves into the social history encapsulated within the political cartoons, necessitating a research approach that is visually analytic and deeply entrenched in cultural, aesthetic, and visual considerations, juxtaposed with their political and historical significances. For each political juncture, a curated collection of cartoons is examined to reflect the artistic and intellectual diversity of the cartoonists, who donned varied roles ranging from journalists, editors, and satirists to modern-day self-publishers creating their own platforms. Through this nuanced exploration, the dissertation aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted landscape of Tunisian political cartooning across different social and political spectra.

This dissertation embarks on an exploration of Tunisian political cartoons, delving into their diverse genres and formats within the intricate framework of social history. From colonialism's ink-stained inception in 1881 to the seismic shifts of the Arab Spring and beyond, we trace the cultural and social evolution of these inked narratives. Amidst a scarcity of scholarship, this project is an attempt to provide a comprehensive social history and examine the significance of the artists' stylistic and thematic choices. The dissertation analyzes cartoons by their defining features, such as their use of satire, symbolism, and caricature to convey socio-political commentary. There are five chapters, and each one deals with a specific time period during which the selected cartoons were published. From the earliest cartoons published during French occupation through independence, dictatorship, the Arab Spring, and to the present day, I

trace the cultural and social evolution of this art form. These inked narratives transcend mere aesthetics; they mirror Tunisia's collective consciousness, concerns, and social interactions. The contours of Tunisian cartooning emerge—a lineage shaped by historical events, socio-political upheavals, and artistic innovation. I explore the major influences—the voices that breathed life into this medium. Who were the rebels, then and now? What drove their pens? Within these inked panels lie recurring themes—satire, dissent, conviction, and resilience.

## **Chapter One**

### **The French protectorate and The Inception of Cartooning in Tunisia**

This chapter analyzes political cartoons in Tunisian national newspapers that appeared at the onset of printing and publishing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, presenting a number of different cartoons from newspapers that were established by that time. The use of humor, as this chapter illustrates, was a tool used by the intellectuals of the time in order to combat the French protectorate.

The cartoonists' styles provide a veritable visual feast: the whole wide spectrum from the most to the least iconic in terms of image, and numberless permutations in word-picture combination. Their use of visual perspective does not vary much, but their contrastive use of light and dark shades and color from cartoon to cartoon are unfailingly suggestive. On the other hand, the cartoonists, all their differential skill levels considered, presented themselves in their work to be highly experienced and pen-ready for any kind of crisis. Some of the challenges appear as contrary pulls among or between directions, which creates disparateness both thematically and stylistically, and both within the corpus of a single cartoonist, and across bodies of work by different cartoonists.

Since this dissertation focuses on the conjunction of social history and cartooning, the visual analysis of cartoons will be based on style and themes, as well as where they appeared and circulated. The dissertation studies the social history of the political cartoon as illustrated by the cartoons themselves – their content, form, and style; which necessitates a more visually analytic analysis, more cultural, aesthetic, and visual.

## The Colonial Press in Tunisia:

The first three decades of the twentieth century offered more than fifty humorous newspapers and periodicals<sup>2</sup>. These invaluable sources can give us an idea about the social attitudes and the way journalists reported the political, social, and moral mutations that were shaping the present and the future of the country. However, it should be noted that within the context of colonialism, there is a paradox between indigenous pre-existent mental categories and the astonishing manifestation of the freedom of speech. In his book *L'humour Miroir Caché de la société: Etude sur La Presse humoristique en Tunisie*, Azaiez Gliouiz raises some of these questions when he points out that, “In a colonial situation, there is not only the military presence and the economic exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer or, in other words, a physical presence established by violence and oppression. There is, more importantly, the presence of another mental structure with articulation as complex and dynamic as those existing in France” (8).<sup>3</sup>

Azaiez Gliouiz adds that it is in this double perspective of mental and material expansion that the upheaval of the traditional framework of the colonized, where power dictates the relation between the colonizer and the colonized<sup>4</sup>, relative freedom of press, Tunisian “journalists” and cartoonists could write freely, while at the same time resisting and criticizing French culture and

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<sup>2</sup> These can be accessed at the archives National Library of Tunisia, or consulted online in their digitized collection: <https://www.bibliotheque.nat.tn/>

<sup>3</sup> A note on translations: although I have consulted translations from other scholars, all the translations in this dissertation are my own.

<sup>4</sup> The statement by Azaiez Gliouiz highlights the dual nature of change—both mental and material—that occurs within the traditional frameworks of colonized societies under the influence of colonization.

mental structures that were gradually adopted by people growing up under the protectorate. In the same vein, these contradictions created a new dialectic form of “love-hate,” “repugnance and seduction”, and this still resonates in the twenty first century, as chapter 5 will illustrate.

The French community, in colonial Tunisia, was in the minority; its numbers did not exceed 160 thousand individuals towards the end of the protectorate. However, a preponderant minority, holding the political and economic power of the country, marked the media and journalism space of Tunisia for two decades during the French protectorate. In fact, this chapter explores how the French satirical press in Tunisia sought to establish this presence of the colonial press<sup>5</sup>, and to identify the roles played by this press to defend French interests in the country. The Tunisian political and cultural élites, along with the population that was educated in French, were readers of these newspapers, which made it easier for them to understand the French culture and the colonizers’ agenda in Tunisia.

According to Mohamed Hamdane<sup>6</sup>, the colonial press benefited from its privileged situation in Tunisia, as the French authorities were in favor of circulation. The French publications were better endowed with financial resources since they were the voice of a wealthy minority of colonists. With modern printing facilities, technicians, managers and experienced journalists from France or from colonial Algeria, this French press was far superior to the Arabic-language newspapers at the level of presentation, look, periodicity and continuity.

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<sup>5</sup> This colonial press was very rich and varied, as evidenced by the archival collection that can be consulted in the different Tunisian archive centers at the National Archives and at the service of periodicals of the National Library in Tunis. Hundreds of newspaper, magazine and newsletter titles, directories and other publications have emerged during these 75 years of French presence in Tunisia.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRAJze5jYwk> تاريخ الصحافة العربية: تونس  
"The History of Arab Journalism: Tunisia"

The French newspapers had a yearly subscription service, and soon after, Tunisian local newspapers started doing the same. The French occupation wanted to publish newspapers in Arabic that would support the colonial interests of the French rule. In 1887, They established a weekly newspaper called *Nata'ij Al Ikhbar* that lasted for a year. The French received the help of two Lebanese journalists to establish, in 1893, the *Al Basira* newspaper which stopped publishing in 1897. The failure of these newspapers was mainly because of their pro-protectorate content, which encouraged Ali Bouchoucha to establish a weekly newspaper called *Al-Hadhira*<sup>7</sup> on August 2, 1888. Indeed, French propaganda materials served as the quintessential political tool for maintaining and extending French influence and control in Tunisia. These publications acted as a strategic instrument wielded by colonial authorities, mainly to establish their cultural domination and above all to defend their interests and express their political demands and fight Tunisian nationalism.

The content and themes of cartoons and illustrations in these French newspapers focused on establishing and enabling French power, questioning local traditions and customs, and attacking any voices of dissent. Multiple cartoons from newspapers such as *Le Charivari Tunisien*<sup>8</sup>, focused their political satire on the figure of the “Bey,” the Ottoman military title given to ruling dynasty<sup>9</sup> whose role became peripheral after 1881. In fact, a number of cartoons

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<sup>7</sup> *El Hadhira* was launched by Bechir Sfarr and a group of Tunisian intellectuals.

<sup>8</sup> A satirical, humorous, and political illustrated weekly, appearing every Sunday, co-founded by J.B. Fray and Horace Meunier in 1887 and published until 1889.

<sup>9</sup> Husaynid dynasty, the ruling dynasty of Tunisia from 1705 until the establishment of the Republic of Tunisia in 1957.

show caricatures of the Bey as weak and under the direct influence of the Resident General <sup>10</sup>.

The French viewed the Ottoman rulers in Tunisia (the Beys) as figureheads who could help legitimize French rule and maintain stability by providing a sense of continuity with the past.

The Beys were utilized as intermediaries and symbols of local sovereignty, but real power was vested in the French Resident-General and colonial administration. The French Resident-General was the de facto ruler of Tunisia, and the French authorities controlled key aspects of governance, including foreign relations, defense, finance, and public works.

The French also worked to undermine Ottoman influence and the role of the Ottoman rulers by promoting French culture, language, and institutions, and by marginalizing and co-opting Tunisian elites. The French sought to frame their presence as a modernizing and civilizing mission, aimed at bringing progress and development to Tunisia. According to Azaiez Guilouiz, while the Beys were allowed a degree of ceremonial and symbolic status, they had limited power and autonomy, and their role was largely confined to matters of religion, culture, and traditional law. The French protectorate system in Tunisia created a dual structure of governance, with parallel French and Tunisian administrations, and this duality was used to manage and control the local population (132).

The historical transition from societies rooted in oral traditions and sacred texts to those embracing written and printed forms of knowledge marks a pivotal moment in history. This shift, particularly significant within Arab and Tunisian cultures, warrants a thorough examination. The reluctance and opposition faced by the printing press upon its introduction sparked a critical

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<sup>10</sup> The position of French Resident-General in Tunisia was not held by a single individual throughout the duration of the French protectorate, but rather by a series of officials appointed by the French government. The Resident-General was the de facto ruler of Tunisia, representing French interests and overseeing the colonial administration of the territory.

discourse in the evolution of these societies' cultural landscapes. In his book *L'Édition tunisienne depuis l'indépendance et le statut de l'écrivain*, Jamel Zran underscores the impact of such resistance on literary development; the emergence of the first Arabic novel in 1914 and the debut of theatrical plays in the early 20th century reflect the stagnation within the political, social, and cultural fabric of these communities. Zran attributes this delayed literary progression to the entrenched structures resistant to change. Furthermore, the encounter with modernity, epitomized by Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt, stands as a watershed moment in the history of Arab societies, signifying the transition from manuscript to print. This event not only heralded a new era in the dissemination of knowledge but also catalyzed a reevaluation of cultural and societal norms, underscoring the importance of analyzing this transformation within a broader historical context (Zran 16).



Figure 1: *Le Cri de Tunis* 1907

### Judeo-Arabic Press

Hebrew journalism flourished in Tunisia for a period of nearly 62 years. This consisted of Arab-Jewish newspapers, that is, newspapers that were published in Tunisian Arabic transliterated in Hebrew letters. The editorial and political orientations of the newspapers varied from the far right to the far left, reflecting the debates witnessed by Tunisian society under

French colonialism. Furthermore, Hebrew journalism presented the realities of the Jewish community, its internal issues, and its relations with other components of Tunisian society (Joseph Chetri). This unknown and neglected Hebrew heritage represents a documentary wealth that can be used to analyze the orientations of Tunisian Jews during the first half of the twentieth century. This includes their stances in political, social, and economic domains, their views on issues of colonialism, assimilation, Zionism, the partition of Palestine, the World Wars, and other issues that preoccupied the world at that time.

The Tunisian academic, Mohamed Hamdane, states in his book *Guide to Periodicals Issued in Tunisia*- that Hebrew journalism in Tunisia was.

particularly aimed at reinforcing the religious and cultural identity of Jews in Tunisia. Subsequently, it raised political slogans and advocated for the establishment of a state for the Jews, contemplating various strategies to achieve this purpose. Also, most Hebrew newspapers were modest in their resources and funding. Therefore, the lifespan of most newspaper titles was short, and the majority were weekly publications. They did not necessarily adhere to release schedules and often came out in small volumes and few pages, rarely exceeding four. (12)

The lack of a Hebrew language press led to the publication of the first pages in Livorno in 1878 *Al-Amala al-Tunsiyya*, (The Tunisian State) and then in 1884-1886 *Al-Mubashir*, (The Herald of Good News), as well as in Paris in 1885 for a bilingual outlet, *Al-Shams* (The Sun), in Arabic and Hebrew characters, intended for both Muslim and Jewish readers.

Then in June 1889, the first daily Hebrew newspaper in Tunisia, *The Telegraph*, emerged. It was founded by the Jewish publisher Masoud Maarek and managed by Cohen Ghannouna. However, it lasted only a year due to the financial problems it faced. In 1904, the Zionist Menahem Belaich

issued the first Zionist-oriented Hebrew newspaper titled *The Union*, but it ceased publication two months after its establishment.

Before French colonialism, Tunisians spoke a mix of Arabic with Tunisian indigenous language like Amazigh, also known as Berber. From the end of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, a large number of newspapers were published exclusively for the Jewish community. For instance, one Arab-Hebrew publication was a local newspaper for the Jewish community called *Sadaa Al<sup>11</sup> Mahdia*. Some have mistakenly assessed these newspapers as "Hebrew" in terms of language, while they are in fact Arabic, containing nothing Hebrew except for its letters and a few words here and there. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that their language is a form of intermediate Arabic, closely resembling Tunisian colloquial, with a few simple touches of formal Arabic.

With the emergence of Hebrew newspapers in Tunisia, many Jewish writers and merchants became prominent. Jewish merchants formed the backbone of the Hebrew press from its inception to its demise. Most of the newspapers were published by merchants who relied on them to promote their goods, target their market rivals, or to get closer to members of the Jewish community and the Jewish religious authority in the country, all under the banner of "promoting Jewish culture". Their activity was primarily concentrated in the "Al-Qranah" market in the heart of the old capital.

Since its arrival in Tunisia at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement sought to disseminate its propaganda through newspapers. It established newspapers and magazines in both French and Hebrew. The movement gathered around it several enthusiasts

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<sup>11</sup> Note on the use of Al or El in newspaper titles: This is the same as the article "the" in the English language, except that Al is used in Modern Standard Arabic, and "El" is employed in spoken Tunisian Arabic.

for the idea of a Jewish state, including journalists, publishers, and merchants, becoming the most prominent direction in Hebrew newspapers, especially between the two World Wars.

During this period, dozens of Zionist-oriented Hebrew newspapers emerged, including the newspaper *Al Ittihad* published by Menahem Belaich in 1904, and *Al Fajr*, which was launched in 1911 by Mardochee Ouzan, edited by the Jewish journalist Kaskas Maier, and described itself on its first page as serving "the Israelite interests in North Africa." Also, the magazine *Voice of Zion* was established in 1913 by Sofer Strock, edited by Joseph Bami, and was issued monthly by the Zionist organization in Tunisia.

Several other newspapers were also published, such as *Mubasharat Zion*, *Humanity*, and *Civilization*. In 1922, the weekly newspaper *Al Watan* was launched, representing what was known as the "General Zionists", but it ceased publication after issuing 98 editions. Furthermore, the well-known Jewish merchant who was enthusiastic about the Zionist movement, Nathan Garbi, issued a bi-monthly newspaper in 1921 named *Echo of Mahdia*, named after the city of Mahdia on the eastern Tunisian coast.

The heritage of the Hebrew press in Tunisia remains obscured and forgotten. The Tunisian academic, Mohamed Hamdan, mentioned in the introduction to his aforementioned book that "many collections of Hebrew newspapers have been smuggled out of Tunisia."

### **Printing and the Satirical Press:**

During the 19th century, European countries witnessed a significant expansion and consolidation of journalism as both a primary source of information and a mode of

entertainment. In contrast, Arab nations were in the nascent stages of exploring and establishing newspapers. Several factors converged to facilitate the growth of the press in these regions.

The introduction of the printing press was a pivotal moment. Its arrival marked a technological advancement that directly enhanced the capacity for knowledge dissemination. Reformist movements, characterized by efforts to modernize and introduce change, further underscored the need for a robust press to communicate new ideas. Additionally, patterns of migration meant that there was an influx of diverse ideas, further necessitating mediums like newspapers for expression and communication. Translators played a particularly significant role in this period, not only translating content but also pioneering the establishment of newspapers.

It's also crucial to address the impact of colonialism during this era. The colonial presence, with its complex interplay of control and cultural exchange, had a dual effect. On one hand, it introduced certain technological and structural advancements that could benefit the press. On the other, it often sought to control or influence content, shaping narratives to its advantage.

In the growth of the press, "networks" or interconnected groups played a substantive role. They acted as conduits for promoting reformist ideas and political actions, a role evidenced by the prominence of publications such as *Ar-Raid Et-Tounsi*, the *Al Hadhira*, *Le Tunisien*, *Al Irada*, and *L'Action Tunisienne*<sup>12</sup>. These publications, and others like them, are indicative of the

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<sup>12</sup> Some of these publications are available on the Tunisian National Library's website: <https://www.bibliotheque.nat.tn>

rich variety of influences that contributed to the development of the press in Tunisia during the 19th century.

The European model was taken as an example by Tunisian newspapers in Arabic. This is how local and national newspapers were published. There is a diversity of languages used by these newspapers: Arabic, French, English, Russian and Hebrew. It is undoubtedly useful to recall that the history of the press is intimately linked to economic and cultural history of a specific place, and to the history of printing techniques and international relations.

### **Language in the Tunisian Satirical Press:**

Since the inception of newspapers in Tunisia, the written press in Tunisia experimented with different forms of language, primarily due to the lack of a clear standard for all newspapers. The French occupiers determined what journalists could or could not publish, and for this reason, many of them resorted to using local forms of Tunisian Arabic that became a sort of coded language<sup>13</sup> among the population, used to alienate informants and translators who worked with the French army.

A large number of Tunisian intellectuals of that time, such as Mahmud Bayrem El Tounsi, started newspapers with the intention of evoking laughter and informing at the same time. Some of them relied on the spoken vernacular, while others picked Modern Standard

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<sup>13</sup> In the popular neighborhoods of old Tunis, pickpockets and locals had their own coded language called "Guejmi," which they mastered and used among themselves. Almost every neighborhood had its own Guejmi, like a code that distinguished its members from those of other areas, intended for encrypted communication to exclude strangers, whether passersby or military personnel. This aimed to create a closed circle for the purpose of self-protection and practicing a form of belonging to a certain group. See this article for more information on this coded language in Tunisia, Palestine, Egypt and Saudi Arabia: <https://shorturl.at/FIKR6>

Arabic as the language that reflected Pan-Arab identity and belonging. The main feature of this emerging press was its reliance on *written* jokes and popular folktales and poetry, and this explains the sparsity of cartoons in these early publications. The language used in these comical texts was indeed a form of coded language that was loaded with stories, wise sayings, and proverbs. Most of the cartoonists would hide behind a nickname such as “Abou Zaid al Tanbourini<sup>14</sup>” “Mister Chleka” and “Fadheel El Aaraj.” The cartoons of these early publications relied mostly on oral forms of literature, and satiric poetry to communicate the intended message of the newspaper, whether it was solely for entertainment or information. The cartoons were closely linked to the purpose and focus of the newspapers, notably that some of these newspapers reflected different political and ideological orientations.

We can understand the use of Guejmi as a way to achieve a form of qualitative superiority among its speakers, enabling them mechanisms for relief and amplification by liberating the repressed taboos weighing down society. On the other hand, Guejmi was popular among the toughs and pickpockets of popular neighborhoods, the *باربوات* or *باندية*; gangsters and bandits in the Tunisian lexicon, showcasing new slang and recently coined terms with the purpose of ego inflation. This is because words carry encoded meanings, charged by the speakers with a covert authority. Regardless of its form, be it coded or formal, language derives its continuity from being a field for dominance strategies and practicing a form of superiority. It was therefore used in comic newspapers as a way to entertain the readers.

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<sup>14</sup> Abou Zaid “the drummer”, “Mister Flip-Flop”, Fadheel “the crippled”, were nicknames used to hide their real identities from the colonial authorities.

## رحلة في ارض الجنت



من الولد الصخرة يسعونه لانما كانت ساردة  
ونظروا باب الداموس



بعث المؤدب و ما لقيش يقول و يشي  
مع تلميذه حتى وصلوا الى صخرة كبيرة



واخيرا وصلوا قدام واحد راسه  
راسا سد فرحب به و شكره على  
استنائه بتعليم الولد واستدعاء القطور



ومن السقيفة بدالك المؤدب يشوف  
في الخيرات



ومن بعد قاموا البنون برقصوا و يتوما  
للصباح



و حضر للقطور جميع من البر والبحر و كان  
المؤدب المنكبين ياكل و يتلذذ في انواع من الطعام  
ما راها شي في المنام

Figure 2: A Trip in the Land of Jinn – Weld El Bilad N°9

“A trip into the Land of Jinn”

The teacher was surprised and couldn't say anything.

The boy passed by the rock, until he saw the entrance of the cave.

From the large hall the teacher could see all the goods

And finally they arrived before someone with a lion head, and he thanked the teacher for instructing the student, then he invited him for dinner.

All the Jinn from the land and the sea were feasting, and the poor teacher was eating food he never saw in his dreams.

And thereafter, they all stood up and danced until the morning.

Considering this is one of the first Tunisian comic strips in a newspaper, it marks a significant development in the African visual narrative tradition. Historically, narratives were passed orally or through more traditional art forms in many African cultures. This move to a Western-style comic strip format might reflect the growing influence of globalized media in Tunisia.

The representation of Jinns, which are supernatural creatures rooted in Islamic and Middle Eastern lore, might be an attempt to juxtapose traditional beliefs with a modern format, thus bridging the gap between old and new. The mentor and student dynamic, a common trope, highlights the transfer of knowledge and perhaps an intergenerational exchange of values and beliefs. The imagery and text work hand in hand to narrate the story. The use of caves may symbolize the unknown or the spiritual world. The comic's visuals, with its stark contrasts and detailed illustrations of the Jinns, create a sense of mysticism and allure, drawing readers into this magical world. In addition, the sequential art format tells a story over multiple frames, allowing for a paced narrative that mirrors traditional storytelling methods. Each frame captures an essential moment or turning point, allowing the story to progress while retaining the readers' attention.

Introducing a Tunisian comic strip that centers on a traditional Arabic-Islamic concept like Jinn could be seen as a form of cultural resistance. By doing so, the comic strip subtly emphasizes indigenous traditions and stories, thereby asserting a distinct cultural identity in the face of colonial assimilation. Jinns hold a significant place in Islamic lore. They are often considered supernatural entities, and their stories are found in the Quran and Hadith. For Muslim readers, the story would resonate on a religious and cultural level. The decision to depict a story about Jinns might be seen as emphasizing the continuity and vitality of Islamic traditions amid external influence.

The very format of the comic strip, a modern medium, tells a traditional story. This juxtaposition might be reflective of Tunisia's own struggle between modernization (as pushed by the French) and retaining its own traditions. For Muslim readers, this could signify that embracing modernity doesn't mean relinquishing cultural and religious roots.

### **Social issues and the Tunisian Satirical Press**

Satirical caricature has found a vibrant cradle in the written press of Tunisia, demonstrating its relevance and humor by representing the flaws in the political world, primarily through newspapers and magazines in Arabic. Despite the predominance of Arabic-language publications, French-language newspapers have also made their mark within the country. These Francophone newspapers, including those circulated in France and its colonies, have featured political cartoons and caricatures concerning Tunisia. Moreover, certain leftist newspapers have used cartoons to critique colonialism. This cross-linguistic and cross-regional engagement highlights the dynamic interplay between Tunisia and French-speaking contexts, underscoring

the role of satire in shaping political discourse. The language of the satirical press was the spoken colloquial “Derja”, which was harder to comprehend for the colonizers. In fact, Tunisian press was tolerated by the French occupiers as a necessary evil and was allowed to publish since they did not have enough knowledge of the local language.

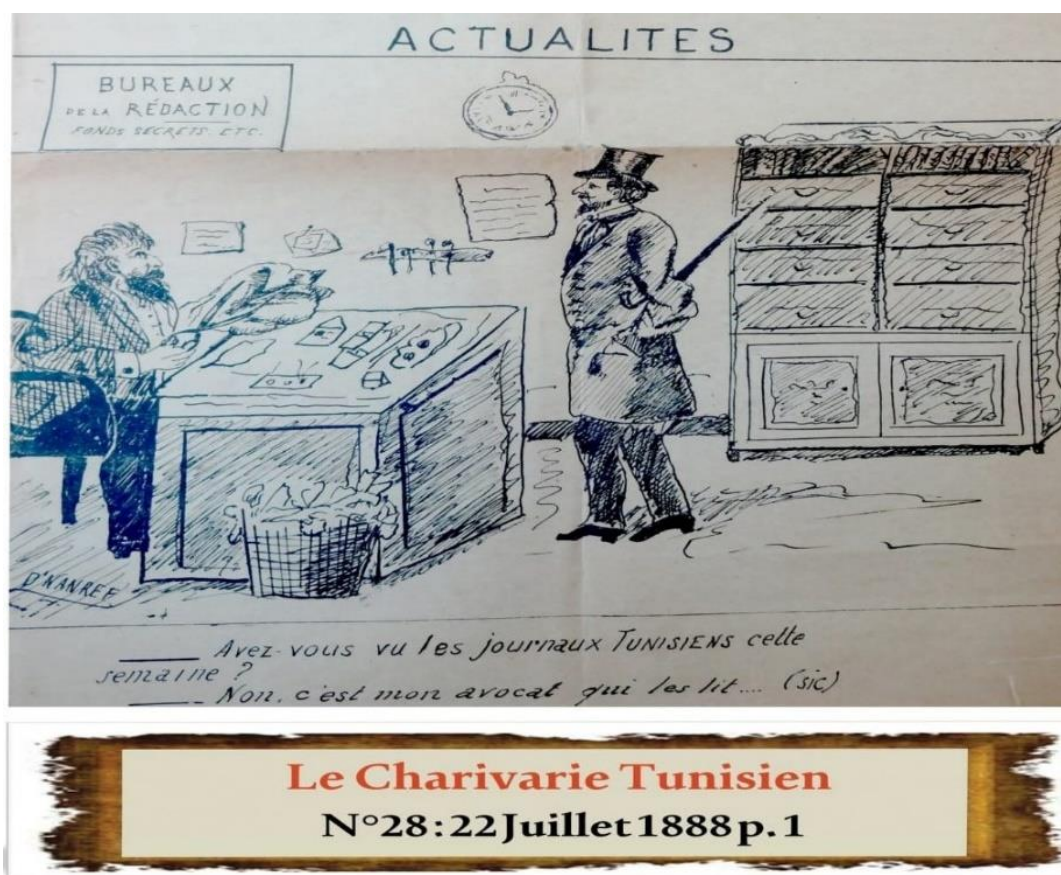


Figure 3. From *Le Charivari Tunisien* Number 28, 1888

*Le Charivari* was established as a response to the French newspaper holding the same name, *Le Charivari*, but it did not last for a long time until it was stopped by French authorities. On July 22, 1888, *Le Charivari Tunisien* published a cartoon depicting two French gentlemen

talking in what looks like an office. A standing man asks the question “have you seen the Tunisian newspapers this week?”. The sitting man replies “No, it’s my lawyer who reads them”. The fact that the standing man asks about “seeing” and not “reading” brings the existence of these very newspapers into question. It appears that the sitting man is cutting and shredding Tunisian newspapers, and claims that his lawyer reads them. The cartoonist relies on the combination of words and images to show the process of censorship.

The cartoon certainly reflects a certain type of satire, but one that reassures the colonists that they should not fear the masses, as they hold their grip around the country’s neck. According to Mohamed Hamdane<sup>15</sup>, the colonists imposed a heavy fee of 10 thousand riyals for those who were seeking to establish a newspaper in Arabic or 5 thousand riyals for a newspaper in French. Meanwhile, the colonial power continued to circulate its propaganda newspapers such as *La Depeche*.

In curating the selection of cartoons for this dissertation, I have meticulously sought to present works that epitomize the historical epoch in which they were created. These cartoons are not only reflective of the prevailing artistic trends and stylistic nuances of the early 20th century, but they also serve as visual narratives that offer profound insights into the societal fabric of Tunisia during a time of significant transformation. The rationale behind the ordering of these pieces is twofold: to chronicle the evolution of cartooning as a medium of political and social commentary in Tunisia, and to delineate the thematic and aesthetic shifts that parallel the nation’s journey through modernity. Each cartoon has been chosen for its ability to act as a historical lens, bringing into focus the ways in which cartoonists and journalists of that era

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<sup>15</sup> From an interview conducted by Aljazeera.net:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRAJze5jYwk&t=1s>

interpreted and influenced the discourse surrounding key events and everyday life. In presenting these cartoons sequentially, we read not just images, but a social history, unraveling many facets of the Tunisian culture as seen through the satirical and poignant gazes of its most prominent illustrators and commentators.



Figure 4. The Theater of War. *Le Charivarie* (1881)

Karakouz (Arabic: كراكوز) is a satirical shadow puppet theater genre, directly inspired by Turkish Karagöz (قارہ گوز), whose beginnings in Tunisia date back to the sixteenth century. introduced by the Ottomans. Karakouz was performed in Turkish, according to travel accounts, until the early 19th century when performances began to use the Tunisian dialect (Habiba Jendoubi<sup>16</sup>). Karakouz is the name of the hero of this theater, a mocking and comical hunchback. He embodies the stereotype of an illiterate person, strange in the way they dress, talk and behave in society, and subject to laughter and mockery.

He was often described as an ugly fellow, whose education and manners leave much to be desired (Jendoubi). This type of show plays heavily on storytelling, double meanings, puns, satire and comedy. Among the topics covered are popular superstition, sexuality and women, as well as misery and poverty. Many Tunisian sheikhs of the 19th and 20th centuries denounced or advised against Karakouz for religious reasons, due to the obscene nature of some scenes. However, this theatrical genre was at its peak under the French protectorate, with shows given all year round but especially during the month of Ramadan in the Tunisian district of Halfaouine.

This cartoon appeared in the French newspaper, *Le Charivari*, depicting a karakouz at a what appears to be a puppet show. A person holds the strings of the karakouz puppet, and on the left side another person holds a sword that shows one hand holding sword that is very close to the strings. Karakouz has “Tunis” written on his belt, to indicate that Tunisia is a manipulated

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<sup>16</sup> Habiba Jendoubi is a puppeteer and director known for her work in creating engaging and thought-provoking puppetry performances. Her productions often integrate marionettes, actors, choreography, and original music that evolves live during rehearsals. This innovative approach to storytelling, where motion and music replace spoken text, has distinguished her work in the field of puppetry. Jendoubi has received numerous awards for her contributions and has been active in training educators and children, notably with the Institute for the Promotion of the Handicapped (IPH) in La Manouba, Tunisia. She has been instrumental in promoting the puppet profession in its diversity and ensuring its transmission to future generations.

Karakouz under the control of France. The attempt at cutting the threads/strings points to the possibility of independence and emancipation.

The caption says, “It is only a question of cutting the strings in order to arrive at the denouement.” Compared to the previous illustration, this cartoon is more aesthetically and visually complex in terms of its framing of Karakouz as a cultural artifact, it is a scene from a show, but at the same time, one that tends to have a dramatic ending.

The cartoon has its aesthetic and visual appeal, as it invites the reader to ponder about the hands that are moving and manipulating the stunned Karakouz. The cartoon displays the ideas of war and theater as an invitation to watch the show, with the French readers invited to the front seats. In the French colonial iconography, the defeated indigenous figures are a recurrent cliché who always appears in a subservient or humiliating situation.

In the cartoon, no particular identifiable political figure is present. This cartoon can be categorized as what Tejumola Olaniyan calls “the cartoon of display”<sup>17</sup> that shows specific failings of particular individuals, groups, and targets at a particular time (4). The cartoon explores the idea of power through ridiculing a weak and defeated figure, and it appeared at a time where most French publications followed the same expansionist ideological orientation. The cartoons of this period offer a plural representation of conquests with a special attention to military events. The illustration of the fighting revolves around an opposition between the belligerent “savages” who are fighting against the courageous metropolitan soldiers. The conservative French press championed colonialism and offered its readers the latest news about the military achievements in North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

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<sup>17</sup> From *Taking African Cartoon Seriously* by Tejumola Olaniyan.

### **Sexuality in society:**

The Tunisian satirical press was often daring in dealing with sensitive or embarrassing social issues such as drugs, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases. Journalists relied on poetry, popular sayings, anecdotes, and cartoons in order to show people how to live correctly. These newspapers were a source of news, laughter, and an avenue for the educated elite to share their political and social concerns. According to Hamdane, journalists of this period had a moral obligation to educate and partake in the larger social reform project of the time<sup>18</sup>.

The cartoon is not unique or remarkable in terms of its subject matter, i.e., talking about prostitution, but is in line with numerous articles and poems focused on a broader campaign waged by the satirical press against sex workers in the first half of the twentieth century. A reader of *Al-Mudhakk* newspaper will find that prostitution, i.e., sex work, is one of the most frequent topics, among other topics such as drinking and drugs, popular religious beliefs such as witchcraft and sorcery, and women's makeup. This changed the Islamic and Jewish religious discourse – not to mention the colonial French Christian discourse – which was degrading sex workers as well. The Tunisian thinker and sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhadiba mentions in his French-language book *Sexuality in Islam* that Tunisia between the years 1930 and 1940 contained five streets devoted to prostitution, namely, Sidi Abdallah Guesh, Sidi Bayan, Mahjoub, Al Faras and Saleh bin Osman, and that about 300 sex workers worked in these streets. He also mentioned that “appointment houses” in Tunisia were mainly devoted to male prostitution. There was a brothel named “Sidi Ali Waki” in which a Frenchman and an Italian

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<sup>18</sup> From Aljazeera documentary on the history of journalism in Tunisia  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRAJze5jYwk&t=450s>

worked, dressed in women's clothes, and offered their sexual services to certain clients for five francs, and the price might reach ten francs, depending on the quality of the service provided and the social status of the client (Bouhadiba, 132).

Other cartoons come with a story or a commentary that shows a deep hostility towards sex work and sex workers, as well as homosexuals. For instance, on October 12, 1881, in a newspaper called *Al Tankeet wal Tabkeet*, Abdallah Nadeem wrote a blistering attack against male sex workers and homosexuals, calling on the government to arrest them and throw them out of the regency. It is also known that most of the streets dedicated to sex workers bear the names of saints such as Sidi Abdallah Guesh, Sidi Bennaim, Sidi Bayan, Sidi Ayyad, Sidi Boumandeel and Sidi Zuhair, and these names remain the same up to this day. This mixture between the sacred and the profane requires a closer look into the relationship of prostitutes with saints.

The intersection between the sacred and the profane, particularly through the lens of prostitutes' relationship with saints, presents a complex and nuanced cultural phenomenon that requires a deeper analysis. This connection often reflects a historical and sociocultural dynamic where marginalized groups, such as prostitutes, seek protection, solace, or legitimization through religious or spiritual means. In many cultures, saints and deities associated with mercy, forgiveness, and protection are venerated not just by the mainstream but also by those on the peripheries of society, including prostitutes. This veneration can manifest in various forms, such as making offerings at shrines, participating in religious festivals, or seeking intercession for safety, health, and prosperity. The relationship may also involve rituals that are believed to provide spiritual cleansing, redemption, or even a form of moral support that stands in contrast to the societal condemnation these individuals often face.

The need for saints and their miracles was the result of a society that was searching for answers to issues such as madness, infertility, and diverse illnesses. Over time, the appearance of saints and maraboutism was the result of these needs, to the point of making-up mythical characters who possessed certain miracles or superpowers. Many of these mystics/saints were females who were known to have practiced some form of “sacred prostitution”. Male saints also performed sexual acts on women to treat infertility<sup>19</sup>.

The juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane in this context challenges conventional moral binaries and offers insight into how religious practices and beliefs can be inclusive, providing a space for all members of society, irrespective of their social status or profession. This relationship highlights the complexity of human spirituality where the sacred can offer a refuge and a sense of community to those marginalized by mainstream society. It underscores the idea that the divine or the sacred is accessible to everyone, serving as a source of compassion and hope, and that the spiritual engagement of marginalized groups is a significant aspect of the broader human experience of faith.

According to Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguèche, the political and social role of a saint was that of a protector, conciliator and pacifier. Most of the saints had become religious and spiritual leaders of urban and rural masses, who were conditioned against the religious leaders of the elite: the Ulemas (orthodox religious scholars)” (67). The most significant role of the saints was on the basis of the right to asylum, which was a privilege and a judicial attribution giving them the power to protect all sorts of fugitives. The “Zaouia”, or Marabout, was a controversial social milieu in which strict social norms were diluted, and where these fugitives would be

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<sup>19</sup> Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguèche, the authors of *Marginales en Terres D’Islam* explore multiple examples of these acts dating back to the Hafside era in 1490.

accepted and protected. More importantly, the religious parties that took place (and continue to take place in certain places) in the zaouia gave women the entire liberty to show their bodies in trance-like dances, to participate in open-sky baths, to the point that total nudism in front of the men had become normal and where the latter lose total control of their actions. (Larguèche 73)

The authors also describe that,

Large zaouias were transformed into veritable "nests" of criminals, including women of "dubious morality", like the Christians or the Jews who, under the cover of abjuration, took refuge there to flee their families and live then freely with a Muslim lover or a former repentant pimp. (Larguèche 68)

To understand this link with the sacred, there are a few facts to consider. The *Mezouar* was a kind of "vice squad" who also moved from the prohibition of prostitution to regulating it until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the protection of the saint, women who were considered 'sinners' would be installed in, or to the proximity of the zaouia. By entering this sacred space, women would claim this sacred duty to protect them, while honoring those who do protect them. This kind of protection leads to a system of patronage and social control. Ultimately, these women retrace what other famous 'sinners' symbolized through their passage from "infamy" to piety.



Figure 5: *Al-Moumathil*. Bawella!

In this cartoon by Wezwez, who is perhaps an anonymous cartoonist, “Bawella”<sup>20</sup> is the main focus of attention as she is portrayed as a very short woman with a man who looks much taller than she. The name is emphasized with exclamation marks, and her physical proportions are distorted. The visual language of the cartoon is driven by a contrast of sharp lines, dark corners, and cross-hatching. The ground is consistent with the old streets of the Medina in Tunis and other cities, but the woman is wearing a hat, which indicates that she might be a foreigner.

<sup>20</sup> The name of a Jewish sex worker that has been mentioned a lot in the satirical press in Tunisia.

She also does not say anything. The man looks middle-aged, wears the traditional Tunisian “Jebba” of the time, and holds a cane in his right hand while asking in Italian “Quanto volete?” or “how much do you want?” What is interesting here is that the labels that are all in Arabic name the street as “Nahj Zarkoun,” where a famous brothel was established.

The main request written underneath the cartoon translates to “We would like for the municipality to uproot Bawella immediately so that Zarkoun Street is cleansed in the day and the night!

The response comes from Bawella herself to the newspaper in the form of a vilifying poem responding to the newspaper and their obsession with her work.

Al-Mumathil is a curse on those who are powerful, but he is harassing Bawella, and he tells the government about us. If he was wise he would leave us alone. We are young women who have a profession. He (Al-Mumathil) went out of his mind trying to wage a war against us, but I think he is drunk, and he should know that the police is with us. Let him try to talk to one of us at “Beb Bahar”, people would defend us. This is our profession and nobody can stop us. We all gather at Bawella’s and you can also find us at “El Chedli’s”. Leave us alone. The police will always protect us and you should stop messing with us.

The response underscores a complex interplay of societal dynamics, where figures like *Al-Mumathil*, despite their power, are criticized for targeting individuals and informing the government about the prostitutes' activities. This defiance is rooted in a strong sense of professional identity and autonomy, challenging societal stigmas and asserting their right to exist within their chosen field. The narrative reveals underlying conflicts and unexpected alliances,

such as the support from the police, which could indicate a blend of corruption, mutual understanding, or community solidarity.

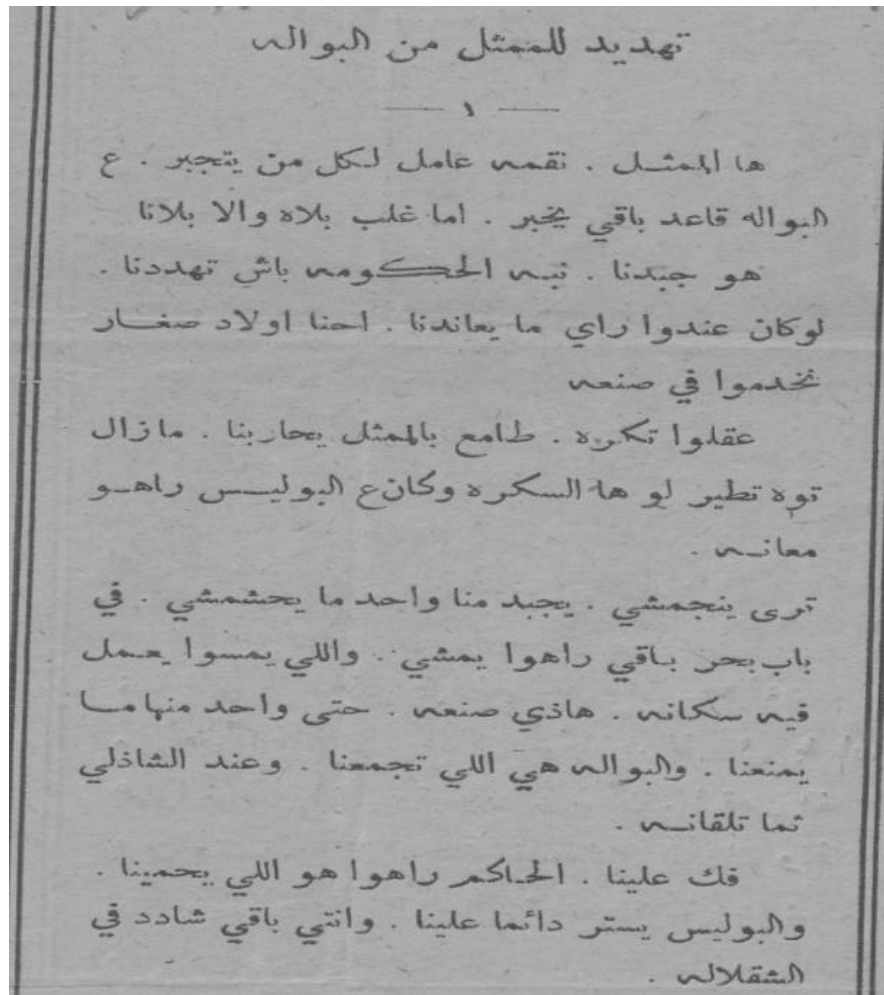


Figure 6: *Al Moumathel*: “Imminent threat from Bawella”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Transcription of Figure 6 in Arabic:

هذا الممثل نقمة على كل من يتجبر ع البواله باقي يخبر ، أما غلب بلاه ولا بلانا؟ هو جببنا ونبه الحكومه باش تهددنا . لو كان عند راي ما يعاندنا . احنا أولاد صغار نخدموا في صنعة . عقلوا تكره طامع في المثل بش يحاربنا . مازال توا إيطيرلو هالسكره كان عالبوليس راهو معاننا . تراه ينجمش يجبد منا واحد ما يحشمشي في باب بحر باقي راهو يمشي ، واللي يمساوا يعمل فيه سكانه . هادي صنعة حتى واحد منها ما يمنعنا والبواله هي إلي تجمعنا وعند الشاذلي ثمة تلقاننا . فك علينا والحاكم راهو هو إلي يحمينا والبوليس يستر دائما علينا ونتي باقي شداد في الشقلالة

The general meaning of the response in figure 6 translates to: Mumathil is a curse on everyone who oppresses the weak; he's still informing [on them]. He is the cause [of our troubles] and alerted the government to threaten us. If he had his own opinion, he wouldn't oppose us. When he wakes up from his drunkenness he will know that the police are with us. If he dares to touch one of us, they will learn a lesson. This is our job, and nobody can stop us.

The act of vilifying sex workers through poetic rituals undeniably showcases a mix of complex emotions, blending disdain with reverence and bewilderment with esteem, among other feelings. In essence, mocking and glorifying are merely different expressions of the same sentiment. The propagation of such a charged narrative arises from a deep-seated fascination with both the personal and professional lives of sex workers, their physical allure, and the allure of their surroundings; these are places and opportunities often concocted from the imaginations and desires of journalists. In their book *Marginales en Terre D'Islam*, Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguèche assert that “despite the infinite social stigma against prostitutes because of their ‘infamous profession,’ they remain women and Muslims ‘who had their right to social control,<sup>22</sup>’ like all members of society. In fact, the police intervened very often to assure the security of such or such a prostitute who was assaulted or threatened in her house” (54-55). These women were mostly single, divorced, widowed, or were rejected by their family for having a child out of wedlock. It is also important to point out that the names of brothels held the names of real saints such as Sidi Zouhir, Sidi Ayed, Sidi Ben Naim, Sidi Bayan, Sidi Mahroug, and Sidi Abdallah Guech. Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguech argue that this phenomenon of naming brothels after

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<sup>22</sup> According to OxfordBibliographies.com, social control is the study of the mechanisms, in the form of patterns of pressure, through which society maintains social order and cohesion. These mechanisms establish and enforce a standard of behavior for members of a society and include a variety of components, such as shame, coercion, force, restraint, and persuasion.

saints exists in many other villages, notably Sousse and Kairouan, and even in other countries like Algeria and Morocco (66). Seeking refuge in a “Zaouia” was quite common among sinners, thieves, and prostitutes who were looking for redemption and protection. Larguèche explain that “this link with the sacred appears at a higher level which is symbolic and affective in the Islamic culture: the protection of the soul that integrates the prostitute in her basic culture and reconciliates her with God. With this protection, she gives a human and noble sense to her sin that transforms into a sacrifice, that only the saint can prove it to the rest of society” (74).

### Images of Colonialism



Figure 7: Weld El Bilad 1910, Front Page.

*Weld El-Bilad* is a “weekly humorous newspaper” of which only nine issues were published between April and June of 1910, and despite its short lifespan, it is considered one of the important publications in the first wave of comic journalism in Tunisia. The newspaper was a lithographic edition, whose editorial director was Bashir al-Furti. It is worth noting that the popular comic press in Tunisia in the first half of the twentieth century is a very rich material for the social, political and linguistic history of North Africa in general, firstly because of its language, which is Tunisian vernacular at times and facilitated Arabic at other times, and secondly thanks to the literary genres that it published among them folk poetry and novels, i.e., short skits, etc., which are very rare texts that only exist in private archives and collections.

The title of the newspaper itself means “someone who is a native of such or such country.” The title could also be read as “the son of the country” which suggests the idea of a maternal entity and a child, which in this case is Tunisia and its citizens. In this sense, Tunisia as a mother-nation who is portrayed as a naked woman. The graphic representations of the following examples show the iconic mosque of Al-Zitûna with a shining sun behind it. The mosque is a hallmark of Islamic culture and patrimony. The sun functions here as an iconic reminder of light, as opposed to darkness and obscure thinking.

Another very important detail on this first page is the mailman who is carrying a heavy load of letters. The text explains how readers have flooded the newspaper’s headquarters with letters and subscriptions, and the impact that this newspaper had on its readers. The text is a collection of jokes and anecdotes about how life-changing their decision was to subscribe to the newspaper. This is indeed quite funny and reveals a genuine social interaction between the readers and editors/journalists who focused on comedy and humor to attract more readers. The face of a smiling man with a turban seems to be half-lit as a result of the rising sun. The sun

connotes the tendency of this newspaper to bring truth into light and give hope to its readers. In the next example, a mosque with a modern architecture shows another side of Tunis, and the Arabic text describes Tunisia as “green,” followed by a patriotic chant from the Egyptian national anthem. The third part of the text says, “my country is dear to me even if she wrongs me.” One can infer a sense of misery and poverty that was rampant across the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, and this has to be understood in the context of colonialism and daily exploitation by the French authorities.



Figure 8: *Weld El Bilad*, 1910 (Winning or Losing?)

The cartoonist adds another larger image of a naked woman.<sup>23</sup> She is standing against the wall with her head resting on her arms. The text that comes with cartoon limits the iconic symbols of the image to an emotional function: “A symbol that represents Tunisia as a woman despondent for her children’s misery due to her own destitution.” However, the rest of the text on the page is a separate anecdote in the form of a dialogue. A closer look at the iconic image of the woman, and the position of her tilted head reveals a state of depression. But why did the cartoonist make this choice of a woman? First, women were less powerful than men in society, more likely to be poor and under the control of their husbands. Put in its socio-historical context, women can cause dishonor, shame, and humiliation if she rebels against society, or her community. The second implication of the woman’s dorsal position can reinforce the idea of shame. It seems like she does not want to reveal her face to the reader because of something unspeakable. The cartoon also juxtaposes a naked woman against the image of Tunis and the tall mosque that appears in the middle. Naked in the sense that she was stripped of her wealth and honor by the French. The third connotation of the woman on this cartoon is beauty and love. A woman is beautiful, and on this cartoon although she is naked, she only shows us her back, as a symbol of purity and modesty despite the fact that she is naked. She is not only here to display her sadness, but her presence is a direct accusation of the colonizer as the source of her and her children’s misery. Put in its colonial context, the cartoon reveals this emotional connotation that was a reality, a cry for help against the abusive exploitation of colonialism.

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<sup>23</sup> Originally, the image of Tunisia as a woman appeared in an Italian postcard during the first world war. By appropriating this image, the newspaper integrates it within its own semantics.



lack of resources to continue publishing, and because of the shifting political climate in the country.

Figure nine is from the fourth issue of *Weld el-Bilad* newspaper, and within the colonial context, the cartoonist seems to show another story of suffering and misery in the country that has to do with the children rather than the mother. This cartoon can be categorized as a *cartoon of display*, which is not meant to invoke laughter, but to illustrate the pain of the toiling poor and the number of problems they face every day. The cartoon emphasized the large figure of a man carrying an oversized bag, and he is given the name (*Wild al-Blad al-miskeen*) “the poor son of the country.” The man’s posture indicates that he is burdened with an oversized load, and the iconic visual elements of the bent back and the bare feet connote the harsh reality of the proletariat. In addition to the posture, the tears and the protruding eyes are also visible on the man, but he seems to be resilient and continues walking, and this reflects certain intrinsic values, such as resilience and defiance. The excessive enumeration of different sorts of taxes on the large bag serves to explain the misery and the physical and moral pain of the proletariat.

This cartoon is a direct criticism of the new reforms of *Majba* (taxes), and the compromise between the indigenous bourgeoisie and the colonial regime of the protectorate. In the background, the reader can see a mountainous landscape and two men in traditional garb are talking about the toiling man. “Look at his sweat and tears” The gesture of the arm that is pointing at the man. The two men have a different type of clothing that marks their belonging to the Tunisian bourgeoisie. especially the cloak. In this case, the term “Wild al-Blad” distinguishes between sons of the country and the outsiders; the outsiders being the French and the Italians.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Italian presence in Tunisia was a privileged one, according to Camille Fidel, it holds a strong colony within the French colony, and this is due to the number of immigrants (in 1909: 105 684 Italians), and because of its commercial turnover: 24.161,000 Francs, in 1909, and due

The size of the men on this cartoon signifies the percentage of the bourgeoisie in the country as opposed to the larger number of the poor.

The textual elements are handwritten in Tunisian Arabic and the large font focuses on the physical pain by pointing to the potential to breaking of this man's knees. The text serves to explain the reasons behind the man's misery, the passive position of the bourgeoisie and to accuse those in more powerful positions. In fact, the new tax reforms hit the *Khammesa*, who were the poorest farmers earning a fifth of the harvest for their work. Accordingly, *Wild al-Bilad* focuses on the proletariat and the subaltern to defend them against the ruthless injustice of the financial system, and to denounce the privileged position of the indigenous bourgeoisie and the colonizer.

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to its assets (industrial, real estate, and agricultural companies that reached 65.697,000 Frs.). In the same year, 1083 Italians owned 78 874 hectares of arable land. Moreover, Italy had some legal privileges conferred to it by the Franco Italian conventions of 9/29/1896.

## Chapter Two

### The Golden Age of the Satirical Press 1906-1956

Between 1906 and 1956, Tunisia experienced a profound transformation under French colonial rule, transitioning from a protectorate established in 1881 to an independent nation in 1956. This period was marked by the exploitation of Tunisia's resources and the imposition of French administrative systems, which fueled the rise of nationalist movements, notably the Destour and Neo-Destour parties led by figures like Habib Bourguiba. The post-World War I period represented the most fertile and diverse era in Tunisian journalism, especially after the formation of political parties. Starting from 1920, following the establishment of the Destour party (Constitutional Liberal Party) to defend the rights and sovereignty of Tunisians over their country, several political parties, movements, and reformist currents emerged. Most of them sought to establish productive and constructive cooperation with the protectorate authorities without clashing with them. The ongoing developments in Europe and the world, especially with the emergence of principles of peoples' freedom and their right to self-determination, had an impact on the course of these events within Tunisia.

Sheikh Mohamed Fadhel Ben Achour summarized this new journalistic dynamism in his book *The Literary and Intellectual Movement in Tunisia*, stating: "The misfortune of Tunisian journalism being suspended for eight years had halted its progress. When the war ended, which brought Tunisians more calamities than spoils, people pinned their hopes on Wilson's principles, which turned out to be a captivating illusion. However, the literary impact remained in their hearts after the political hope had faded. The inevitable result of spreading these principles and pinning hopes on them was that the ears of tyrants were opened to listening to the complaints of

the oppressed, and the spirits of the oppressed were strengthened to complain and protest. Tunisian newspapers emerged after being unshackled, broadcasting the call for freedom and fighting the colonizers for granting the oppressed nations their rights, and urging the nation's sons towards sincere advice and cooperation." (Gamoon 91)

There was a noticeable burgeoning in the publication of comics within the pages of newspapers, a trend that did not sit well with the French colonial overseers. Many of these cartoons, perceived as contentious through the lens of the colonizer, frequently led to the newspapers being subjected to fines or outright closure.

Most of the satirical newspapers in Tunisia were subjected to obstruction and censorship, notably after the demonstrations of April 9, 1938. A decree issued by the Resident General<sup>25</sup> suspended the newspapers *L'Action Tunisienne* (Habib Bourguiba), *La Voix du Tunisien* (Chedly Khairallah), and *La Voix du Peuple* (Ahmed Essafi). On the same day, the Destour party was dissolved. The French colonial authorities considered these active comic newspapers in Tunisia a danger to the continuity of their power due to their scolding criticism and the way they were spreading awareness among the masses.

The struggle for independence intensified, especially after World War II, leveraging both diplomatic and passive resistance against French repression. The culmination of these efforts was the recognition of Tunisian independence by France on March 20, 1956, ending colonial rule and marking the beginning of a new chapter in Tunisian history.

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<sup>25</sup> Refers to a high-ranking official appointed by a government to oversee its interests and administer a protectorate or colony. This role is typically associated with colonial administrations, where the Resident General acts as the chief administrator or representative of the colonizing country in the territory, managing its affairs and acting as the intermediary between the colonial government and the local population or rulers.

|                       |      |                                         |      |
|-----------------------|------|-----------------------------------------|------|
| Tarwih Al-Noufous     | 1906 | Al-Shabâb                               | 1936 |
| Al-Hazj               | 1906 | Kol Shay Bel Makshûf                    | 1937 |
| Abu Kisha             | 1908 | Al-Kashkûl                              | 1937 |
| Abu Nûwas             | 1909 | Al-Watan                                | 1936 |
| Jha                   | 1909 | Al Bûk                                  | 1936 |
| Al-Mûd'hik            | 1910 | Al-Sardûk                               | 1937 |
| Jahjûh                | 1910 | Jahjûh (reissued)                       | 1946 |
| Wild Al-bilad         | 1910 | Al-Zahû                                 | 1946 |
| Al-Nims               | 1910 | Al-Watan (reissued after<br>censorship) | 1947 |
| Al-Sourour (Euphoria) | 1936 | Al-Anees                                | 1947 |
| Zahû Al-Bal           | 1936 | Al-Farzazzou                            | 1955 |

Figure 10: *This table includes the periodicals and newspapers that appeared between 1906-1956.*

The cartooning experience of this time built the foundation of the art in Tunisia, and it was considered as the first Arab country in terms of the number of comics. The interwar period witnessed a quantitative and qualitative development in newspaper publications, reflecting diversity and pluralism in all directions, which continued in different stages until the year 1956 with independence.

This thirty-five-year period can be briefly divided into three major periods according to Tunisian press historian Mohamed Hamdan:

The first period, extending from 1920, the date when the issuance of Arabic press was permitted, to 1925, which saw the issuance of orders that restricted press freedom. This period saw a boom in the number of journalistic and media titles in various languages—Arabic, French, Italian, and Hebrew. The publication of newspapers increased from an average of 20 to 50 issues per year. The year 1920 saw the highest rate of newspaper issuance, with 32 publications in

French in a single year, and the number of Arabic publications that year reached eighteen titles. The number of Arabic language periodicals reached eight titles, as detailed in the annex of publications at the end of this book.

The second period extends from 1926, the date of the issuance of the restrictive orders for the Arabic press, to 1936, before the issuance of the second Tunisian magazine. This period was characterized by the freezing of the Arabic press and the permission for other newspapers to be published. The average number of newspapers issued during this period ranged from 14 to 33 new periodicals per year in various languages. This period was distinguished by the emergence of titles in German and English, due to the developments on the ground in the course of the war and the presence of Axis and Allied forces engaged in battles on Tunisian soil and North Africa, where the last chapters of World War II took place.

The third period continued from the end of the war in 1945 until the end of the French Protectorate and the declaration of independence of Tunisia. This period experienced a recession, with the number of newspapers issued in various languages ranging from 15 to 30 periodicals. The period also recorded the disappearance of Italian press titles and many other titles.

### **Satirical Newspapers and Cartooning After World War I:**

Historically, folk poetry has often been used as a tool for resistance by marginalized or oppressed groups in times of political repression, whether it be colonial or authoritarian in nature. Folk poetry, which includes references to cultural traditions and practices, can reveal the differences between those in power and those who are dominated, which can challenge the myth

of assimilation and the efforts to achieve it. This remains true today. The use of this type of poetry can be particularly effective in subaltern resistance movements.

Thus, the poet's individuality manifested itself in his manner of expression: the more inventive this was, the more he was admired for his originality. It was his duty to give to the collective, to the everyday moral and ethical existence of the group, a unique image of itself in a unique poetic language. In doing this, the poet was not expressing himself so much as he was expressing the group, or rather he expressed himself only through expressing the group. He was their singing witness, and therefore we should not be surprised at this paradox in pre-Islamic poetry: unity of content and diversity of expression. (Adonis 14)

Folk poetry is a powerful oral tradition that conveys messages to the audience, through the use of word play and metaphor. The poets who produced this kind of poetry relied on a lexical field, slang, and speech patterns used by the peasant population, which was not commonly understood when used in the city.

Aida Adib Bamya underscores this point in her analysis of Algerian folk poetry during the colonial period: "The subtleties of its colloquial language and the double meaning of many of its expressions are often inscrutable to non-native speakers. Its elusive meaning even to those learned in classical Arabic provides it with a layer of protection" (Bamya, 13).

In fact, the Tunisian newspapers of the post WWI period feature some purely entertaining cartoons, where caricatures of celebrities and politicians appear frequently. Other cartoons are very small in size and function as an illustration to help the reader imagine the situation or cement a specific image in their minds. By writing an article that describes a political event, the cartoonist displays a particular point of view, inviting the reader to support the main cause,

which is participating in the Tunisian national movement for decolonization. Many cartoonists attempted to connect the social sphere with what we see in the image. This style, characterized by its use of language that is familiar to the general public, has proven to be highly successful<sup>26</sup> in attracting more readers. The satirical press often uses the language of its readers and employs humor to entertain and criticize the colonial government. This approach is more friendly and less likely to alienate the reader compared to the sometimes-complex analyses and commentary of mainstream newspapers<sup>27</sup>.

The concept of social semiotics can explain how meaning is created through complex interactions between different elements, such as symbols, signs, and language. In the case of political cartoons, social semiotics can be used to analyze how the visual and textual elements in the cartoon interact to create meaning and convey a message. For example, the use of certain symbols, such as a casket, can evoke specific emotions and associations, while the use of certain colors, such as black and white, can create contrast and emphasis. Additionally, the use of language, such as captions or speech bubbles, can provide context and further reinforce the message of the cartoon. By understanding how meaning is created through these complex interactions, social semiotics can provide a deeper understanding of the political cartoon and the message it is trying to convey.

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<sup>26</sup> According to Mohamed Hamdane, the language of the satirical press was a necessity for journalists to convey their ideas in a simple, familiar language. reflected the popular culture of the time and used in colloquial poetry, jokes and cartoons. (Aljazeera documentary)

<sup>27</sup> As opposed to the satirical press, the mainstream news relied on Modern Standard Arabic to communicate its complex ideas to the public. The use of the colloquial Tunisian Arabic was an exception that only marked the satirical press.

In his book *The Role of the Reader* Umberto Eco proposes a model of interpretation that emphasizes the active role of the reader in creating meaning. He argues that readers actively interpret the signs and symbols in a text based on their own cultural and personal experiences. “To postulate the cooperation of the reader does not mean to pollute the structural analysis with extratextual elements. The reader as an active principle of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text” (4). In the context of Tunisian political cartoons, the reading experience was different due to the low rate of literacy at the time (below 20%). Some people attended public readings of newspapers, while others relied on their literate friends or family members to help them read the text.

Popular sayings and proverbs dominated some captions or commentaries on cartoons. Tunisians have a large repertoire of carefully crafted proverbs on almost every aspect of life. These proverbs are often used to showcase the wisdom of a certain character, or as a way for social commentary and criticism. The cartoonists felt the need to try and give advice to their readers, either through long articles that includes proverbial language, or within the frame of a cartoon to reinforce a certain idea or produce a comical effect.

In his book, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud discusses seven ways in which words and images can be combined in comics in his book *Understanding Comics*. The first way, "word specific," involves using pictures to supplement or illustrate the text, but the text is the main source of meaning. The second way, "picture specific," involves using words as a soundtrack to the images, with the images carrying the main meaning. The third way, "duo-specific," involves both the words and images conveying the same message. The fourth way, "additive," involves either the words or the images amplifying the meaning of the other. The fifth way, "parallel combinations," involves the words and images following separate but parallel

paths without intersecting. The sixth way, "montage," involves the words being treated as integral parts of the images. McCloud also notes that the "word specific" and "image specific" modes can be combined, with one mode conveying the main meaning and the other adding additional context or information. However, he emphasizes that the most common combination is "interdependent," where the words and images work together to convey an idea that neither could convey alone (McCloud 155).

### **Visions of Society:**

During this period (1906-1956), there were many writers of comic poetry or articles, but relatively few specialized cartoonists. The French authorities were unwilling to allow the continued publication of Tunisian satirical newspapers, leading to censorship and obstruction. This decision, made on April 9, 1938<sup>28</sup>, was due to the perceived danger of these newspapers' critical commentary and their ability to spread awareness among the population.

After the First World War, the satirical and humorous press continued to appear regularly, focusing on issues of politics and reform. A new generation of intellectuals appeared in the cultural scene, many of whom were influenced by Middle Eastern Islamic scholars, and others were impressed by what they saw as the greatness of Western civilization. As opposed to the reformists of the previous generation, some of these new intellectuals were seeking the secret of French superiority, while simultaneously toiling on the preservation and advancement of Tunisian literary and cultural production. These Tunisian intellectuals were called *Jamaat Taht*

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<sup>28</sup> In Sahrawi Gamoon's book *A Century and a Half of Journalism in Tunisia*, large demonstrations ensued, and people clashed with the French army. As a result, the colonial government decided to stop all Arabic newspapers.

*Al-Soor*<sup>29</sup>, and they used to meet and discuss a variety of topics, such as naturalization, women's rights, Islamic cultural heritage, poetry and literature. Among them were Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, al-Taher Safar, Zine al-Abidin al-Senussi, al-Hadi al-Ubaidi, al-Taher al-Haddad and Muhammad al-Salih al-Muhaidi. The events of this era are highlighted by the impact of these pioneers who succeeded in mirroring Tunisian society and its cultural diversity.

To fully grasp the multifaceted impacts of colonialism, it is imperative to explore how it intertwines with and influences gender dynamics. However, it is crucial to consider the intersections of colonialism and gender as they are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The exploitation and oppression experienced by colonized peoples is not limited to the political and economic sphere, but also extends to the social realm, including gender relations. Women, in particular, were often doubly marginalized as they were not only subjected to the violence and exploitation of colonialism, but also faced patriarchal oppression within their own communities. Understanding the ways in which colonialism and gender intersect is crucial for a complete understanding of the legacy and impact of colonialism on the colonized population. The representation of women by male cartoonists was a challenge and a problem at the same time, because no female cartoonist is known to have been published at this point in history.

In many Tunisian Arabic language newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s, political cartooning focuses on a variety of local issues such as the problem of naturalization of Tunisians into French citizens, the imports of tea, the issue of tobacco and narcotics, alcohol, and women's

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<sup>29</sup> The name of this group of artists and intellectuals translates to "Under the Ramparts". The group was a collective of Tunisian intellectuals with diverse academic specialties. The group provided an opportunity for the Tunisian elite during the protectorate era, with their various intellectual orientations including writers, poets, musicians, artists, comedians, etc., to meet and engage in dialogue on various topics.

attire. Some of the political cartoons either glorify or attack a certain political figure. This milieu of ideas was marked by a pronounced dichotomy: on one side stood the traditional Islamic scholars, guardians of conventional wisdom and the proponents of a modest way of life shaped by centuries of religious teachings. On the other side were the emerging progressive elites, who championed a worldview shaped by modernity and the advancements borne out of the industrial revolution. The collision of these worldviews is captured in multiple cartoons.

### **The Naturalization Problem:**

In Tunisia, before World War I, the problem of naturalization -- the process by which an individual becomes a citizen of a particular country -- was a complex and controversial issue. At the time, Tunisia was a French protectorate, and many of the country's citizens were seeking to become French nationals. Jihane Ben Saleh explains that,

The granting of nationality and citizenship, which conferred certain advantages, was a tool that made it easier to manage populations under French power. What made the status of French citizen different in the colonies was that it was not essentially contrasted with that of foreigner, as in metropolitan France, but with that of imperial subjects (73)

However, the process of naturalization was plagued by a number of challenges, including discrimination, bureaucracy, and conflicting legal frameworks.

Tunisia's status as a protectorate meant that the French government had the power to grant citizenship to individuals who were foreign residents. This led to a situation where many non-Tunisians were able to become French citizens, while Tunisians themselves were often denied citizenship. the discriminatory policies of the French government created a sense of

frustration and injustice among Tunisians. According to a report by the *Tunisian Association for the Defense of Human Rights* (2008), the French authorities often denied naturalization to Tunisian citizens based on their race, religion, or social status. For example, individuals who were deemed "undesirable" or "inferior" by the French authorities were often denied naturalization, even if they met all of the other requirements (p. 12). In addition, the process of naturalization required Tunisians to navigate a series of bureaucratic hurdles, including filling out numerous forms, obtaining letters of recommendation, and presenting evidence of their loyalty to France. At this time, one of the cartoonists who focused on the issue of naturalization was Mustafa Osman.

Mustafaa Osman was a Tunisian political cartoonist who played a significant role in shaping the political climate in the country before its independence in 1956. Born in Tunis in 1908, Osman grew up during a time of great political upheaval and social change in Tunisia. As a young man, Osman was exposed to the ideas of political activism and resistance to the oppressive colonial rule of the French. He became involved in the political circles of Tunis and was known for his sharp wit and biting satire, which he used to critique the policies of the French government. Osman's cartoons often featured caricatures of the French officials and politicians who ruled over Tunisia. He was particularly critical of the policies of the French governor, Léon Charles Péricaud, who was known for his heavy-handed and authoritarian approach to governing the country. He was also a vocal advocate for Tunisian independence and used his cartoons to call for political change. His work often featured characters representing the different factions of Tunisian society, including French colonial officials, Tunisian nationalists, and ordinary people caught in the middle. Osman began his career as a cartoonist in the 1920s, working for various publications such as *Le Petit Tunisien* and *Le Tunisien Libre*.

In 1924, Mustafa Osman decided to join *Al-Moudhik* as a cartoonist who had an affinity to the Ottoman empire and its hegemony in the Arab countries. The title of this newspaper has a double meaning; it can mean “The Comedian” or “The Laughable”. The newspaper had different editors over time. Abdallah Zarrouk was the editor from 1910 to 1911, while Abdelaziz Mahjoub took over as editor from 1922 to 1923. At the social level, the newspaper highlights the degradation of the authentic values of Tunisian society. As for the political level, it directs the laughter towards everything that is not of communist value, especially after the First World War. Nationalism, Pan-Arabism, and Destourian<sup>30</sup> thinking appeared because different journalists held the direction of the newspaper.

Mustafa Osman was directly involved in founding the newspaper and contributed to most of its political cartoons. He was the most notable cartoonist of this publication because of his talent as a cartoonist and a journalist. Osman started his career at the age of 16 as a cartoonist for *Al-Mod'hik* then moved to *Al-Mumathil*<sup>31</sup>, after the former's suspension by the colonial authorities. He eventually left Tunisia for the United States career in film.

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<sup>30</sup> This refers to the political party Established by Abdel-Aziz Al-Thaalbi

<sup>31</sup> *Al-Moumathil* (The Performer: a satirical weekly founded by Slouma Aberrazak and published from 1920 until December 15, 1924)



Figure 11: Mustapha Osman “Naturalization” *Al-Moumathil* November 23, 1924

Comedic and satirical tones characterized these newspapers as, for example, in the case of *Al-Mod'hik* (The Comedian), a weekly satirical and entertaining publication founded by Abdallah Zarrouk and Mustapha Osman. It was published between 1910 and 1911, and again from 1920 to 1923. The editors advertised the prices of their newspaper in the classifieds section, stating that it would cost 20 francs for the poor and be free for the wealthy. This was meant to be cynical about the poverty and difficult circumstances many people faced in the country.

Despite the challenges posed by the lithographic edition's hand-written text, which can be difficult for readers to fully comprehend, it was a common experience for readers to engage with newspapers in this format. In multiple cartoons the text is very cumbersome, with inconsistent

handwriting on each cartoon or article; these were common features of popular newspapers that circulated across the country. In fact, these editions were sought after for their playful editing, which included doodles of small scenes, or characters that represent the main idea of a segment in the newspaper. The unconventional style of certain cartoons reflects the experimental nature of the cartoons and their function in the newspaper. These cartoons were not just a means of entertainment; they were an important form of expression and critique under the constraints of colonial rule. The unconventional styles of these cartoons allowed artists to push the boundaries of traditional artistic expression, often conveying complex political and social messages in a manner that was both engaging and accessible to the public. Cartoonists, therefore, used their art as a subtle means of resistance and commentary on the colonial situation, the struggles for independence, and the social and cultural issues of the time. The experimental nature of these cartoons was not just a stylistic choice but a strategic one, enabling cartoonists to navigate the restrictive media landscape, convey nuanced critiques, and connect with a wide audience despite the limitations imposed by colonial authorities.

Osman's cartoon on naturalization represents a typical Tunisian man battling a dragon with a spear. The man is labeled as "the Tunisian people," but the dragon does not belong in this culture, neither did it exist at any point in history, which shows the outlandish and exotic nature of this creature. Nevertheless, a closer look to this cartoon reveals the main idea: Tunisians are united against this monster that French colonial authorities introduced. Cartoonists use different strategies to present potent rhetorical depictions of political candidates and an alternative vision of reality. One of these strategies is the demonization of social mores and issues, to make them part of the national struggle for liberation.

Cartoonists employ a variety of sophisticated techniques to craft compelling rhetorical portrayals of political figures and to offer an alternative perspective on reality. This approach is not merely about critiquing individual politicians or policies; it's about challenging and redefining the societal values and practices that underpin and sustain the status quo.

By demonizing certain social mores and issues, cartoonists do more than just criticize; they engage in a form of social commentary that seeks to provoke thought and stimulate discussion among the public. This tactic serves multiple purposes: it highlights the ways in which these norms and issues contribute to oppression or injustice, it questions the legitimacy and moral foundation of the current social order, and it mobilizes public sentiment towards the idea of change or resistance. Moreover, by framing these issues as part of a national struggle for liberation, cartoonists link individual grievances and social injustices to a larger narrative of resistance and emancipation. This not only elevates the significance of these issues but also fosters a sense of unity and common purpose among those who might otherwise see their struggles as isolated or disconnected.

### **Foreign Imports and Foreignness:**

The rejection of foreign imports is one of the social issues that was extensively debated in comic and political newspapers. In fact, the denial of foreign imports and ideas is a form of resistance against the colonizers and their lifestyle. The different ways of understanding the world between the colonizer and the colonized made the relationship more complex and made Tunisians more vigilant of foreign imports. Western science, alcohol and drugs, naturalization, French education, and Western clothes for instance, were among the recurring issues in political

cartoons of the 1920s and 1930s. Tunisians not only endured the impacts of French capitalism and imperialism but also contended with the influence of French civilization on their land. But despite this rejection, these foreign ideas and imports found their way into the Tunisian mainstream, mainly because of the impact of colonialism and the indigenous intellectuals. Most of these intellectuals received or sought a Western education that would influence their political thinking, such as Habib Bourguiba, and Mahmoud El Materi.

In his article “The protectorate and the law. The Regency of Tunis between the Charter of 1861 and the French colonial system”, Hedi Saidi asserts that.

French colonization was an act of power, an act of exploitation and domination. It brought together two peoples that were vastly different. Various contacts were established, contact between the metropolis and a tribal population where national law often came into conflict with local customs and religion, written law against oral culture, freedom against authority, invention against tradition. (242)

The new wave of scholars/authors wrote columns and produced most of the cartoons in their newspapers. One of these intellectuals was the poet and journalist Bayrem El Tounsi, an Egyptian whose father was Tunisian, who was very attached to journalism and committed to sharing his ideas of reform and progress. He established the Al-Shabab newspaper in Tunis, after he was forced out of Egypt for causing trouble because of his political views<sup>32</sup>. Sending

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<sup>32</sup> Bayrem al-Tounsi, a renowned Tunisian poet known for his nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments, was expelled from Egypt around 1938. His expulsion was largely due to his political activities and writings, which were deemed too radical and threatening by the authorities. Al-Tounsi was actively involved in nationalist movements and used his poetry and writings to criticize colonial rule and advocate for independence and social reform. His work and political stance, which resonated with anti-colonial movements across the Arab world, likely posed a challenge to both the British colonial presence in Egypt and the conservative monarchical regime at the time, leading to his expulsion as a measure to curb his influence.

intellectuals and political activists into exile was a colonizer's strategy to stop the new flow of ideas about independence and nationalism. El-Tounsi's return to Tunisia in the interwar years profoundly energized Tunisian nationalism and decisively reoriented it away from the reformism of older generations.



Figure 12: El Thâalbi Returns with Goods from the Orient. (*Al Shabab*, N2)

Mahmud Bayrem El Tounsi was part of the growing nationalism that gripped the country from the 1920s. He worked during the pivotal period of nationalist struggles for Tunisian independence, a period when nationalism had the aura of divinity and the nationalists of its anointed saints. Bayrem El Tounsi introduces Abdelaziz El Thâalbi in this cartoon. El Thâalbi

returned to Tunisia after World War I and joined the Al-Shabab political party as an editor of their Arabic newspaper. He was expelled from Tunisia in 1912 following the Tunis Tram Boycott<sup>33</sup> and traveled to Libya, Egypt, and India. This cartoon shows El Thâalbi guiding a group of camels heading towards Tunisia, with a clear sign on the road showing the way to the country. The three camels are holding labeled boxes, and each box indicates a certain kind of merchandise. The first box on each stack holds the name of the country where it was brought from. The set of boxes labeled “Goods from Egypt” include “politeness”, “kindness”, “art”, “wit”, “greatness”, and “pride”. The next box from Palestine indicates “jihad”, “sacrifice”, and “magnanimity”. From Iraq, the boxes come full of “power”, “honesty”, and “self-esteem”.

Although the cartoon shows one man returning with the camels and goods, it also offers a vision of a society that could be supplemented with the new ingredients coming from other Arab nations. These qualities are also what the intellectuals of the time aspired to see among the Tunisian people, notably because the people’s experience with the colonizer constituted a threat to the Tunisian character. In fact, colonization brought some fundamental changes to Tunisian culture, and the colonizers imposed French superiority by showing their lifestyle and enforcing its foreign codes and customs. They pointed out the “backward” habits and customs of the indigenous population as an anomaly that needed to be addressed. This led to the emergence of a wave of newspapers in Arabic, most of which did not use cartoons at all, but focused on reviving the Islamic traditions and rejected all sorts of cultural intrusion.

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<sup>33</sup> This was a mass protest which began in Tunis on 9 February 1912. For more than a month, Tunisian Arabs refused to ride on the city trams until a series of demands were met. The boycott, though unsuccessful, is considered an important step in the development of the Tunisian nationalist movement.

Stylistically, the black and white cartoon shows the iconic figures of Abdelaziz El Thâalbi and the camels. The cartoonist uses the technique of hatching to create shadows in what appears to be the desert, with palm trees and simple lines that create the outline of the sand dunes. A closer look at the man's clothes reveals a type of clothing that is unusual for a religious figure. This also marks a difference in terms of modern religious thinking and reform, especially that the loaded goods on the camels represent what qualities should be ingrained within society. I argue here that this vision of society is informed by the Arab world and its resistance movements and figures.

The cartoon represents the desires of an intellectual to fix the ills of his society. Intellectuals of this period, such as Ali Douagi and Bayrem El Tounsi, felt the danger of the intrusive French culture, so they doubled down on producing articles, literary works, poems and cartoons in order to diminish the impact of the French culture, and convince the readers that their cultural heritage is in peril. cartoonists sought to establish a sort of cultural awareness and combat the intrusive imports of the colonizer. To the colonizer, conformity and homogeneity are used to subject the population to their will. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon maintains that,

In colonial context the colonist only quits undermining the colonized once the latter have proclaimed loud and clear that white values reign supreme. In the period of decolonization the colonized masses thumb their noses at these very values, shower them with insults and vomit them up. (Fanon, 8)

The vision that Thâalbi brings with him is very important because these qualities are actually the attributes of people. The cartoon uses visual metonymy where the camels stand for power and resilience. People used this animal for trade and transport for centuries, proving their

reliability and perseverance in the desert. The desert in this vision becomes a metaphor for the impoverished cultural scene, but at the same time, its presence invokes the idea of a tough journey. El Thâalbi takes center stage on this cartoon, and his posture shows that he is confidently walking towards his home country, Tunisia.

In April 1937, Mahmoud Bayram al-Tūnisī was deemed unwelcome and expelled from Tunisia, where he had lived for over four years and produced numerous articles and literary works. The significance of Bayram in his literary community is evident in the numerous responses condemning his banishment in both French and Tunisian media.

### **Imagining Society:**

The apogee of this satirical journalism criticizing the colonialists came with the formation of the *Taht Essour* group. Among them was the storyteller Ali al-Duaji (1909-1949), who is considered the godfather of the Tunisian story, and who founded a satirical weekly newspaper called “Es-Surour” in 1936. Another was Abdel Aziz Laroui, a famous journalist who later became known as a storyteller, who founded the satirical political newspaper “Al-Hilal”, the first issue of which appeared in 1930.

According to Walter D. Mignolo, the distinct experiences and perspectives of colonized peoples should not be overlooked. In his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2000), Mignolo argues that colonial difference prompts colonized individuals to engage in what he calls "border thinking," a process of adapting and interpreting global knowledge (including knowledge about colonialism) in a way that is

meaningful for their own experiences and contexts. Essentially, the border zone is a space for intellectual exploration and adaptation within the context of colonialism.

The political and cultural force of colonialism in Africa was so enduring that writers concerned with the nature of African society could not avoid the trauma and drama that accompanied the imposition of the European rule of the continent. According to Douja Mamlouk, Ali Du'aji,

Al-Du'aji and other writers, poets, and artists formed the taht al-sur group to mark their protest against Mohamed al-'Arbi al-Kabbadi's classical Arabic literary group, which met in Maqha al-banka al-'iryana (a popular café in the old city of Tunis). The Taht al-sur group saw no innovation in this classical literary salon and yearned to modernize Arabic prose. (795)



Figure 13: woman standing in front of a store. *Al-Sourour* (1936)

This cartoon, with a middle-aged Tunisian woman standing in front of a window of a clothing store, reflects the tension between tradition and modernity in the country. The caption translates into “Oh my! Why shouldn’t I wear a hat with an Arab dress? After all, Sousou wears his ‘Jebba’ with a scarf! It’s the new clothing trend these days!”. The image of the woman in traditional clothes, contemplating the acquisition of a Western hat, is a comment on the pressure felt by many Tunisians to adopt Western styles and values. The cartoonist is critiquing the way

in which Westernization has been imposed on Tunisia, and how it has affected the cultural identity of the people.

The pose of the central figure in the cartoon, the Tunisian woman dressed in traditional clothing, with her hand on her chin, suggests contemplation or introspection. The shop window in the background serves as a metaphor for the exposure to and temptation of Western ideals and consumer culture. The western hat on display suggests the allure of modernity and the pressure to conform to Western standards of beauty and fashion. The absence of a husband or other male in the image the woman's agency and decision-making power.

The use of words and images accentuates the theme and the metaphor of the cartoon. The cartoon implies that the woman is questioning the double standards and the gender inequalities that exist in Tunisian society. The situation where her husband can combine a baseball cap with his traditional garb, whereas she must adhere strictly to traditional dress, underscores the disparate societal norms and pressures that men and women face. It further suggests that she is aware of the greater latitude her husband possesses in balancing the old with the new, while she finds herself more tightly bound by societal norms. She is pointing out the hypocrisy of the societal norms that allow men to adopt elements of Western culture while expecting women to remain traditional, by using humor to point out how this combination of Tunisian and Western attire would look ridiculous on her husband, as much as it would for her.

In fact, this negotiation between the modern and the traditional was a contentious issue in Tunisian society, especially since, eventually, most Tunisians succumbed to the lure of modern society and embraced the T-shirt, dresses, hats, pants, and suits common in any Western society.

The colonizer made sure to ridicule Tunisians into thinking that their distinguished local clothes were “backward” and were associated with stereotypes of illiteracy. However, the leaders of the national movement sought to preserve the national identity and character of Tunisians by using the red Tunisian hat called “Sheshia”, to be a symbol of the national struggle for independence against France. In his essay “Africa: Varied colonial Legacies” Tejumola Olaniyan explains that.

Space and place are the objects of colonial territorial control, but the soul is the object of its reformation of minds. It is in the realm of the reformation of minds – the realm of culture – that history is processed into nature, and contingency into inevitability; where the subjective I is simultaneously real and illusory, and acting is also and at the same time the illusion of acting. It is simultaneously the process and space of securing discursive reproduction and stability. (237)

The two ways of life<sup>34</sup> that co-existed in Tunisia were very different; a western Christian way of thinking, excavating and pillaging the resources of a traditional agrarian Muslim society.

Olaniyan adds that “The project of reforming minds was marked by an ambiguity from the start. Its ostensible goal was to “civilize,” that is, Europeanize, the natives. However, to civilize the native is paradoxically to confound the basis of the racist hierarchical scheme of civilized/barbaric” (238).

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<sup>34</sup> Dewhurst Lewis's work is significant for pointing to not only the power structures internal to Tunisia between 1880 and 1940 but also how inter-imperial rivalries slowly shaped the social and political context of the French protectorate. Moreover, the author describes how Tunisia underwent a transition from an 'indirect' form of colonial rule, whereby France would rule through the local sovereign and his institutions, into a much more invasive form of colonial governance barely distinguishable from the direct rule that prevailed in many other parts of the French Empire.

### Images of Fantasy:



Figure 14: For the Occasion of The Politics of Participation. *Es-Sardouk*, April 1937

This cartoon, published in the Tunisian newspaper *Es-Sardouk* in 1937, depicts a dancing party during the colonial era in Tunisia. The most prominent characters in the cartoon are a mix of Tunisian and French people dancing together. At the table, a French woman is sitting on the lap of a Tunisian man, while a Tunisian man and a French woman are dancing together. A French soldier is also shown dancing with a Tunisian woman. Another woman, who is wearing a niqab, is depicted dancing with a gentleman wearing a western hat. There is also another couple

in the background dancing. The musical band in the cartoon appears to be using a mix of local and foreign instruments. Omar Ghayri portrays typical characters who represent different types of men and women, belonging to different races. He uses the contrast between black and white to accentuate the different elements of the cartoon; because of the lack of color, the cartoonist also employs grayscale for shades and shadows.

Stylistically, the cartoonist places the characters at the center of page, focusing on movement, proximity, and facial expressions. Stylistically, the cartoon is drawn in a straightforward, clear line style typical of the era, which allows for easy reproduction in print media such as newspapers. The lines are bold and unshaded, suggesting that the cartoon was likely intended for black-and-white publication. This technique emphasizes the outlines of the figures and their actions without the distraction of color or detailed textures, focusing the viewer's attention on the characters' expressions and interactions. The clothing of the characters is simplified but distinct enough to convey the contrast between traditional Tunisian attire and Western fashion, which is central to the cartoon's thematic commentary. The use of space and body language creates a dynamic scene that feels both lively and crowded, encapsulating the cultural fusion or clash that is taking place in Tunisian society.

The caption of the cartoon, "For the occasion of the politics of Participation," suggests that the cartoon is a satirical comment on the policies of the French colonial government. The caption "Es-Sardouk encourages all races to get closer and to love each other" is an ironic commentary on the French colonial government's rhetoric of "civilizing" the Tunisian people and its efforts to promote the idea of a "shared" culture between Tunisians and French colonizers, while ignoring the reality of the power imbalance and exploitation that characterized the colonial relationship. The reader and the cartoonist both know to what extent the traditional Tunisian

man<sup>35</sup> can be jealous and protective of his wife, so introducing this idea of his spouse dancing with a foreign man can be downright funny. The presence of both traditional Tunisian attire and Western clothing among the figures illustrates a juxtaposition between Tunisian and Western influences, reflecting the tension between maintaining traditional values and adopting new, foreign customs brought by the French. This scene could be critiquing the gradual erosion of traditional Tunisian culture or possibly the selective adoption of Western practices by Tunisians.

Raymond Williams's idea of "structures of feeling" can be beneficial in this context. The cartoons are using humor and satire to express the feelings and emotions, Humor and satire can be used in colonial cartoons as a way to critique and subvert the power dynamics of colonialism, and also to create a distance from the realities of colonization and its impact. The cartoon could be a visual metaphor for the broader political and cultural impact of French colonialism on Tunisian society, showing a transformation that is met with both acceptance and skepticism by the local population. It captures the complexity of Tunisian identity during this period, torn between the preservation of its heritage and the pressure to assimilate into the colonial culture. The use of humor can be read as a structure of feeling and understanding that structure can reveal much about the attitudes and perspectives of the colonizers.

"The policy of participation"<sup>36</sup> in the 1930s in Tunisia, also known as the "politics of sharing" was implemented by the French government during the colonial period in Tunisia. The

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<sup>35</sup> A man who adheres to the cultural norms, values, and behaviors that are historically and socially recognized as typical within Tunisian society. These might include certain expectations about masculinity, honor, and the role of men in the family and community.

<sup>36</sup> This policy was also used as a tool to maintain French control over the colony and to create a sense of loyalty among the Tunisian population towards the French government. However, this policy ultimately failed in achieving its goals, as it failed to address the deep-rooted inequalities and injustices of the colonial system and it did not lead to real political or economic gains for the

main goal of this policy was to promote better relations between the Tunisian and French peoples, and to create a sense of collaboration and cooperation between the two groups. The policy aimed to include Tunisian representation and participation in government affairs, by cooperating with important Tunisian personalities in political, economic, and cultural affairs, in order to give the illusion of a shared governance. The funny idea in this cartoon has to do with the word “participation”, as it could also mean “sharing”, and therefore the cartoon takes a different meaning.

This cartoon can be analyzed as a critique of the performativity of French colonial policies, which were presented as a means of "sharing" culture but were in reality a way of imposing and maintaining dominance. The cartoon exposes the way in which these policies were used to obscure the realities of colonialism and the exploitative relationship between colonizers and colonized.

The cartoon subtly signals anti-colonial resistance through various artistic elements and techniques. The juxtaposition of traditional Tunisian attire with Western clothing within the scene suggests a tension between native customs and colonial influences, potentially valorizing the former over the latter. Caricatures that ridicule colonial figures or the exaggerated portrayal of Tunisians engaging in Western activities could mock the colonial establishment and undermine its authority. Symbols and gestures familiar to Tunisians but less so to the French might pepper the scene, serving as a covert nod to nationalist sentiments. Facial expressions and body language among the characters could betray a sense of disdain or resistance to the cultural

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Tunisian population. The article that comes with the cartoon describes these politics of sharing. See Pierre-Jean Luizard's article « La politique coloniale de Jules Ferry en Algérie et en Tunisie » (89-120)

assimilation being portrayed. Additionally, the cartoon's setting in a Tunisian neighborhood against the backdrop of Western-style leisure may critique the penetration of colonial lifestyle into the traditional fabric of Tunisian society, implicitly advocating for the preservation of Tunisian culture and autonomy. The cartoon becomes a visual metaphor for resistance, embedding its critique of colonialism in cultural incongruities and a celebration of Tunisian identity.



Figure 15: Tunisia colonizes Spain! *Es-Sourour*, 1937

This cartoon is a satirical representation of Tunisian men enjoying the company of Spanish women at an Andalusian castle. The composition of this cartoon suggests a good use of space and architecture to point out the settings of the scene; an old Andalusian castle, where the ancestors of many Tunisians used to live in the past. The placement of characters and objects within the frame reveals a number of Tunisian men embracing Spanish women. There is a total absence of Spanish men in the scene, and there is no visible resistance by the women. It seems that debauchery and fun is the main goal of the party. The placement of the characters inside a castle also serves to emphasize the idea of conquest and control, as castles are often associated with power and fortification. Additionally, the fact that the Tunisian men are visibly happy and having fun suggests a sense of triumph and enjoyment in their supposed conquest.

This reverse colonialism is an extremely funny idea in the context of Tunisian popular culture. The cartoon appears to be a commentary on the idea of Tunisian men conquering a foreign land and enjoying the spoils of war, which is a popular fantasy across the Islamic world<sup>37</sup>, especially among religious people. In fact, this happened in Spain, but at the time this cartoon was produced, the sheer idea of Andalus, is a tragic reminder of the defeat of Muslims against Ferdinand and their eventual expulsion from the country between 1492 and 1610.

However, it also seems to be a nod to the historical fact of Andalusia, where Muslims, including Tunisians, lived for centuries before getting deported or killed<sup>38</sup>. The cartoon may be

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<sup>37</sup> See the article by Arab48 on the topic of going back to Andalus.

<sup>38</sup> According to Ali Kettani “it is estimated that between 1609 and 1614, about 330,000 Muslims were banished from Spain under the most tragic and inhuman circumstances, carrying with them no more than their bodies. In March 1611, King Philip III walked at the head of a long procession of Leaders, giving thanks to God for purging the country of its Muslim populace.

using this historical context to criticize the fantasy of conquest and to highlight the negative consequences of such actions. It pokes fun at Tunisians' lack of power and inability to repeat the conquests of the past. However, this cartoon can also be read as a satire of this notion, as the Tunisian men are portrayed as conquering not just a physical space, but also the hearts and bodies of the Spanish women. This can be seen as a commentary on the ways in which colonialism and imperialism were often rooted in notions of racial and sexual superiority, and the belief that colonized peoples were inferior and in need of being "civilized" by the colonizers.<sup>39</sup> But in this cartoon, the imagery of Tunisian men conquering and embracing Spanish women, might be interpreted as suggesting that the Tunisian men see the Spanish women as mere conquest, or as a reward of their military victory.

In the context of Tunisia's national struggle for independence, this cartoon can also be read as a commentary on the ways in which colonialism and imperialism not only affected the physical and economic well-being of colonized peoples, but also their sense of identity and self-worth. The image of Tunisian men as conquerors and colonizers is a stark contrast to the way in which they were typically portrayed in other cartoons, and especially in colonial discourse, and

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Of the expelled Andalusian Muslims, about 60,000 settled in Morocco, 160,000 in the Ottoman Empire including about 65,000 in Algeria and 55,000 in Tunisia, and many in Izmir, Istanbul and Bosnia. About 10,000 Andalusian Muslims settled in the Christian states of Europe and America. About 70,000 were killed, having been drowned in the sea and 30,000 managed to return to Spain.” (620)

<sup>39</sup> Krista Scott talks about this idea in her article “Imagined Bodies, Imagined Communities” and how “the woman-as-nation does not exist in her own right as a desiring subject, but rather as a quasi-eroticized object-member of a kinship network of children-citizens, lover-defenders, and so forth. Reflecting current notions of women's bodies as passive "receivers" of aggressive male sexual attention, the woman-as-nation must constantly be defended against penetration/domination by her sons and lovers.”

by implication, serves as a reminder of the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for self-determination.

The satirical press experienced a resurgence after World War I, particularly due to the lifting of censorship and the liberation of the Tunisian press by orders in 1936 during the rule of French resident "Arman Fillon," as well as to the arrival of Tunisian writer Mahmoud Bayram in Tunisia in 1932. The first humorous newspaper to resume publication in 1920 was the newspaper *Joha*, and in addition to the old humorous newspapers that resumed publication, two new humorous newspapers appeared during this period: *Al-Nadeem* (The compatriot) and *Al-Zahw*. The first was founded by Hussain Al-Jaziri in February 1921 and continued for 20 years without interruption. It worked to publish cartoons that opposed innovation and corrupt creators, and politically supported the old Constitutional Party and attacked its opponents. As for the newspaper *Ez-Zahw* (Elation), it was founded by Othman Al-Gharbi in 1921 and was circulating until 1962.

*Al-Watan* (The Nation) newspaper relied on a group of competent editors, but it also relied on a talented illustrator, the first of his kind in the history of Tunisian Arabic journalism, Omar Ghayri. Yes, dozens of years have passed on Tunisian Arabic satirical journalism trying to rely on this type of illustrator, but it has not reached its desired. Mr. Forti, in his newspaper *Weld el-Bled* (The Compatriot), a light-hearted satirical weekly founded by Bachir Fourti, but published only throughout 1910, relied on a French illustrator. *Al-Mumathil* relied on Mustafa Osman who left the country after being imprisoned for poking fun at the colonial authorities. Mr. Sheikh Ben Yakhlef tried to be this type of illustrator but he was not successful. Mr. Doweij tried to illustrate in his newspaper (*Al-Sourour* (Happiness)) with his pen, but he was not successful except in some character illustrations and Mr. Al-Munji Al-Sherif stepped into the field, but he

delayed. The famous painter Hatem Al-Makki tried to work with Tunisian Arabic journalism, but he found it unhelpful, so he fled to Parisian journalism, presenting his ideas.

In order to push its political and social agenda, *Al-Watan* (The Nation) relied on cartooning which was a new phenomenon in the history of modern Arab journalism in Tunisia. This publication adeptly captured the array of politicians and leaders coalescing into a unified political movement, which subsequently evolved into a party characterized by its own internal distinctions. The primary aim of the cartoons featured in this newspaper was to articulate the imperative of ending colonialism. Regrettably, Bayrem El Tounsi found himself exiled to France as a direct consequence of his staunch anti-colonial stance, which ran counter to the prevailing French colonial interests.

It was Omar Grayri who filled this gap in *Al-Watan* (The Nation), *Al-Shabab* (The Youth), *Sabra* (Patience, a satirical weekly founded by Taher Zarrouk and published between 1937 and 1939), and *Essardouk* (The Rooster) as well as other newspapers. *Al-Watan's* first page were occupied by a large political cartoon. Its main focus was usually on domestic politics, but it may also have covered Eastern or Western international politics in relation to Tunisian politics. Every week, the Nation publishes a symbolic image of a local event under the title "Joke of the Week".

The newspaper was divided into different sections related to culture, language, theater, cinema and politics, among a variety of other topics. Omar Grayri would depict actors, singers, and artists, without distinction of gender or social status. If we move on to the "Heroes and Monsters" section, the brushstrokes of Mr. Omar Grayri become sharper and more critical of the social and political reality. These illustrations could elicit either laughter or sadness depending on how they were presented and portrayed.

Ultimately, the quality and success of *Al-Watan* was largely due to the talent and dedication of Mr. Omar Grayri as its illustrator. Without his contributions, the newspaper would not be able to stand out in the crowded media landscape and attract readers. It is important to recognize the critical role that cartooning plays in the success of a newspaper, and the value of talented and dedicated cartoonists like Mr. Omar G. in bringing important issues to the forefront and engaging readers.



Figure 16: Small Cartoons and Jokes. *Al-Watan* 1937

Omar Grayri was known for using witty and light-hearted illustrations to address important social and political topics. This technique is still used in contemporary newspapers like *Al-Sareeh* and *Al-Sabah*, where the strategic placement of cartoons serves to attract attention, provide entertainment, and encourage readers to connect images with words. For instance, some

of these small cartoons portray scenes of daily life in Tunisia under French colonialism. On the right of the above cartoon, we find a man and woman in traditional Tunisian clothing. This kind of attire is indicative of social status, religious affiliation, and how women navigate different spaces with different clothes. The woman on the right looks like she is wearing a “Burqa” which was very common among women in the streets. The man on the other hand looks like he is wearing a turban, and a traditional robe called “Jebba”. The cartoon depicts an elderly woman asking the man to buy some golden coins, which at the time was a sort of store of value for Tunisian women. The man denies her request by saying that he only has a little amount he is saving for “precarious times”. On the other side, the cartoon depicts a man and woman talking to each other, but the woman is wearing a different outfit that reveals her face in front of the man. Because Islam only allows women to uncover their faces in front of their close family members, the cartoon and the words that come with it suggest that the man is her husband.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Tunisian dress codes varied based on social class and education. Wealthier, educated Tunisians often mixed Western and Arab clothing elements, and could be distinguished by their luxurious “Jebba” and outfit, as well as the color of their turban. Meanwhile, Tunisian scholars and politicians often wore Western attire with a Tunisian Tarboush. This division in clothing choices reflected deeper ideological differences and visions for the future of the country. In fact, Western clothing became the norm in the 1950s and 1960s, and it was encouraged by President Habib Bourguiba who wanted to modernize society according to his own vision. The secular and religious divide was not very strong, as there was still a lot of work for the secular elite to do.

The secular elite in Tunisia often favored modernization efforts that aligned with Western models. They saw the French language as a tool for modernity and progress, arguing that

mastery of French would enable Tunisians to engage with the wider world, particularly in the fields of science, technology, and international diplomacy. French education was also seen as a means to gain social mobility and access to administrative positions within the colonial structure. Secularists were generally inclined toward a curriculum that embraced French while not completely abandoning Arabic, which they viewed as a language more suited for cultural and religious contexts.

On the other hand, the religious elite advocated for Arabic, the language of the Quran, to maintain the central role in education. They believed that preserving Arabic was crucial for maintaining Islamic culture and identity, especially in the face of pervasive French cultural influence. Religious leaders often ran *kuttab* schools (traditional Islamic schools) where Arabic was the primary language of instruction. They argued that a foreign language should not replace Arabic, the language that connected Tunisians to their heritage and the wider Arab and Islamic world.

The newspaper *Al-Surur* is among the newspapers that represented an important space for some Tunisian writers, and perhaps the most famous of them is the poet and writer Mustafa Khreif (1909-1967), who wrote a weekly column with a literary criticism style called "Journalistic Reviews." This newspaper, like other newspapers that were published at the time, relied on colloquial language, due to its proximity to the popular masses under colonization.

Newspapers often featured amusing cartoons that depicted celebrities and politicians as caricatures. Some cartoons were small and served as illustrations to help readers visualize a scene or concept. Cartoonists such as Ali Baba, and Omar Ghayri were able to effectively use this medium to connect with their readers and address social issues using comedy and satire. This approach, characterized by its use of relatable language and humor, proved to be highly effective

in raising national awareness on the ongoing political struggle. Unlike mainstream news outlets which may use Modern Standard Arabic as its language, satirical newspapers often use the language of their readers and use humor to criticize with a lighthearted touch. According to Medhurst and Desusa, “the artist must know and utilize the beliefs, values and attitudes of his audience if he or she is to be an effective persuader” (204). This approach is more appealing and less likely to alienate the reader compared to the sometimes complex language and commentary of mainstream news. The cartoonists and editors displayed a great deal of knowledge they shared in different forms and ways.

For instance, in a newspaper like *Al-Watan and As-Sitar*, certain cartoonists illustrated the news through comics and caricatures. The caricature served an entertaining function in most of the newspapers that I analyzed; on each section of the newspaper, a caricature illustrates the main theme of the narrative. This tradition proved its success in attracting readers, and was carried out by many other cartoonists and journalists in the future.

### **The Social Structure:**

The political cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s focused on depicting poverty as a crisis that was deeply rooted in colonialism. In fact, these political cartoons identified and depicted the evil of poverty that was part and parcel of the colonial strategy of maintaining supremacy and power. Therefore, in order to understand the social reality that cartoons depicted at this period, I will highlight the role of cartooning in portraying abjection not only as a significant problem, but to galvanize support from the people to act and change the situation. Social history does not focus on the elite or bourgeoisie, because as Olaniyan argues concerning Fanon’s ideas on this

class, “the African bourgeoisie is an unoriginal class that is “not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; [but] is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type.” It is “bankrupt,” lacks initiative, and its “mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation” but to be “content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent” (Olaniyan 3). In fact, artists, free spirits and authors, for instance, were always attacked as belonging to the “populace”, as an expression of distaste and condemnation of their role in society. Because cartoonists belonged to the middle class, and some of them were described as “Bohemians”<sup>40</sup>, they often succeed at bridging the social sphere with what we see on the cartoon or illustrations.

Similarly, Raphael Samuel adds that “social history derives its vitality from its oppositional character. It prides itself on being concerned with 'real life' rather than abstractions, with 'ordinary' people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events” (Samuel et al.). Therefore, the study of Tunisian cartooning should open up a window on how artists and society think at a certain time period, in addition to the often-contested relations between the religious and the secular, Arabization and Francophonie, as well as traditionalism and modernity.

Before we delve into the visual analysis of certain cartoons, it is important to consider the social and historical reality of the various social classes in the country. The social structure of the population underwent significant changes between 1881 and 1956. According to Tunisian historian Hedi Timoumi, this complex social hierarchy ranged from the upper echelon of society,

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<sup>40</sup> These intellectuals were scorned for their unconventional use of the Arabic language. Many of them were attacked for using the spoken dialect, instead of participating in the larger project of preserving Arabic and Islam in the country.

consisting of owners of modern and traditional means of production in agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, and services, to the lower levels of the pyramid. Land and cattle owners, as well as professionals like doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, and government officials, also belonged to this higher social class (14).

The modern and traditional urban middle classes made up a significant part of Tunisian society. The modern middle class included employees of the colonial state, some teachers, and small business owners in modern manufacturing. The traditional middle class consisted of representatives, teachers and instructors at Zaitouna university<sup>41</sup>, sailors, artisans, and small traditional merchants (Timoumi 15). This social class knew how to navigate the colonial system because of their relatively higher rate of education.

The third important component of Tunisian society consisted of the toilers and the unemployed, urban wage workers, small and poor farmers, and agrarian workers. In addition to common and marginal people in cities and villages. Many peasants struggled with limited education due to widespread illiteracy in their communities<sup>42</sup>. Their primary means of artistic expression was through oral traditions such as popular poetry, puzzles, and riddles. This, combined with a strong adherence to Islam and its rules, contributed to their intellectual

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<sup>41</sup> Ez-Zaitouna University, located in Tunis, Tunisia, is a public institution founded in the 7th or 8th century as the Al-Zaytuna Mosque. It became a renowned center for Islamic learning in North Africa and currently consists of the Higher Institute of Theology, the Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, and the Center of Islamic Studies in Kairouan. The university offers a variety of courses, including those in Islamic law, Arabic grammar, history, science, and medicine. It has a rich history and was once home to famous libraries, attracting students and scholars from around the world. It underwent reforms in the 19th and 20th centuries and played a role in resisting French colonial influence in Tunisian culture. After Tunisia's independence in 1956, the modern Ez-Zaitouna University was established and continued to undergo reforms. It currently offers undergraduate and graduate programs in a range of disciplines.

<sup>42</sup> By 1956, the literacy rate was about 29%.

backwardness and resistance to adapting. Despite these challenges, Timoumi maintains that they were able to find ways to express themselves and preserve their cultural traditions especially through song, poetry, and popular sayings.

The populace, according to Hedi Timoumi, are those who had limited but stable resources. The lumpenproletariat, on the other hand, are those who live in the bottom of the social pyramid, and all those whom the colonial system sought to punish and reform, according to certain Western conceptions, and all those who willingly or unwillingly, temporarily or continuously, rejected the rules and procedures that the society relied on and ensured its cohesion (Timoumi 208). The lumpenproletariat are not linked to organized production and service sectors and are willing to sell their labor power for a wage, but they often cannot find someone to buy it. They live outside the official division of labor and are distributed in legally hidden but tolerated or suppressed sectors. We find these lumpenproletarians<sup>43</sup> in all major cities, especially the capital, and some researchers call them the "rural" or "semi-rural" or sometimes the slum dwellers. Hedi Timoumi explains that.

The marginals consist of individuals who are almost permanently unemployed, such as shoe shiners, street vendors, porters, and scavengers (also known as 'barbecha'). They also include crooks and beggars, as well as most prostitutes and those who loiter around and gamble. Among them are slanderers, charlatans, fraudsters, drug dealers, and those who lack any common sense. These marginals often lack family bonds, are addicted to

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<sup>43</sup> An excellent film directed by Jean-Jacques Sirkis and Raymond Vogel can be found at this link. It documents all sorts of exploitation, destitution, and impoverishment of the population. <https://www.cinearchives.org/Catalogue-d-exploitation-494-177-0-0.html>

alcohol and drugs, and serve as informants for the police. They also include housemaids, some intellectuals, and artists. (209)

Arab journalism served various functions to its readers, sometimes representing the voice of the nation and promoting Islam, at other times representing the people, and ultimately serving as a mirror of reality. Despite this diversity, it gained widespread distribution among educated circles and social gatherings, where someone is paid to read the news or funny articles. Most groups are interested in following up on the news and a large portion of them were students from Al-Zaitouna university.

In his book *The Maghreb Between the Wars*, Jacques Berques delves into the topic of satirical newspapers during the period between World War I and II. He notes that these publications were widely read and that individuals, particularly in cafes like "Beb Jdid" and "Beb Manara," would often pay a small fee to have them read aloud. This trend was particularly prevalent during the 1920s, as a large number of rural residents migrated to urban areas in search of work (165). However, the economic structures of the time were not able to fully support or integrate these newcomers, leading many to struggle with unemployment and poverty. As a result, cafes became popular spaces for both social and political expression and mobilization among this population.

After the rise of newspapers in Tunisia, the reading habits in the country began to change. Reading and discussing the ideas presented in newspapers became a common activity in cafes and bars. This trend extended beyond these urban settings, as newspapers were also distributed to rural areas and provided to those who were illiterate or required assistance in understanding the

news. *Al-Mozaaj*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Rashdia*, and *Al-Sawab* newspapers were particularly popular and influential among Tunisians. Mohamed Salah Omri opines that,

In the 1930s in particular, there was a dramatic surge in political humor as a journalistic, literary, and artistic style. [...] There were unprecedented successful attempts to devote entire newspapers to humor. For example, *al-Sarduk* (The Rooster), *al-Surour* (Happiness), *al-Farzazzou* (The Wasp), *Juha* (Goha), and others were widely circulated during the first half of the twentieth century. (135)

The political and social framework through which France organized the colonization illustrates a clear colonial and oppressive system in which the French settlers in Tunisia enjoyed greater privileges and rights than the local Tunisians. This is significant in understanding that there was no protection or equality between the Tunisians and the French, and that colonization impoverished the majority of Tunisians while they lived as servants to the colonizers.

### **Visions of Abject Poverty:**

He Lived his life wishing for a single grape  
When He died they brought him a cluster of grapes.  
A miserable artist can only find happiness in the grave. (Ali Du'aji)



Figure 17: *Al-Shabab*, February 1937

In this cartoon, Omar Ghayri poignantly portrays a number of people from different walks of life. The naked people some of which are sitting on the ground seem to be beggars. Three other seemingly naked people are standing and waiting for their turn to get some food. There are no visual cues that indicate the settings of this cartoon but one might guess that it is taking place in the street. All of the poor looking men are thin, and their bones are almost visible. On the left of the panel, there is a number of people whose facial expressions reveal disgust and anger. The characters are not iconic, but they represent different social classes that lived in the capital Tunis. The caption translates to: “The old *Depeche Tunisienne*: if irresponsible people

donate food to the hungry, chaos will sway the country.... ”. The cartoon indicates the harsh reality of the poor and the homeless during and after the economic crisis of the 1930s. The cartoonists condemn a newspaper for advising people not to give to the poor. This shows the evil intent of the French newspaper to deliberately try to keep people hungry.

The lasting impact of colonialism on African politics and culture was such that it was impossible for writers discussing African society to ignore the pain and turmoil caused by the European colonization of the continent. Many of those writers and comic artists reflected this type of struggle through their depiction of misery and poverty. It is also important to note that poverty itself was the subject of ridicule. According to Haythem Guesmi,

The political and social framework through which France organized the colonization illustrates a clear colonial and oppressive system in which the French settlers in Tunisia enjoyed greater privileges and rights than the local Tunisians. This is significant in understanding that there was not protection and equality between the Tunisians and French, and that colonization impoverished the majority of Tunisians while they lived as servants to the colonizers' wealth. (Nawaat, online)

The dissonance between the act of giving food, and the denouncement of the *La Depeche* newspaper is only a microcosm of the relationship between the colonizer and colonized.



Figure 18: *Al-Sourour* (Happiness): Man and Woman

Tunisian cartoonists were not only documenting the social history of the people, but they were also trying to educate and entertain the large number of citizens who were illiterate. Not only did they cover a wide array of social problems, but they knew how to sharply criticize the colonizers for their direct role in impoverishing the nation. These cartoonists knew exactly how to portray the unfortunate situation of the Tunisian population under colonialism.

For example, Omar Ghayri presents a scene from one of the streets of the capital. The man and the woman seem to be collecting trash from the ground, while their candlelight is

enlightening their surroundings. The readers can infer through visual cues that the scene is happening at night. there is a lamp on the ground guess the shadow on the man and the woman that is visible on the wall. The couple is positioned at the center of the frame, and the cartoonist literally sheds light on them through the use of candlelight. The artist relies on a set of iconographic elements, such as the type of clothes that indicate poverty and squalor. The use of dark shades and cross hatching accentuates the contrast between light and dark. The shadows play a significant role in magnifying their figures, rendering them almost like ghosts at night, scavenging for leftovers. Haunting as it may be, the cartoon embodies the Arabic phrase “شبح الفقر” or “the ghost of poverty”. This mental image amplifies the emotional response from the readers and reminds them of the implied but absent ghost of colonialism. Cartoonists often use simplified or exaggerated forms to convey the poverty and desperation of the characters. In this cartoon, Ghayri is using thin, emaciated figures with sad facial expressions to convey the characters' suffering. Moreover, this cartoon does not introduce a contrast with the opulent wealth of the colonizer, but presents itself as a result of deliberate impoverishment.

Here again we can see the pertinence of Raymond Williams' concept of "Structures of Feeling" can be useful to understand this type of colonial cartoons. Analyzing the emotional content and tone of the cartoons, we can gain insight into the cultural and emotional landscape of the colonial era in Tunisia. The emotions depicted in the cartoons - whether they be fear, anger, or contempt - can reveal the ways in which emotions were understood and experienced by both colonizers and colonized people at the time.

The text accompanying a political cartoon is equally important as the image itself. In this particular cartoon, the depiction of a couple sifting through old clothes serves as a powerful visual representation of poverty. The accompanying text provides context and further illustrates

the dire economic situation many Tunisians underwent during colonialism. “The rag man” is the story that comes along with this cartoon. The ongoing conversation includes questions on the quality of this pile of trash, in comparison to the colonists’ luxurious trash piles. It also includes feelings of envy, or as Fanon explains “The colonised man is an envious man. [...] for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place (30).



Figure 19: *Al-Sourour* (Happiness)

In addition, the use of old, worn-out clothing and the act of sorting through trash for usable items highlights the limited resources and struggles the poor face on a daily basis. The presence of a candle on the ground adds an additional layer of symbolism, potentially suggesting the need to shed light on such dire conditions. By drawing attention to the harsh realities of poverty and economic inequality, the cartoonist aims to provoke an emotional response from the readers and

inspire them to take action against it. Through the use of powerful imagery and text, the cartoon documents a reality that many Tunisians faced and serves as a powerful call to action.

Political cartoons include a plethora of visual devices which are the backbone of sense and meaning. According to Nicholas Mirzoeff,

intervisuality comprises the intertextuality of visual media, the interdependence of visual and non-visual media, the interface of viewer, technology and the viewed and the new infrastructures being created to support these changes. Intervisuality takes the network as its guiding intellectual framework, rather than traditional hierarchical formats. (124)

Mirzoeff's concept of intervisuality highlights the formal aspects of visual media, including composition, lighting, color, and perspective, and how these elements contribute to the meaning and impact of the images. The concept of intervisuality highlights the need to consider the formal aspects of visual media in addition to their content and context when studying contemporary visual culture.

One notable aspect of Omar Grayri's cartoons is how he deliberately chooses to display the lack of expressiveness or similarity to real people in their images. The lines used to create the images are thin and angular, and the overall composition is minimalistic, resulting in a lack of resemblance to specific individuals. The principle at work here is one of generic characterization. Generic characters are only distinguishable from one another through characteristics such as their clothing patterns and body size. The only exception to this is when he represents police or military characters, who are typically depicted wearing their professional uniforms in an abstract way. Panofsky (1970) cited in D'Alleva (20) postulated that "In a work of art, 'form' cannot be divorced from 'content': the distribution of colour and lines, light and shade, volume and planes,

however delightful as a visual spectacle, must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning” (20). Omar Grayri uses a variety of sources, including indigenous, colonial, and European sources, to create the iconographic images needed to deliver his message to Tunisians.



Figure 20: *Al-Shabab*, The Doctor and the Pharmacist, 1936

The portrayal of Tunisia as a sick woman in bed can be interpreted as a metaphor for the country's current state of health, suggesting that it is in a state of crisis or decline. The presence of the doctor and pharmacist can be seen as a commentary on the role of political leaders in addressing these issues. The doctor's request for a "respected parliament" and a "completely responsible ministry" can be interpreted as a call for stronger and more effective governance, as well as a more accountable and responsible political leadership. The cartoon seems to be

highlighting the need for political and social reform in Tunisia and suggesting that the country's current leaders are not adequately addressing the challenges it faces.

In newspapers such as *Es-Sourour* (happiness), *al-Watan* (The Nation) -*Al-Rakeeb* (The Observer), the sickness of the nation is a recurring theme, and the metaphorical images were getting darker as the socio-economic reality.

In his article “Protectorate and law. The Regency of Tunis between 1861 Charter and French colonial system” Hedi Saidi explains that:

Economic inequality is accompanied by cultural and legal inequality. It is France that brings its values to Tunisia, inculcates its ideas and imposes its laws, spreads its culture with its education system. The reverse does not exist, because France hardly borrows from other civilizations. The colonial policy was therefore in total contradiction with the principles of the young Tunisian constitution. Tunisian politicians will brandish, in their struggle against foreign presence in Tunisia and colonial France, the values of the revolutionary France and its constitution of 1791. (243)

Political cartoonists are critical mirrors of their societies portraying socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions through their powerful medium that embeds visual and textual cues. During this nationalist wave of satirical newspapers, the owners had to circumvent censorship and find a way to maintain their biting commentary on current events. This often meant employing clever symbolism and allegory to evade direct scrutiny, ensuring their messages reached the public despite the tightening grip of government oversight. This period not only showcased the resilience of political satire but also underscored its pivotal role in shaping public opinion and galvanizing societal change amidst turbulent political landscapes.



Figure 21: *Al-Shabab* “Hey Tunisia” 1937

This cartoon by “Boughdir” is a stark depiction of Tunisia as an emaciated woman lying in bed or on the ground, while the hand of colonialism seems to be drawing blood from her frail arm. Although simple in its wording, the use of “Hey Tunisia” is a desperate call for help. The hand of colonialism in this cartoon is a symbol of continuous exploitation. The French government and corporations extracted resources such as oil, phosphates, and agricultural produce, without considering the negative impact on the Tunisian population. The French also implemented policies that favored French settlers over Tunisians and imposed high taxes on

Tunisians while providing subsidies to French settlers which also contributed to the weakening of the Tunisian population (Timoumi 134).

The cartoon serves as a powerful commentary on the ways in which colonialism can have a devastating impact on the people and resources of a country. It highlights the human cost of exploitation and the ways in which the colonial power is seen as a predator, draining the resources and weakening the people of the colonized country. The image of the woman being drained of blood is particularly evocative, as it serves as a reminder of the human cost of exploitation and the ways in which the colonial power sees the colonized population as nothing more than a source of resources to be exploited for their own gain. However, these images were deliberately circulated in newspaper simultaneously with the growing national sentiment.

The cartoonist does not show a complete naked body, which indicates that at least, the honor of the people is still there. It can also be understood as a way to reinforce the idea of illness. The cartoonist achieves this effect through the use of lines, the agonizing look on the eyes of the woman, and the position of weakness she is in.

Throughout history and into the 20th century, political cartoons have often depicted women as the "weaker sex," a trope rooted in patriarchal stereotypes of physical and emotional frailty. This imagery is also utilized in the personification of nations, such as Britannia or Marianne, where female figures in distress symbolize national crises. In the realm of social commentary, the frail woman motif serves to highlight issues of health, rights, and equality, often criticizing the neglect or mistreatment of women by those in power. The portrayal of sick or vulnerable women can amplify the cartoon's message, by intending to elicit an emotional response and drawing sympathy or outrage from its audience. At times, this representation serves as a critique of gender inequalities, contrasting the ideal of a healthy society with the harsh

realities faced by women. However, the persistence of such images also reveals conservative resistance to the evolving roles of women in society, as the fight for greater rights and representation challenges outdated societal norms.

### **Images of Exploitation and Corruption:**

Exploitation of resources and space in Tunisia and other colonies was a crafted strategy to maximize the profits and resources of France, and even use the people in their armed forces to defend the metropolitan France during World War 1.

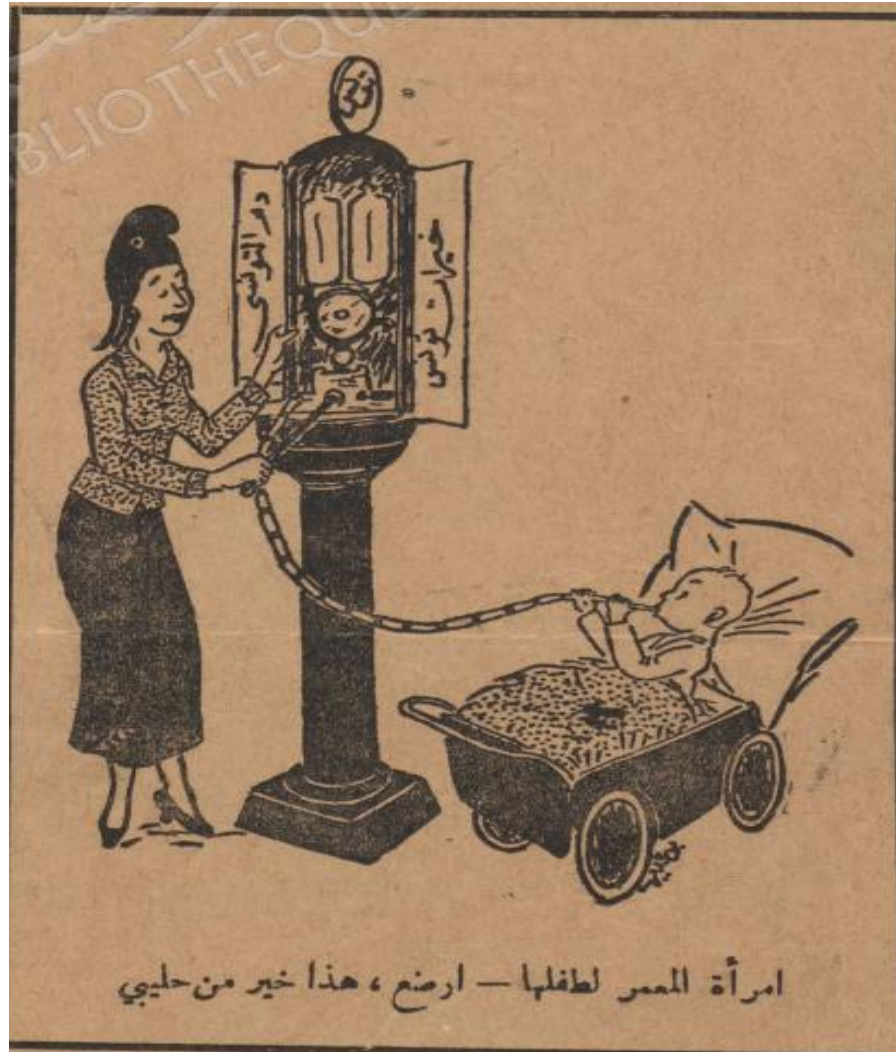


Figure 22: *Al-Watan*, This is better, my child!

This political cartoon is a powerful visual representation of the exploitation and oppression of the Tunisian people during the era of French colonialism in the 1930s. The image of the colonist's wife, with her baby suckling through a tube on a big machine labeled "Tunisian blood" and "Tunisian resources," is a stark reminder of the way in which the colonizers viewed the Tunisian people and their resources as nothing more than a means to an end. The fact that the woman is telling her baby to "suck on this, it's better than my milk!" highlights the dehumanization and devaluation of the Tunisian people, as well as the lack of empathy and

concern for their well-being. This cartoon also illustrates the economic exploitation of Tunisia by the colonizers, who drained the country's resources while leaving the local population in poverty. The cartoon is a poignant commentary on the injustice and suffering caused by colonialism that continued for 75 years.

To achieve this visual rhetoric, the cartoonist relies on the iconic image of a baby in his or her stroller or cradle, and the woman seems to be helping her child to feed on the blood and resources of the Tunisian people. While the baby represents innocence in this context, it is also a reminder by the artist to point out the immorality of exploitation and how the French sustained themselves through rough times, and world wars, by extracting tons of resources from its colonies, by impoverishing its people, and even attempting to subvert their way of life. The cartoon becomes darker by the sheer absence of the Tunisian people. Their representation by a machine is certainly dehumanizing, but it also represents the essence of Tunisians: their blood and sweat, their time and resources, and anything that the colonizer took away from the people. The colonizer drained the country's resources while leaving the local population in poverty.

Perhaps the most aggravating impact on Tunisian culture was how the French convinced many Tunisians that they brought civilization to the country and pulled people out of backwardness and primitive ways of life. Of course, the French colonists used these fallacies to justify their existence on the Tunisian soil. Colonial France, on the contrary, stopped the political and social progress that started with the constitution of 1861<sup>44</sup> and the reforms of Khair al-Din

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<sup>44</sup> The Constitution of 1861 in Tunisia, known as the Fundamental Pact (Ahd al-Aman), holds historical significance as it is considered to be the first modern constitution in the Arab world. It was enacted under the rule of Sadok Bey, the ruler of Tunisia, who was part of the Husainid Dynasty. However, the Constitution of 1861 was short-lived. It faced resistance from conservative elements within Tunisia and was suspended in 1864 following a tribal rebellion against the taxes imposed by the government (Gamoon 84).

Pasha, and imposed on us its own negative vision of human development, which impoverished our country and distorted our national.

After colonizing Tunisia, France seized most of the agricultural land and wealth in various forms, leaving the colonists to do as they pleased with the land and resources in the western and coastal regions. Having applied the same system of exploitation in other places like Algeria, they decided that in order to increase profits and exert more control, they needed to undermine the Tunisian government and expand their infrastructure, not out of love for Tunisians, but to facilitate their colonial exploitation and looting. In addition, 90% of the budget and expenses incurred by France were funded by the Tunisians through imposed heavy taxation. Meaning all the expenses are on us and all the profits were for them.

The political and social framework through which France organized taxation shows that the French practically established a colonial, oppressive system in which Tunisians were mainly exploited by the French settlers in Tunisia. This is significant because it indicates that there was not protection and equality between Tunisians and French colonists, and that colonization impoverished the majority of Tunisians and left them living in servitude to the colonizing capital owners. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon articulates how colonialism.

...is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. / On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gently loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego,

and from its physiology, its biology, and its own unhappiness which is its very essence. / In such a situation the claims of the native intellectual are not a luxury but a necessity in any coherent program. The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people. (210-11)

As for Mitchell (*Picture Theory*), “[t]he normal structure of ... image-text involves the straightforward discursive or narrative suturing of the verbal and visual: texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify ground, and document the text” (94).

#### **Images of a National Liberation Movement:**



Figure 23: *Al-Watan*: Welcome back! April 23, 1936.

This cartoon represents a scene where Tunisia is portrayed as a woman in traditional clothes is welcoming her sons back home, which indicates they were somewhere else. The settings seem to be in the open desert, and some of the characters can be identified for their iconic resemblance to real people. Abdelaziz Thaalbi can be identified through his clothes and eyeglasses. Habib Bourguiba appears in the cartoon with a long beard. Mahmoud El-Matri and Mohamed Ali El-Hami are also walking with the group. In the background the palm trees and architecture, indicate that the location is Tunisia. The caption says “welcome to my dear sons!! They have returned with diplomas in sacrifice and selflessness, and the truth of faith!”

Since its very inception, Tunisian journalism played a significant role in resisting French occupation through the use of satire and criticism. Often, the pen was mightier than any other form of resistance, and Tunisian newspapers excelled in their journalistic, literary, and artistic creativity in facing the colonizer. However, their most notable achievement was in fostering a national spirit and popular unity through these publications, which were seen as the voice of the people in confronting the tyranny and power of the occupier and asserting their own presence. Tunisian citizens have always used humor, satire, and wit to mock each other and to talk about the oppression of the French. This requires a high level of skill in manipulating language, words, and meanings to convey messages that are both humorous and wise, drawing on a wide range of life experiences. Tunisian writers, poets, journalists, artists, and actors are particularly adept at using their writing to portray the struggles of citizens and resist occupation.

The cartoon is an example of how the artist uses iconicity to give the characters some kind of resemblance to reality. Although the lines are simple, the use of outfits, eyeglasses, and hats helps the reader identify these characters. The artist shows the arms of the woman in the air, a

welcoming gesture, notably from a loving mother. Ghrayri keeps his characters mobile in this cartoon, and by keeping the legs open, the process of marching towards the homeland becomes more significant—especially in a desert-like political landscape—in galvanizing support for the national cause. However, this cartoon is completely in black and white, but the artist achieves a variety of textures and tones by using different lines, cross-hatching, and darker clothes. In fact, McCloud clarifies the difference that colors make by asserting that “In black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language. In flat colors forms themselves take on more significance. The world becomes a playground of shapes and space” (192).

The use of color can have an influence on the mood and tone of the cartoon. The use of black and white can create a sense of stark contrast, which can be used to emphasize certain emotions. For example, a black background with a white character can create a sense of isolation or sadness. Additionally, the use of simple, exaggerated lines and shapes can make characters and their emotions more easily recognizable and relatable to the audience. But in this case, we are confronting a deserted landscape.

The satirical press in Tunisia has a long history of poking fun at political figures, often resulting in fines and even shuttering of newspapers by French authorities. Some publications were deemed particularly dangerous for their role in inciting unrest and riots. In response, newspaper editors frequently changed the names of their publications to evade detection. Despite these challenges, cartoonists continued to cover a wide range of issues and make jokes about individuals from all social classes since the establishment of the satirical press in 1906. Many of these newspapers were established and supported by intellectuals who sought to empower new political leaders to negotiate with France and play a crucial role in the country's eventual

independence. However, France's tactic of exiling these leaders made it difficult for the people to maintain strong leadership.

The political party that played a key role in obtaining independence for Tunisia is the Neo-Destour Party. Led by Habib Bourguiba, it was formed in 1934 as a nationalistic and progressive movement to achieve independence from French colonial rule. The party fought for independence through peaceful means such as political lobbying, negotiations and mass mobilization. However, because of the abundance of weapons left by the American, German, and French armies, some groups started to form militias called “Fallegua” who would fight against the French and drive them out of the country. They were peasants who had nothing to lose, or as Frantz Fanon describes them:

And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength. (48)

Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory, outlined in his 1973 paper "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," is a key contribution to the field of media studies and has had significant influence on the way scholars understand the role of media in society. The theory suggests that media texts are not neutral or objective, but are instead shaped by the cultural, economic, and political contexts in which they are produced. Furthermore, the theory suggests that media texts are not simply passively consumed by audiences, but are actively interpreted and negotiated through a process of encoding and decoding.

Omar Ghayri's nationalist is always a man, or a group of men fighting for freedom or demanding the colonizer to reform the political system. In this masculinist vision, Ghayri's Tunisian woman stands for abstractions such as "Freedom" Tunisia" "Women". In addition, the return of these intellectuals to Tunisia represents a pivotal moment in the history of the national independence movement. The core mission of the national movement was to initially negotiate peacefully with the French government and get the independence, but the French government refused to leave.



Figure 24 : *Al-Watan*: "It is time to destroy this devil" 1938.

This political cartoon depicts colonialism as a devil that is being stoned by three people, who represent Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. The cartoon is using symbolism and metaphor to convey the idea that these countries are actively resisting and fighting against the negative effects

of colonialism. The use of the devil as a metaphor for colonialism highlights the evil and oppressive nature of the colonial system, and the act of stoning represents the countries' resistance and rejection of it. The people in the cartoon are visibly stoning the devil, and they are drawn with stones that vary in size, according to the length of colonization in that country. This could be interpreted as a representation of the different levels of resistance and the different degrees of damage that colonialism has caused in these countries. The presence of three people, representing Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, emphasizes the idea of unity and collective action in the fight against colonialism. This can be seen as a call to action and a reminder that the fight against colonialism is a shared struggle, and that these countries are working together to overcome the legacy of colonialism.

This is a political cartoon that ridicules and dehumanizes colonialism. The use of Islamic/biblical imagery is perhaps the most notable feature in this cartoon. This political cartoon uses satire and ridicule to dehumanize colonialism and convey the message that it is an oppressive and evil force. By depicting colonialism as a devil, the cartoonist is using a powerful and emotive metaphor to emphasize the negative impact of colonialism on the people and countries affected by it. The devil, as a traditional representation of evil, is often associated with negative characteristics such as deceit, destruction, and malevolence, and this association is being used to convey the same message about colonialism. The idea of stoning comes from the tradition of stoning people who were accused of adultery. It is also a tradition that is constantly occurring in Mecca, and more precisely, it is a requirement, in order to fulfill the pilgrimage. Furthermore, by depicting the people of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as actively stoning the devil, the cartoonist is dehumanizing colonialism by depicting it as an object of contempt and

ridicule. This serves to empower the people and countries affected by colonialism, and it sends a message that they are not passive victims but rather active agents of resistance and change.

Cartoons had a vital function of not only attacking the colonial power, but also raising the awareness of Tunisians and convincing them to join the national struggle for liberation. The comic press played a significant role in the development of a national culture and awareness in Tunisia before independence. Through its use of humor, satire, and cultural references, the comic press helped to create a shared language and a sense of community among Tunisians. It provided a space for the expression of local perspectives and challenged the dominant narratives of the colonial government. In particular, the comic press served as a means of resistance against colonialism and a way for Tunisians to assert their cultural identity. By poking fun at the colonial authorities and exposing the injustices of the colonial system, the comic press contributed to a sense of national pride and solidarity. It also provided a way for Tunisians to voice out their frustrations and aspirations, helping to shape a collective vision for the country's future.

The agency of images in producing political ideas is evident in the way political cartoons shape and give form to the enemy. Mitchell's concept of the "war of images" in *Cloning Terror* argues that cartoons and cartooning should not be seen as a separate sphere or place for poking fun, but rather as agents in shaping political ideas. In this way, the image of colonialism as evil is contested and reshaped through political cartoons. The war of images enables the creation of an enemy, or that which should be opposed, as an image. This concept makes tangible the power of cartoons to condition how one should respond to the ideas they produce, such as viewing colonialism as evil and something to be opposed, derided, and cast out. The way cartoons work to make sense and shape political ideas seems crucial in understanding the role of images in shaping our perceptions of good and evil. In his book *Understanding Comics*, examines the role

of evil in comics by analyzing the ways in which cartoon characters can be used to represent complex moral concepts and ideas. He argues that the simplicity and abstraction of cartoon characters allows them to be used as powerful symbols for good and evil, and that the use of these symbols can be used to communicate complex moral messages (154).

The way in which evil is depicted in political cartoons can reveal a great deal about the dynamics of power and control in a given society. The style of the cartoon, with its sharp lines and bold imagery, can serve to highlight the malevolent forces at play, emphasizing the harm they inflict and the need for resistance. The style of the political cartoon is a powerful tool for revealing the underlying dynamics of evil in a society. Through the use of symbolism and metaphor, the cartoonist can reveal the insidious nature of oppression and corruption, exposing the machinations of those in power and encouraging viewers to question the status quo.



Figure 25: *El-Farzazzou*: The fruit of Agreements! December, 1955

This political cartoon by “Sabri” paints a poignant and powerful picture of the human cost of French colonialism in Tunisia. The year 1955 was particularly significant as Tunisia was negotiating its autonomy from French colonial rule, leading to internal administrative autonomy, which was granted the following year. Sabri, the cartoonist displays a chaotic scene: A funeral for two people in the background, and an assassination in the foreground.

The image of a large number of men carrying dead caskets and going to bury their friends and relatives is a stark reminder of the devastating impact of war and violence on ordinary people. At the same time, the presence of the French, depicted as shooting and killing Tunisians, highlights the brutal and unjust nature of the colonial enterprise. The cartoon is a clear

commentary on the tragic consequences of colonialism and the dehumanizing effects of violent repression. The use of the image of the caskets serves to humanize the victims of the conflict, reminding the viewer that behind the political and ideological rhetoric, there are real people with families and loved ones who are being affected by the violence. The juxtaposition of the caskets and the single French colonizer also serves to highlight the contrast between the mourners, who are peaceful and engaged in a ritual of mourning, and the colonizer, who are violent and engaged in killing.

This stylistic choice is crucial to deliver the kind of scathing criticism, or dramatic imagery that calls for action. The cartoon's style, with its visual hyperbole and attention to detail, would have enabled it to capture and critique the subtleties of Tunisian society and politics at a crucial moment in the nation's history. Cartoons from this era often contained layers of meaning, with the potential to influence public opinion and offer a form of resistance or support to the currents of change. The cartoonist also shows the ritual of carrying the dead in Tunisia, which is still done in the same manner; the deceased family and friends carry them to the cemetery. The artistry not only reflects the humor and artistic sensibility of the time but also the cartoonist's acute awareness of the socio-political climate.

The text that comes along with the cartoon is very important to understand the context of this scene. In fact, it is a poem that describes the failed negotiations with the French government:

The tree has fruit that feeds the city in every way  
 We live by the rule of gangs, funerals going to "Beb El-Fella"  
 You only hear "he just died now", arms have become like a pack of cigarettes,  
 Souls falling like flies, and bullets flung all over, but the government doesn't care.



Figure 20: *El-Farzazzou* The first public sentence, 1957

This political cartoon appears to depict the execution by hanging of a figure that represents monarchy. Given the context of the 1950s, a time of significant political upheaval and the dismantling of colonial empires, this image symbolizes the rejection and dismantling of monarchical or colonial rule by the people. On July 25, 1957, Habib Bourguiba decided to abolish monarchy and stripped the last Ottoman Monarch of his official duties.

The main text on top says, “the first public sentencing”. The group of individuals gathered to witness the event signifies a collective action, perhaps a unified movement against the established order. The act of hanging often represents the ultimate sentence passed by a

community, indicating that the monarchy or the colonial system is being utterly rejected and removed from power. The cartoonist shows what the monarchy cost Tunisians through the decades by placing a money bag with “11 billion” on it.

The pit labeled with what could be interpreted as "colonialism" adds a deeper layer to the cartoon. It suggests that not only is the monarchy being eradicated, but it is also being discarded into the very system that may have sustained it. This could imply a recognition by the populace that the monarchy was complicit with colonial powers, or it might be read as a metaphor for how colonial structures are disposed of following their use, indicating a cycle of exploitation and discard.

The cartoon features a distinctive, simplistic line-drawing style that was common in the Tunisian satirical newspaper. It lacks the depth and detail found in other contemporary cartoons, but it's very much in keeping with the print technology and artistic sensibilities of its time. The simplistic features and expressions show typical characters. Or ordinary citizens. The scene is presented in a straightforward, almost theatrical manner, which allows the message to be immediately understood by viewers. There is a clear use of visual metaphor – an element widely utilized in political and social cartoons to convey deeper meanings. The cartoon is rendered in a way that emphasizes the whole scene, rather than focusing on the individual expressions and actions, a technique that both attracts the viewer's attention and serves the cartoon's commentary.

In conclusion, the period between 1906 and 1956 represents the golden age of political cartoons in Tunisia, a time when the sharp pens and visionary minds of cartoonists and journalists boldly sketched the contours of public discourse. The pressing problem of naturalization was deftly critiqued through their art, capturing the complexities of identity in a

colonized land. Issues of foreign imports and foreignness were also illuminated, often contrasting the allure of the exotic with the stark realities of cultural dominance and economic control.

Cartoonists during this era masterfully navigated visions of fantasy, offering an escape while simultaneously commenting on the socio-political climate. Their work laid bare the stratifications within the social structure, inviting contemplation and critique of the established hierarchies. The abject poverty experienced by many was not hidden in the shadows but rather spotlighted, offering a stark juxtaposition to the opulence of the few, thus amplifying calls for social justice.

Moreover, the pervasive visions of exploitation and corruption were exposed with unflinching candor, challenging the status quo and inciting a collective consciousness among the masses. Finally, the crescendo of this artistic symphony was the envisioning of a national liberation movement, a prophetic narrative that not only reflected the aspirations of the Tunisian people but also galvanized them towards the pursuit of independence.

## Chapter Three

### Cartooning and Independence 1956-1987

“The peasant always starts revolutions, but the merchant, the sailor, the craftsman are who benefit the most from it” – Hedi Timoumi<sup>45</sup>

The satirical press managed to develop its communication methods with readers, taking into account the historical and objective circumstances, especially the spread of illiteracy, ignorance, and superstition in the Tunisian society during that period. These newspapers renewed their methods and styles, transforming humor from preaching and guidance and clinging to the past into political and social criticism and political symbolism, which mixes with forms of intentional linguistic ambiguity to avoid censorship and ensure the newspaper's continuity.

Hamadi Sahli, a historian of satirical press in Tunisia, in his book *The Satirical Press in Tunisia from the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to Independence*, states that the Tunisian satirical newspapers have engaged in the political and social battle on two distinct fronts: the front of political struggle against colonialism, and the front of social and educational reform. To achieve this dual purpose, they relied on an effective means consisting, on the one hand of using the colloquial Arabic language, and on the other hand, of adopting caricature drawings to communicate with the popular masses and raise their awareness.

Independence marked a turning point in the way the press was conceived and produced. Journalism, which previously served the purpose of the nationalist movement, needed to adapt and establish new standards in the context of the newly established postcolonial state. Tunisians

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<sup>45</sup> From an interview on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmaaVJ2ooyE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmaaVJ2ooyE).

had to face the legacy of colonialism and make sense of what independence meant for them. The fight for independence was filled with a power struggle within the Tunisian leadership of the Neo-Destour party, notably between two main figures: Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef<sup>46</sup>.

The chapter opens with a momentous event in Tunisia's history: its independence. However, to fully appreciate the significance of this achievement, we must look back at the fervent anti-colonial resistance movement that paved the way for Tunisia's liberation. The struggle against French colonization reached a pivotal point in 1952, marking the beginning of armed resistance aimed at freeing Tunisia from colonial rule. Central to this movement was the leadership of Habib Bourguiba, the head of the Neo-Destour party. Born in the coastal city of Monastir, Bourguiba was not only a lawyer educated in Paris but also a dedicated political activist from the 1930s onwards. His relentless efforts in the independence movement earned him the title of al-mujahid al-akbar (the supreme combatant).

Yet, the struggle was far from a one-man effort. Figures such as Salah Ben Youssef, Farhat Hached, and Tahar Ben Ammar, alongside the valor of peasant fighters, were instrumental in the fight against colonialism. These individuals embodied the diverse ideologies that would later shape the nation: the progressive agenda of the Neo-Destourian party, the traditional Muslim conservative elite, trade unionists, and communists.

The trade unionists, blending socialism with Arab nationalism, leaned significantly towards the left, contributing a unique perspective to the independence movement. The communists, too,

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<sup>46</sup> In his book, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, Kenneth Perkins explains that the differences between ben Yusuf and Bourguiba came to a head in the months immediately preceding independence. When it became clear that ben Yusuf would not prevail, he fled to Cairo, where he was assassinated in 1961. (137)

made their stance known, particularly through their publications and political activism in universities. These varied ideologies, representing the four main pillars of Tunisian society, played crucial roles not only in achieving independence but in shaping the country's post-independence trajectory.

Bourguiba had to remove any competition or rivalry for his plan to rule the country. The first hurdle was Salah Ben Youssef. Derek Hopwood asserts that.

Bourguiba had first to try to remove any rival centre of power capable of offering opposition or of diminishing his stature. The first rival was personal, Salah Ben Youssef. The second institutional, the beylicate. Ben Youssef was the only man who posed a real challenge to Bourguiba. They had been companions for many years but had never liked each other. Neither was prepared to come second and both were equally ambitious and talented. In an interview with a French friend of Bourguiba Ben Youssef declared frankly: 'No, I never want to be second to Bourguiba.'<sup>47</sup> (80)

On June 1, 1955, "Bourguiba was met with a tumultuous reception in Tunis following his release from prison and his successful negotiation of an accord with the French government granting Tunisia internal autonomy" (Perkins 133). The declaration of independence in 1956 effectively ended the Ottoman monarchy with the last monarch, Mohamed Lamine Bey. The last Ottoman Monarch of Tunis was not treated well by the Tunisian government, and particularly Habib Bourguiba; he was stripped of all possessions and assets, and lived his last days in

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<sup>47</sup> In chapter 3 of his book *The Tragedy of Longevity* Derek Hopwood explores this clash between Salah Ben Youssef and Bourguiba in great detail.

poverty, until 1962. Ironically, President Habib Bourguiba was also overthrown through a coup, and lived the next 13 years of his life like a prisoner.

As the first President of Tunisia, Bourguiba led the country through a period of modernization and development which included the establishment of a welfare state, the promotion of women's rights, and the expansion of education and healthcare. Bourguiba believed that a comprehensive national education program was essential for Tunisia's success as a newly independent nation. However, his ruling party, the Neo-Destour, also suppressed political opposition and dissent. The cartoons of the 1960s and 1970s focused their satirical representations on society rather than on politics; cartoonists avoided any criticism of local politics and directed that energy towards other regions, or conflicts, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The political climate of the time was filled with nationalist pride, especially after the last French soldier left the country in 1962, and it took a bloody and violent battle for this to happen. The French wanted to maintain a certain degree of military presence in the northern state of Bizerte, but the Tunisian government had negotiations with the government of Charles De Gaulles who refused to leave, starting the battle of Bizerte in which hundreds of Tunisian civilians and armed forces died. The postcolonial social atmosphere was marked by the tension between the traditional conservative elite who wanted to stick to the traditional teachings of Islam, and the progressivists who wanted to follow the footsteps of the west while maintaining a certain balance between religion and freedom.

Political cartoons in Tunisia have been utilized to comment on and critique the ongoing social and political changes in the country. Cartoonists frequently depicted the aftermath of colonialism and its effects on Tunisian society, particularly in regard to economic oppression and

the suppression of political expression. The satirical press celebrated the rule of Bourguiba as they subscribed to the same vision and avoided any conflicts with a president who did not tolerate criticism. Cartoonists published works on reform, on how they viewed and imagined society, and focused more on caricatures of artists and soccer players, especially when soccer culture was increasingly gaining traction in the country. During the 75 years of French colonialism, Tunisians were introduced to industrialization as they witnessed all sorts of new technology and heavy machinery as well as large modes of transportation that only served the interests of France. However, it seems that modernity on a cultural level preoccupied most of the cartoonists in satirical and regular newspapers.

A large repertoire of political cartoons questions the idea of modernity and what it means for Tunisians. Nevertheless, the president's vision of the future depended on how he understood modernity. Bourguiba sought to modernize and westernize Tunisia after independence in 1956. During his presidency, Habib Bourguiba implemented progressive policies aimed at modernizing Tunisia. He championed women's rights, notably through the enactment of the Code of Personal Status, which abolished polygamy and granted women divorce rights, along with other reforms promoting gender equality. Bourguiba also prioritized education and literacy, investing in widespread educational reforms to foster a skilled and educated populace. He pursued a policy of secularization, reducing the influence of religion in state affairs, while also maintaining a non-aligned foreign policy during the Cold War. While his tenure was characterized by efforts towards progress and modernity, it was also tarnished by authoritarian practices, such as the suppression of political dissent and the concentration of power within his own hands, reflecting a complex dynamic between the ideals of governance and the exercise of power.

Politically, after 1963, the political atmosphere was dominated by the single-party rule of Bourguiba, who gradually curtailed press freedom, particularly in regard to criticism of him or his government. According to Abdelraouf Chouchene,

This early period of independence, was characterized by the emergence of a very small number of names such as "Ali Abid," "Mahmoud Al-Ribai," and "Hassan Al-Mashishi..." Their work began to mature in the beginning of the seventies, but they did not find a way to express themselves as their work was limited to the existing press at the time, which was owned by the state or the ruling party, independent and free press was completely absent. (403)

A new generation of cartoonists shaped the future of cartooning in Tunisia, and the most notable ones are below in this table:

| <b>Newspaper</b>                                           | <b>Cartoonist</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Constitutional Socialist Party Press                       | Ali Abid          |
| Tunisian Press: Economic Tunisia                           | Chedhli Belkhamsa |
| <i>Le Temps</i> (The Times)                                | Habib Bouhawel    |
| <i>As-Sabah</i> (The Morning)                              | Mahmoud Al-Ribai  |
| (Press of the Socialist Constitutional Party)              | Ettouzri          |
| <i>Ar-Riadah Saha-fit Tounes</i><br>(Sports Press Tunisia) | Ali Gharbi        |
| (Constitutional Socialist Party Press)                     | Ettounsi          |
| <i>Ar-Raii</i>                                             | Attar             |
| <i>Al-Amal</i><br>(Labor)                                  | Moncef Khalid     |
| Biladi (My country)                                        | Abdelaziz Rahmani |

Figure 27: Newspaper titles

According to Abdel Aziz Hali:

Overt criticism and (especially) satire were apparent in the written press under the 32-year-long authoritarian and individualistic regime of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president, (1955-1987) in publications such as *El-Kanfoud* (The Hedgehog), a mainstream satirical weekly newspaper founded by Habib Borji in 1962, which ran until 1964, *Es-Sitar* (The Curtain), a bimonthly publication created by Mohamed Jaziri in 1956 which only appeared in print that year, and then again from 1960 and 1961, *El-Ifrit* (The Ogre): a satirical journal published in 1957, *El-Imtaâ* (Satisfaction), a funny, satirical newspaper published in Arabic by The Press Club at Menzel Temime Youth and Cultural Centre between 1979 and 1980 and then the weekly newspaper *Le Phare* (The Lighthouse) by Abdejlil Behi. (Hali, online)

Bourguiba and the ruling party tailored a constitution that would create a Muslim nation that embraces secularism, women's rights, and the separation between religion and state. "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its type of government is the Republic." In a way, Bourguiba's image remains as the 'Great Mujahid'; Mujahid in the sense that he was the leader of the national liberation front and sacrificed years of his life in exiles and prisons. Consequently, for secularists Bourguiba remains a champion and the father figure of modern Tunisia.

For the conservatives and religious elite, the shift in cultural values represented a disastrous departure from the Islamic principles they sought to enforce. This change was not merely a matter of different preferences or tastes; it was a fundamental clash between deeply held beliefs about society's direction and moral foundation. The stark difference between the Islamist vision of society and what Habib Bourguiba introduced and advocated for highlights the

profound divide. Bourguiba's progressive policies, aimed at modernizing the nation and promoting secular values, stood in sharp contrast to the conservative and religious frameworks that had previously dominated. This juxtaposition not only underscored the tensions between tradition and modernity<sup>48</sup> but also set the stage for a broader debate about the identity and future of the society in question.

Initially, many newspapers expressing different political orientations appeared in print. And while at first, Bourguiba allowed a number of these newspapers to operate with a certain degree of freedom, but this freedom was revoked after a coup attempt<sup>49</sup> at the beginning of 1962. Bourguiba's conceptualization of power relied on his vision of a modern Tunisian society, where women have almost the same freedom as women in the West. The fundamental ideas Bourguiba professed for the family code<sup>50</sup> and the abolishment of polygamy, which was a major step in women rights, and made him more popular in the country.

Bourguiba remains a very controversial figure in Tunisia; his rule was marked by both modernization and development efforts as well as suppression of political opposition and dissent. One can argue here that Bourguiba's Western ideals influenced his vision for a society that can

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<sup>48</sup> In order to navigate these conflicts with other political entities, Bourguiba had to impose the one-party system that would literally sterilize any attempts to offer a different version of modernity and what it meant for Tunisians.

<sup>49</sup> This coup attempt involved a group of military and civilian personnel from various political orientations including former resistance fighters, military officers and civilian opponents of the regime at the time, who were considered to be part of the Youssefist and nationalistic current, attempted to overthrow the Bourguiba regime.

<sup>50</sup> Women were denied their political and civil rights, so the state issued a Personal Status Magazine that included several measures: prohibiting polygamy, recognizing divorce by judicial decree, and setting the age of marriage for both sexes, as well as giving women the right to vote and stand for all responsibilities (Law of 4 March 1957)

benefit from the West while relying on education, healthcare, and women's rights. Bourguiba is despised by the Youssefist movement and the Islamists because he succeeded in halting their political activities. In fact, after the coup attempt of 1962, hundreds of Youssefist fighters were arrested and sentenced to death for attempting to take Bourguiba down. From 1963, newspapers that were out of the control of Bourguiba disappeared completely.<sup>51</sup> The conservative Islamist current in Tunisia never vanished during colonialism or after it. In the 1970s, the Islamists took the initiative to talk to Tunisians via newspapers, and later on form a political party following a period of Islamic revival in North Africa and the Middle East.

Tunisian cartooning focused on dismantling cultural tropes of colonialism, exploitation, hypocrisy of politicians, and the ways in which colonialism changed Tunisians into colonial subjects. Over the years, the themes of the political cartoons kept changing according to the political socio-economic reality. The newspapers that were the pillars of comedy and satire started to vanish, leaving a few titles and even fewer practitioners of the art. The satirical press celebrated the rule of Bourguiba as its editors and cartoonists subscribed to the same vision. Meanwhile, the first generation of cartoonists in postcolonial Tunisia attempted to trace the changing dynamics of a society that was being shaped by internal and external factors.

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<sup>51</sup> See Al-Jazeera documentary on the history of Tunisian press.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRAJze5jYwk>

### The Father of the Nation:



Figure 28: *Es-Sitar*, The Symbol of Struggle, 1960

This cartoon is an illustration of Habib Bourguiba, “The Leader of the Nation, the Esteemed President, the Great Mujahid”. Bourguiba was an intellectual, a passionate orator, and a charismatic character in Tunisian collective memory.

The style of this cartoon is a dramatic depiction of the leader’s face. The texture and the choice of lines highlights a certain resemblance to wood, or wrinkles. This invites the reader to

associate this image with the struggle for independence. The cartoon's style, through its dramatic depiction of the leader's face, employs a nuanced artistic technique where the texture and the choice of lines evoke a striking resemblance to wood or wrinkles, imbuing the image with deep symbolic meaning. This deliberate stylistic choice is not merely about rendering physical traits but serves as a metaphor for growth, resilience, and the passage of time—qualities intrinsic to the arduous journey of independence struggles. By drawing these visual parallels, the artist invites readers to associate the leader's visage with the broader narrative of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. The rugged, wood-like textures and pronounced wrinkles are emblematic of the hardships endured and the wisdom gained in the fight for freedom, transforming the portrait into a powerful emblem of the leader's role and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of independence. Thus, the cartoon transcends a simple depiction, becoming a poignant narrative that connects the viewer with the patriotic spirit and the collective memory of resilience in the struggle for sovereignty.

Using Olaniyan's scale of iconicity, the cartoon is more iconic or "privilege[s] resemblance to reality" (92). The lines provide the barest essentials to convey its message. The text that surrounds the image of Bourguiba's face frames his image as a stoic and serious leader who deserves praise. The cartoon is certainly picture-driven, which resonates with Olaniyan's observation that "Picture-driven cartoons are fully keeping in line with the popular conception of the cartoon as primarily a visual art; and to give primacy to the visual over the verbal is to privilege the more mass-oriented and easily accessible of the two languages" (98). The iconic face of Bourguiba started to dominate the first pages of newspapers, a tradition that continued for decades to follow.

Habib Bourguiba modeled himself after Atatürk<sup>52</sup> and aimed to educate his citizens in new ways and attitudes. He frequently delivered speeches on radio and television to introduce reforms and express interest in all aspects of life, even going as far as attempting to resolve marital disputes on television instead of in court. His speeches on food, Ramadhan, ethics, and clothing are extensive and have been compiled into multiple volumes. More importantly, Bourguiba saw himself as the father of the nation, a trope that existed in other African nations after independence. Michael Schatzberg offers a definition of this political style, where governance is legitimized through its foundation in familial and paternal metaphors<sup>53</sup>. This shapes the politics of the belly, which refers to the way in which power is exercised at the local level. Schatzberg argues that this moral matrix of legitimating governance is based on four main principles. The first and second of these principles relate to the image of the ruler as a "father-chief." This image portrays the ruler as having the duty to both care for and protect their "family" and to discipline and forgive their "children" when appropriate (35). The third premise has to do with women rights, and the last one with the alternation of power. Based on this moral matrix, Habib Bourguiba would succeed in three of them, except the alternation of power, where his decision to remain president for life proved to be a big mistake, notably after the decline of his physical and mental health by the end of the 1970s.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) was a Turkish nationalist leader and founder and first president of the republic of Turkey. In 1923, Turkey became a secular republic with Atatürk as its president. He established a single party regime that lasted almost without interruption until 1945. In 1935, when surnames were introduced in Turkey, he was given the name Atatürk, meaning 'Father of the Turks'. (BBC)

<sup>53</sup> See Michael Schatzberg *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*.

<sup>54</sup> Bourguiba had a stroke which led to the decline of his health and rule.

The Communication project, established in honor of President Bourguiba, functioned as a media institution under the purview of the ruling regime. Its primary objective was to promote the activities, attributes, and ideas of the President, positioning him as a valiant fighter and an unwavering leader in the face of occupation, poverty, underdevelopment, and illiteracy. In this vein, the Minister of Information at the time, Mustapha El Masmoudi, stated that "President Bourguiba was a man of action, committed to disseminating information and engaging the public. He rejected the idea of journalism as a realm for political debate and a space for contention." (Jamaaoui, online)<sup>55</sup>. Thus, the President held a stranglehold over written, visual, and auditory media, monopolizing the image of the founding leader of the independent state and forbidding dissent from within and outside the party to challenge his public image and likability to the people. The ultimate aim was to construct a media landscape that was one-sided and monopolistic, stifling opposing voices and perspectives, while manipulating political truths and verities under the guise of an "inspiring leader."

The state-controlled media, including the official newspaper, television, and radio, have long been complicit in perpetuating a political discourse that extols the virtues of the President and the ruling party, while demonizing opposition figures and distorting their views. As journalist and political dissident Mohammed Benour testified before the Truth and Dignity Commission in 2018, "the Ministry of Media was giving instructions to the heads of the editorial boards on everything that was happening in the country," revealing the extent to which the media landscape was beholden to the executive branch. The ultimate goal of this messaging led to the creation of a cult of personality around the President and guaranteed loyalty to his rule among

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<sup>55</sup> According to Anouar Jamaaoui, the late President Habib Bourguiba dominated the written, visual, and audio media, monopolizing the image of the founding leader of the independence state. See <https://shorturl.at/gJSVY>

the population. “Bourguiba always enjoyed these encounters, seeing himself as the personal manager of his country. He never doubted for a minute his ability to mesmerize the people, who held him in almost the same esteem that would be due a saint” (Lamb and Daniszewski, online).<sup>56</sup> In fact, Bourguiba’s oratory style and his use of the Tunisian colloquial language made people listen to him religiously. This use of language was an attempt to lure the population into accepting his plan to modernize the country.

This father figure of the nation would punish his children in two occasions; “black Thursday” on January 26, 1978, was a major event where mass protests and strikes took place in response to price hikes and economic austerity measures.<sup>57</sup> The second event is the “bread riots” took place in from December, 1983, to January, 1984. Both events resulted in growing opposition from both secular and Islamist groups, and the country was plunged into a period of political and economic turmoil. The aging president was facing many challenges, and in the background his wife was helping him keep a sense of order. Bourguiba’s divorce from Wassila in 1986 would prove fatal to his rule, as his own prime minister was plotting to overthrow and replace him.

### **Bourguiba and Women**

The president was heavily influenced by the French ideas of freedom and women’s rights and delivered multiple speeches on the importance of women’s liberation and education in order

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-apr-07-me-17142-story.html>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/politics-1978.htm>

to build a strong society. He wanted to steer away from the dominant cultural framework of Islamic and Arab nations and create a certain hybrid society that can benefit from the West, while maintaining its cultural specificities. In fact, Bourguiba was adored by many women for his role in abolishing polygamy and creating the opportunity for them to go to school. Kenneth Perkins posits that:

For the male Neo-Dusturians who engineered the Personal Status Code not until 1955 did women enter the inner circle of the party, and then only a few – the full emancipation of Tunisia required the elimination of antiquated social practices, in gender relations no less than in labor relations. This attitude, rather than a more feminist one, gave rise to the code, as it did to a campaign to discourage all forms of traditional dress, but particularly veiling. Bourguiba believed that old-fashioned clothing encouraged old-fashioned modes of thinking and acting; those who chose to wear it were, at least subconsciously, expressing their rejection of the modern world. (142)

At this juncture, the younger generation adopted Western clothes: pants, dresses, shirts, T-shirts, and suits, became the new trend of the time. The older generation was the more conservative one who proudly wore their traditional clothes for their historical significance. This social transformation was imposed on the population and was denounced as a type of rift with Tunisian traditional ways of life. In fact, Tunisia would become a textile producer of those very Western products. Younger women, and especially those living on the coast cities, enjoyed these new liberties to wear western clothes without getting judged. Nevertheless, this was not the case in the countryside, where people held more conservative views and who did not subscribe to Bourguiba's project.



Figure 29: *Al-Watan* Spring of the year, 1962

This cartoon from *Al-Watan* shows a woman in a mini skirt holding two torches and wearing a hat with the Tunisian flag on it. The caption says, “Spring of the year, flower of the future, symbol of life”. The settings are difficult to locate, but it appears as if she is ripping through the page to reveal herself. This revelation brings flowers and plants in the background. The representation of the woman in the cartoon reflects the cultural and historical context of independence in Tunisia, and how this relates to the representation of women in the country.

The use of the words "Spring of the year" suggests renewal and rejuvenation of society, while the words "flower of the future" indicate hope and potential for women's future role in society. The representation of the woman as a "symbol of life" holds cultural significance,

reflecting the importance of women in shaping the future of Tunisian society. The representation of women as a symbol of life and a flower of the future reflects the cultural and political attitudes towards women's role in society during the independence era, as well as its relationship to the larger cultural and political discourse of the time. This recurrent theme in Tunisian cartooning highlights the cultural significance of women's representation in Tunisia during this pivotal time in its history.

Bourguiba's new policies focused on giving equal rights to women as El Houssi<sup>58</sup> explains:

Legislation favouring female empowerment in Tunisia reveals a significant peculiarity. The 1956 Code of Personal Status (cps) has produced instances of social emancipation linked to the acquisition of women's rights. The abolition of polygamy, the replacement of repudiation in favour of the institution of divorce, the removal of the figure of the tutor, the fixing of the minimum age for marriage at 18 and the introduction of free agreement between the parties were some of the measures strongly endorsed by Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, who asserted that the code "did not contradict any religious text but was in harmony with the need for justice and equality between the sexes. (189)

Bourguiba knew well that if he wanted to build a solid society, women had to share the same rights, even if it took a battle against the Islamist current in the country. Perkins asserts that:

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<sup>58</sup> Leila El Houssi's article "The Role of Women in Tunisia from Bourguiba to the Promulgation of New Constitution."

As the most innovative legal reform in the Muslim world since the abolition of the sharia in Turkey in the 1920s, the Personal Status Code clearly revealed the social trajectory envisioned by the country's leader. He took pains, however, to portray himself not as sweeping aside Islam, as had Ataturk, but rather as reinterpreting it through *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning. The personal code was the culmination of decades of political thinking of the new generation of intellectuals, notably the author and reformer Tahar Haddad<sup>59</sup>, who wrote the book *Our Women in the Shari'a and Society*<sup>60</sup>. (140)

Bourguiba's emancipating politics is identified as a state feminism. Feminist associations criticized this politics because they considered it incapable of answering women's concrete requests for real equality between sexes within society. As Sophie Bessis points out regarding Tunisia, "state feminism during the Bourguiba period was originally conditioned by various limits: The respect for the patriarchal norm, which was legitimized by a recourse to sacred texts, tempered a real will for emancipation"(OpenEdition).

Bourguiba enjoyed lecturing and explaining his ideas to large numbers of people, and that is why he visited universities<sup>61</sup>, and criticized the Islamist legacy that sidelined women and

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<sup>59</sup> Tahar Haddad 1899 –1935 was a Tunisian women's rights advocate, union leader, journalist, writer, poet, militant nationalist, reformer, and social thinker. Haddad's work was influential in promoting women's rights and continues to be a reference in discussions of gender and reform in the Muslim world.

<sup>60</sup> *Our Women in the Shari'a and Society*, by Tahar Haddad, is a seminal work in Tunisian feminist literature. Published in 1930, it was a groundbreaking and controversial book that examined the status of women in Tunisian society through the lenses of Islamic law (Shari'a) and contemporary social practices. Haddad critiqued traditional views on the roles of women and argued for reforms in areas such as education, marriage laws, polygamy, and inheritance rights.

<sup>61</sup> A full-length documentary lionizes Bourguiba's quest towards the emancipation of women. The documentary does not criticize him at all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkV6TEBkqM0>

restricted their roles to the household. Women were getting college education and could now enter the workforce. However, taken hostage by politics, Tunisian women began to denounce inequality, and some feminists in the 1970s were strongly opposed to their subordination in a male-dominated society. In their view, Tunisia continued to suffer from domination by the patriarchy, and women did not enjoy egalitarian conditions within society (El Houssi 192)

Wassila Bourguiba, the first lady, was undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in his inner circle. Nicholas Christoph, in his Washington Post article<sup>62</sup>, describes her as a woman of immense power and influence, stating that "she was powerful before the marriage and, in the view of some observers, is unique in Africa and the Middle East because of her role as a conjugal power broker and her independent political base." Though the President was the ultimate decision-maker, Wassila played a significant role in shaping the country's political and cultural landscape between 1963 and 1986, until the couple's divorce. In fact, Wassila Bourguiba was the main driving force behind achieving equal rights with men, notably in a predominantly Muslim society. Wassila supported cultural events, and promoted art in the country, as well as women's associations.

The idealized image of the free woman comes as a celebration of independence and also symbolizes the health of the country. The image of the woman has always been a versatile vehicle that carries multiple messages or meanings in the larger cultural and political discourse of the time. Women would appear on multiple editorial cartoons that depict them in different situations. This was a period when the concept of women's emancipation was emerging as a new

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<sup>62</sup> Cited from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/07/15/arab-worlds-female-wheeler-dealer-loses-a-power-struggle-in-tunisia/eb9576d5-6a1b-4955-96f5-414e459aee59/>

and contentious idea within Tunisian society. The cartoons served as a medium to explore and debate the implications of women gaining more independence and rights, reflecting broader discussions on changing social norms and the redefinition of gender roles in a newly independent Tunisia.

In multiple cartoons of *El-Kanfoud*, a fictional character assumes the role of a social critic. The section always contains headers with bold fonts, and a caricature of this character who is called “Fat’heez”. This character provides poems that are supposedly filled with wisdom and advice on how to treat women. This poetry is often written by men in an attempt to frame and control the social behavior of individuals, including cheating, drinking, going out without consent. Many of those poems contained advice that would uphold the patriarchal values, especially criticizing people who drink, smoke pot, and more specifically women who go out without the consent of their fathers or husbands.



Figure 30 *El-Kanfoud* (The Hedgehog): Hello Dear Husband, 1970

This cartoon represents a Tunisian woman in revealing clothes, in what appears to be a bedroom and a man sitting on the bed in the background. The cartoonist opted for a simple style, relying mostly on the figure of the scantily clad woman.

In the larger cultural and political context of post-independence Tunisia, this cartoon can be seen as a reflection of the challenges faced by the nation in terms of navigating and defining new gender roles and relationships in the aftermath of colonialism. The postcolonial press and society were grappling with questions about identity and cultural norms, and this cartoon may be seen as a manifestation of these larger societal debates and anxieties. The cartoonist “Belghith” focused heavily on cartooning women in different situations; many of these cartoons were

sexually suggestive, showing women in bikinis, or cheating on their husbands. This could be explained as a representation of the anxieties and tensions surrounding the changing societal norms in post-colonial Tunisia, particularly with regards to the role of women. Some cartoonists were comfortable with nudity, to the point of being unsuitable for certain ages, but it seems that the continuation of the newspaper indicates its success and circulation. The heavy focus on the ways in which women changed their clothing styles reveals a social debate, usually among men in cafes.

The representation of women in such a manner within cartoons may indeed be commenting on the evolving gender norms and expectations in post-independence Tunisia. However, it can also be reflective of a broader narrative where women symbolize the state of the nation itself. In this interpretative lens, women are often depicted as metaphors for the nation's purity, honor, or moral standing. By placing women in sexually suggestive or compromising positions, the cartoonist could be highlighting societal anxieties about the perceived moral direction of the country following significant social changes, such as those concerning women's roles and rights.

This duality in representation suggests that discussions about women and gender are not only about the individuals themselves but also serve as a barometer for the cultural and ethical climate of the nation. The way women are portrayed can signal deeper concerns about the impact of modernization, westernization, and the potential loss of traditional values in the national identity. In this sense, women become signposts for the nation, with their depictions in media and art offering a commentary on the broader societal and cultural shifts within the country.

The theme of infidelity and disloyalty in relationships can be seen as a representation of the larger anxieties and debates around cultural values and identity in post-colonial Tunisia. It is

important to note that while this cartoon and others like it may offer valuable insights into the societal debates and anxieties surrounding gender and relationships in post-colonial Tunisia, they should also be approached with a critical and nuanced lens. This representation of women is arguably exaggerated. The cartoonist particularly criticizes a specific type of women who subscribe to modernity and Bourguiba's vision of free and educated women.

One of the recurring themes and visual images of the 1960s and 1970s was the image of the free modern woman, and how she can be more powerful than the husband. Many cartoons portray women as cheaters, or bullies of their husbands. Other cartoons subtly touch upon the theme of women's sexuality and its perceived influence over men, often presenting this idea with a satirical tone. While on the surface, these images might seem merely humorous or exaggerated, they delve deeper into the underlying anxieties some men had regarding the progressive policies of Habib Bourguiba, especially his push towards women's liberation. Following the abolition of polygamy in Tunisia, a significant step in Bourguiba's broader agenda to modernize and equalize the societal roles and rights of women, these cartoons serve as a window into the societal tensions that accompanied such reforms. The satire in these cartoons, therefore, is not just a reflection of societal attitudes towards gender dynamics but also highlights the discomfort and resistance among parts of the male population. This resistance was rooted in the fear of losing traditional forms of control and influence over women, suggesting a struggle to adapt to the changing landscape of gender equality and women's rights. Through humor, these cartoons expose the challenges faced in shifting societal norms and the complexities of navigating the path towards gender equality in a rapidly modernizing Tunisia.

## Society and Social Practices:

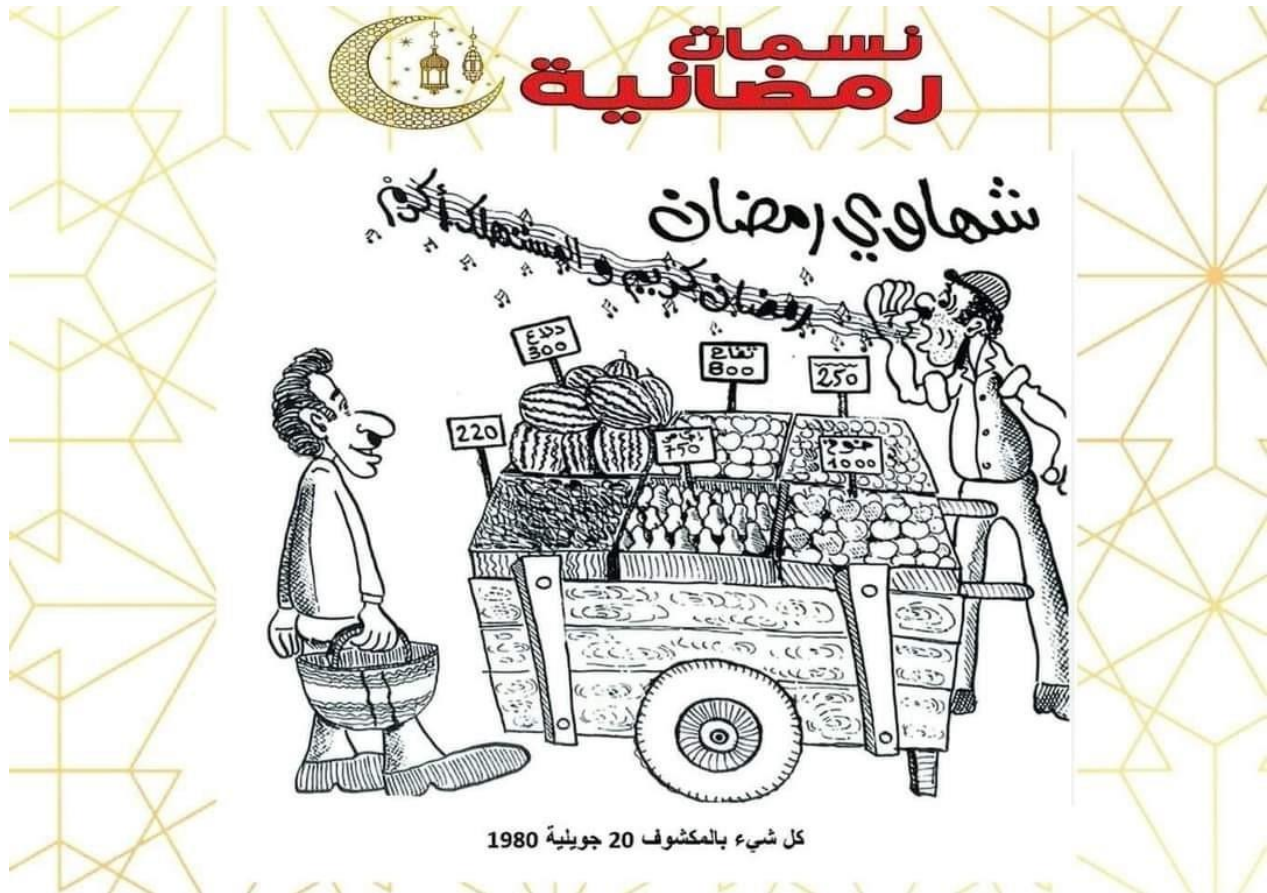


Figure 31: *Koll-Chay-Bel-Makshouf* Desires in Ramadan, 1980

This cartoon appeared on the newspaper *Kollshay-Bel-Makshouf*, in 1980, depicts a fruit seller during Ramadhan in Tunisia, a spiritual month where Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. The seller is trying to attract customers by singing "Ramadhan is generous and the consumer is even more generous!" This phrase is a twist on the commonly heard phrase "Ramadan is generous but God is even more generous!" which emphasizes the generosity of the month<sup>63</sup>. The visual

<sup>63</sup> The generosity of Ramadan is manifested through various practices that highlight both spiritual and social virtues. This holy month encourages Muslims to amplify their acts of charity,

representation of the fruit seller is that of a confident and cheerful man. He is standing tall, singing loudly, and is dressed in Western clothing with a Tunisian hat. This combination of Western and traditional clothing represents the fusion of modern and traditional cultures in Tunisia. The man is also depicted as healthy and well-fed, indicating the abundance of food during Ramadhan.

A curious man, dressed in Western attire to signify his integration into Tunisia's modern, urban culture, stands before the fruit cart, scrutinizing the prices while carrying a handbag, embodying the role of the consumer interested in the cost of the fruit. This is in line with the consumerism that has dominated the spiritual month of Ramadan<sup>64</sup>. The cartoonist also documents the real pricing of produce, notably dates, watermelons, pears, peaches, and apples. The fruit cart itself is depicted in detail, with the prices of the fruit shown on labels, and the textures indicating what kind of material the cart is made of. The attention to detail on the fruit cart, with prices clearly displayed, suggests that the business is taken seriously and is likely thriving due to the increased demand during Ramadan. People often buy more fruit during this time for their iftar meals, which are the meals to break the fast. The full display of fruit represents the abundance and variety typically seen in markets during Ramadan, reflecting the spirit of generosity that is a hallmark of the month.

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including the obligatory 'Zakat' and voluntary 'Sadaqah', and to share Iftar meals with others, particularly the less fortunate, fostering a sense of community and hospitality. Additionally, Ramadan is a period for increased devotion, with Muslims dedicating more time to prayer, Quranic recitation, and spiritual reflection, aiming for personal growth and closer communion with Allah.

<sup>64</sup> During Ramadan, consumerism manifests distinctly, intertwined with the period's spiritual and cultural nuances. The month sees a spike in spending, driven by preparations for the lavish Iftar and Suhoor meals, heightened hospitality, and the giving of charity, aligning with Ramadan's ethos of generosity.

The transition from satirizing the colonizer to focusing on issues like pricing, consumer goods, and aspects of Ramadan in cartoons reflects a shift in the political and cultural landscape of the country post-independence. Initially, cartoons served as a medium for critiquing colonial powers and could be openly critical as they rallied against a common external oppressor. After achieving independence, the same critical lens directed toward the colonizer could potentially be seen as seditious or disrespectful if applied to the nation's own leaders. The cartoon also signals that Tunisian peasants and farmers have now become fully independent and they are able to sell their products. The representation of the fruit seller and consumer, along with the attention to detail in the fruit cart, provide a glimpse into the consumerism that dominated the spiritual month of Ramadhan. The fusion of Western and traditional clothing, along with the abundance of fruit, symbolizes the modernization and prosperity of the country during this period. The fruit seller and his cart will make a momentous reappearance at a later time, cementing his image in history and causing a whole country to revolt against the president<sup>65</sup>.

Cartoonists emphasized multiple social practices related to Ramadhan in other cartoons, such as bad mood, fighting in the market, and showing people sleeping instead of praying or following the spirit of Ramadhan. Islam essentially tries to make people feel the hunger and deprivation that the poor feel, and therefore, create a sort of social empathy to help the poor, while preserving food<sup>66</sup>. Even though the country seems to have food security, and farmers

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<sup>65</sup> Chapter 5 navigates through the Arab Spring cartoons, after the events of December 17, 2010, when a fruit seller self-immolated and caused a revolution across the country.

<sup>66</sup> See this article for a comprehensive idea on the purpose of fasting in Ramadhan:  
<https://www.arabnews.com/news/599956>

produce a variety of fruits and vegetables, cartoonists criticized wasting food, especially during this month, where people buy copious amounts of food.

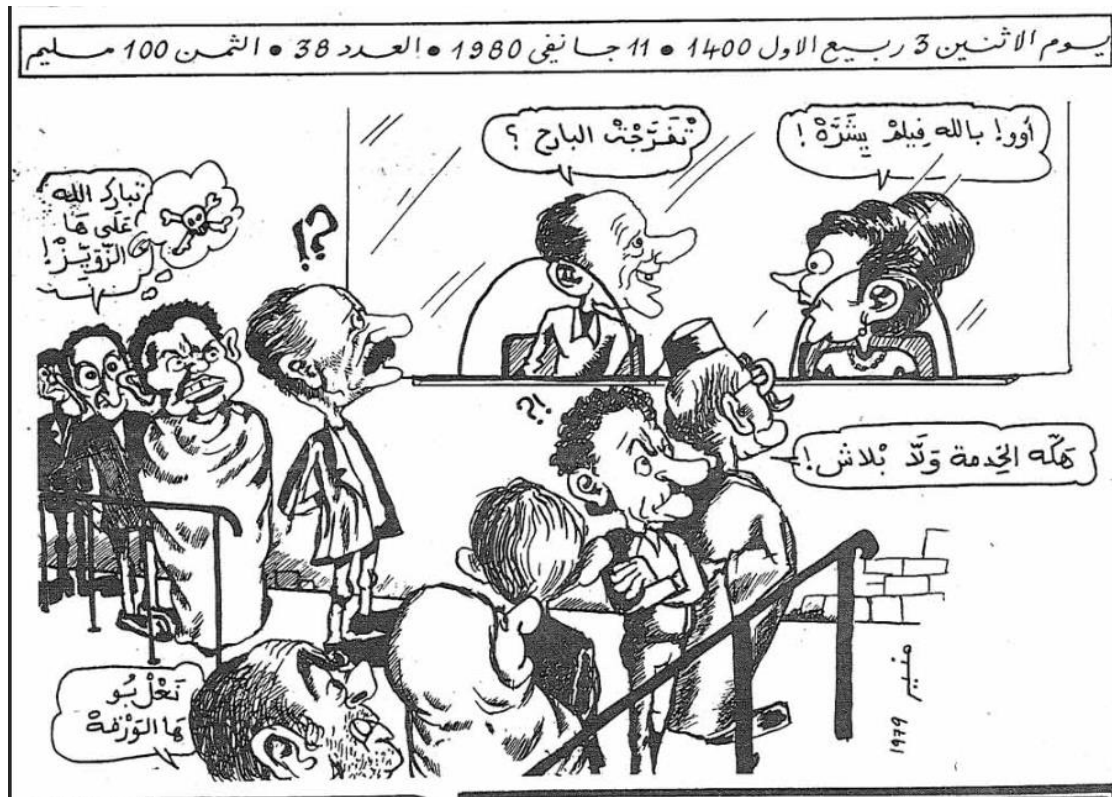


Figure 32: The Tunisian administration *As-Sitar*, 1980

Cartoonists of this decade criticized the government indirectly by satirizing the lack of professionalism in government administrations. This cartoon, which appeared in the Tunisian newspaper *As-Sitar* in 1980, is a powerful and striking visual commentary on the state of bureaucracy in postcolonial Tunisia. The scene is set in a government office, where a long line of frustrated citizens can be seen waiting in line to get their paperwork done. The two central figures in the cartoon, a man and a woman, are workers engaged in a casual conversation about a film they saw the previous night, oblivious to the chaos and frustration around them.

The visual style of the cartoon is characterized by heavy caricatures, large heads, noses, and different clothes. The clothes indicate a mix of Tunisian and western outfits, and the detail in the cartoon is one of its prominent features. At first the details strike the reader with the black color; The use of exaggerated physical features and clothing serves to highlight the absurdity of the situation and emphasizes the contrast between the two workers and the frustrated citizens in line. The large heads of the characters also serve to draw the viewer's attention to their expressions, which further amplify the cartoon's satirical message.

The long line of citizens waiting in frustration to get their paperwork done is a clear representation of the bureaucratic obstacles that citizens often face in their daily lives. The two workers, who are depicted as being completely disengaged from the situation and focused on their own entertainment, can be seen as a metaphor for the apathy and lack of accountability of government officials.

The cartoon can also be seen as highlighting some positive aspects of modernity in postcolonial Tunisia. The depiction of the citizens waiting in a well-organized line suggests that there is a sense of order and structure in the country, which can be seen as a positive aspect of modernization. This can be construed as an observation on the establishment of a strong state and its ability to maintain social order, which is a crucial aspect of governance and development.

Furthermore, the presence of the two workers in the cartoon can also be seen as a representation of the modernization of the workforce. The fact that a woman is depicted as a worker, suggests that there is an increasing acceptance of women in the workforce, which can be seen as a positive aspect of modernization. This is meant to show the progress made in terms of gender equality, and the increasing participation of women in the country's economic and social development.

However, it is important to note that the cartoon also critiques the reality that lies behind this order and modernity; it is not a celebration of it. The fact that the two workers are disengaged and focused on their own entertainment, while the citizens are frustrated and waiting in line, serves to highlight the gap between the government's rhetoric of modernization and development, and the reality of citizens' everyday lives. It also critiques the inefficiency and corruption of the state bureaucracy, which is an obstacle to the citizens' access to services and opportunities.

### Images of Modernity:



Figure 33: *El-Ifrit* 'The Adventures of Sheikh Matlouf (The Ogre) 1962

In the first panel on the right, the man yells “Glory to Allah, glory to Allah, how beautiful this girl is.”, in the middle frame he exclaims crossing the road “God is great God is great! Who is the owner of this luxurious car who almost hit me?! In The last frame on the left he says, “Thank God that the four wives I married before the prohibition of polygamy were slender and lightweight.”

This cartoon cleverly employs a sequence of frames to satirize societal attitudes towards beauty, wealth, and women. In the first frame, the man's exclamation about a girl's beauty juxtaposes religious praise with an admiration of physical appearance, suggesting a superficiality in how societal values are expressed. The next frame shifts to a critique of materialism and the hazards of wealth, as the man narrowly avoids being hit by a luxurious car, yet his reaction is to inquire about the owner's identity, implying a reverence for material possessions over personal safety. The final frame is a reflection on the man's personal life, where he expresses relief that his wives are slender, poking fun at the objectification of women and the man's shallow considerations in relationships.

The man's exclamations evolve from superficial appreciation to a brush with danger, and finally to a self-satisfied reflection on personal life choices. This progression could be interpreted as a critique of societal norms that privilege physical and materialistic attributes over deeper values. The cartoonist may be using humor and exaggeration to question the social and religious hypocrisy of the character, who, while invoking Allah's name, reveals his own worldly preoccupations. The recurring religious exclamations serve to underscore the tension between the character's piety and his fixation on earthly matters.

Between 1956 and 1987, the impact of modernity on Tunisian popular culture was significant and resulted in a shift from traditional cultural expressions towards more Western-influenced forms of entertainment. The introduction of new technologies, such as television and radio, helped to spread modern cultural ideas and forms of entertainment, such as pop music, to a wider audience. Additionally, the growth of urbanization and increased exposure to Western cultural forms through travel and media led to the emergence of new cultural scenes and subcultures, particularly in cities like Tunis and Sfax. These changes had both positive and

negative effects on Tunisian culture, as traditional forms of expression were challenged and sometimes replaced by more contemporary forms, but they also opened up new avenues for artistic expression and creativity.

In the 1960s and 1970s Tunisians had a functioning government that was working on building the nation and its economy, health care system, and educational system. The colonial impact was deeply entrenched in the everyday life of the population. In the political cartoons of this period, one can notice a change in haircuts and clothing styles that was in tune with the 70s spirit. In the Tunisian cultural context of the 1970s and 1980s, the image of the patriarch donning a "Sheshia" (a traditional Tunisian hat) had taken on a comical connotation. This transition reflects the broader societal changes and modernization efforts taking place during that period. The "Sheshia," once a symbol of respect and authority, began to be associated with being out-of-touch or resistant to progress. As Tunisia underwent significant social and political transformation, especially under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, who promoted a modern, secular state and Western-style reforms, traditional symbols like the "Sheshia" came to represent a bygone era.

Another important issue was the way in which society accepted and adopted western clothes as the norm in the country. Dictators often used various tactics to convince people to stop wearing traditional clothes including propaganda, forced dress codes, economic incentives, cultural assimilation, and the suppression of cultural and religious traditions. The utilization of these strategies by dictatorial regimes represents a clear attempt to consolidate power and impose a homogenized cultural identity, often at the expense of valuable cultural heritage and tradition. While this diminished the traditional manufacturing sector of Tunisian clothes and textile this

also opened the door for the modernization of the textile sector, and the creation of new job opportunities for men and women.

### Images of Sports:



Figure 34: *El-Farzazzou* The Independence Match, 1959

The Tunisian press did not really start documenting sports events until after 1956, when special sections of the newspapers were dedicated to sports news. This culture becomes essential in the creation of the modern Tunisian state and identity. Tunisian society has evolved an

interest in sports, especially after the national team participated in the world cup of Mexico in 1978. This was a turning point for newspapers and cartooning as well. After the world cup, many cartoons, and especially caricatures portraying soccer players were increasingly circulating across the board.

This cartoon shows “the game of independence”, where a few Tunisian soccer players seem to be attacking the opponent to score a goal. Two major figures can be identified; Salah Ben Youssef who is passing the ball, and Habib Bourguiba who is scoring, or at least trying to score. At this point, Tunisia had full independence, but the last French military base in Binzart was still problematic for Bourguiba. In this respect, soccer is perceived as an entertaining sport that is highly tied to emotions of national pride.

Many considered that the "sports struggle" represented in the establishment of soccer clubs or competition against teams belonging to the colonizer falls under the realm of resistance and standing up to the invader and is no less valuable than gunpowder. Victory on the field is equivalent to a military strike or a revolutionary achievement par excellence that gives the "underpowered" people doses of belonging and pride. It increases the level of patriotism and prepares it for a decisive stage, while defeat is a setback and humiliation for the occupier (Argoubi)<sup>67</sup>. This type of nationalism in sports would continue to exist in the twenty-first century with the same mindset. In their article "FIFA Seen from a Postcolonial Perspective", Tamir Bar-Ona and Luis Escobedo explain that:

Football matches between former colonial powers and their subjects are more than about football. They are opportunities for former colonial subjects to defeat and humiliate their

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<sup>67</sup> Anis Argoubi is a Tunisian journalist who writes opinion articles on the online website [www.noonpost.com](http://www.noonpost.com)

ex-masters on the pitch. Or, these matches can test the relations between the former colonizer and the colonized. They are also barometers of the climate of integration of former colonial subjects living in the mainland. (39)

In Tunisia, as in its western neighbor, Algeria, soccer played a central role in shaping awareness and redefining the concept of belonging and a path that helped the national movement to form a popular incubator that would serve as a starting point for declaring the beginning of liberation from the restrictions of colonialism. In the same context, historian Mohamed Daifallah confirms to *Noon Post* that “sports (soccer) in Tunisia during colonial times was an expression of racial, ethnic or political groups, adding that the French had their own clubs, as well as the Italians (l'Italia de Tunis), Maltese and also Jewish Tunisians (UST Tunisian Sports Federation,).”

The Tunisian Soccer Federation was established in 1957, to include only Tunisian clubs under its banner. They exchange among themselves the achievement of the championships organized by the university since that date, and they form among themselves the Tunisian national team that represents the country in various international forums.

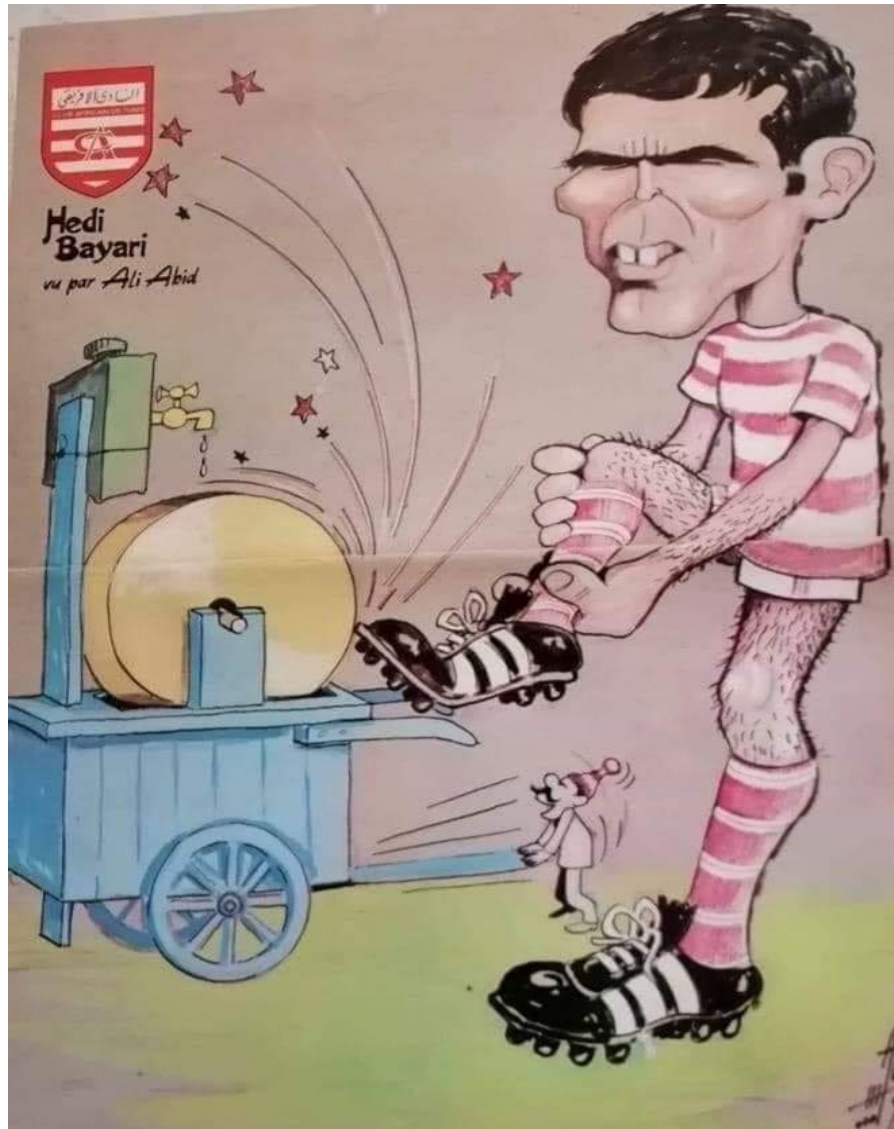


Figure 35: *Hedi Bayari As seen by Ali Abid. 1978*

After independence, many foreign teams were dissolved, and other local teams replaced them. The president supported sports in the country and personally supported Tunisian teams to satisfy a large number of the soccer fans. This pattern continues to shape sports culture in Tunisia and drives many youths to become professional soccer players. However, the government considered soccer as a system of social and emotional order, especially by creating local teams and triggering a sense of community and pride among the population. The soccer

culture developed even more after the creation of multiple local teams, and especially the national team that would compete in the world cup for the first time in 1978.

Sociologist Stanley Eitzen's work on social control and sports is illuminating to the fact that soccer and nationalism are strongly tied. Eitzen explains that "The integral interrelationship of sport and nationalism is easily seen in the blatantly militaristic pageantry that surrounds sports contests. The playing of the national anthem, the presentation of the colors, the jet flyovers and bands forming a flag are all political acts supportive of the existing political system" (D. *Stanley Eitzen* 370). it's important to note that this role of soccer as a system of social control can also lead to negative consequences such as discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion of certain groups based on their race, region, and their favorite team. The ruling elite perceived soccer as a vehicle for sportsmanship and transmission of values, and a whole ministry of sports took over the organization and funding of sport related activities.



Figure 36: *El-Kanfoud* (The Hedgehog) December 24, 1979.

This cartoon by Ali Baba (a pseudonym) shows three men who seem to be tinkering with a landline phone. A large hand looms on top of them while spraying liquid. The abrasive chemical rips off the flesh from one of them. The man in the middle seems to be talking over the phone and singing and his speech bubble says “By God I’m so bored. Let me kill some time...”. The third man is kicking the big phone while confirming his friend’s decision “Yeah, it’s killing me!”.

This political cartoon features a hand-drawn, black-and-white style that's typical of traditional editorial cartoons found in newspapers. The lines are expressive and somewhat

exaggerated, enhancing the caricatural aspect which is a hallmark of the genre. The use of cross-hatching and stippling for shading gives depth and texture to the image. The cartoon contains several figures and elements that are exaggerated and symbolic, a common technique in political cartoons to convey messages and critique. The characters are depicted with large heads and expressive faces, suggesting that the cartoonist wants to emphasize their reactions and emotions. The absence of color is typical for print media, especially when the intent is to distribute widely in formats where color printing is not economical or stylistically chosen to align with traditional formats.

The style of this cartoon relies on details and shadows to create a caricature of the characters and their actions. Sometimes cartoonists rely on violent or graphic visual rhetoric that can be shocking to the reader, and this cartoon graphicness is used to convey the feelings of anger. The cartoonist uses the cannister to eradicate this kind of behavior, while at the same time, the bad behavior of these characters is still unfolding. The cartoonist uses detailed lines and shadows to create a grotesque caricature of the characters and their actions. This style is typical of editorial cartoons that aim to deliver a punchy visual message. The exaggerated features of the characters serve to emphasize the absurdity of their behavior, a technique often used to draw attention to societal vices or folly. It is within this fertile ground of contention and transformation that Homi K. Bhabha's insights become particularly resonant. Bhabha argues that:

Postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities – in the North and the South, urban and rural – constituted, if I may coin a phrase, 'otherwise than modernity'. Such cultures of a postcolonial contra-modernity may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline

conditions to 'translate', and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. (9)

The cartoon seems to engage with the themes of resistance and hybridity that Homi K. Bhabha speaks of in the context of postcolonial societies grappling with the forces of modernity. Bhabha's notion of "otherwise than modernity" suggests an alternative state of being that exists alongside the imposed structures of modernity, often in opposition or in negotiation with it. The characters' actions with the phone, which imply an attempt to find a space for dialogue or interaction outside the approved channels, illustrate the "cultural hybridity" and the "borderline conditions" that Bhabha refers to. They are not passively succumbing to the dominant narrative of modernity but are actively engaging with it, sometimes at great personal risk as indicated by the corrosive effect of the spray.

The conversation between the characters, tinged with sarcasm about killing time, could be read as a critique of the inertia and dissatisfaction that can arise in societies where modernity's promises are undercut by authoritarian control. This reflects the postcolonial condition of being 'otherwise than modernity,' where subjects find themselves in a liminal space, neither fully encompassed by the global narrative of modern progress nor completely separate from it.

### **Visions of immigration/Emigration:**

After independence, most of foreigners in Tunisia left, especially after the nationalization of the land they occupied under the French colonial regime. Tunisians also sought the opportunity to go to Europe, especially when the socialist policies of Bourguiba failed to respond

to their economic needs, and when unemployment became widespread in the 1960s. The third group was the Tunisian Jewish population, whose departure from the country took twenty years.



Figure 37: As-Sitar, The Immigrant, 1982

This cartoon is a satirical take on the exploitation and marginalization of the working class, as well as the disconnect between those in power and the everyday struggles of the average person. The cartoon depicts a middle-aged man, who despite his obvious poverty and patched clothing, is smiling and exuding a sense of resilience and determination. The immigrant

represents the majority of returning Tunisian emigrants who had participated in the large development projects in France which was in desperate need of blue-collar workers especially between 1956 and 1965.

The man is being interviewed by a television reporter, who is represented only by a hand holding a microphone, symbolizing the faceless and distant nature of the media and those in power. The central image of the cartoon is the man holding up his middle finger to the reporter, a bold and provocative gesture that clearly communicates his defiance and disdain for the reporter's question. The reporter's question, "When are you going to invest in a project in the country and bring us foreign currency!" highlights the expectation that the working class should be solely responsible for bringing wealth and prosperity to their country, while ignoring their own struggles and hardships.

In terms of style, the cartoonist uses simple lines and speech bubbles, creating a minimalist aesthetic that effectively conveys the cartoon's message. The cartoon also makes use of subtle visual cues to further emphasize the theme of exploitation and marginalization. For example, the microphone held by the reporter is depicted as an old and patched object, resembling a flower with a bandana wrapped around it. In this context, the bandana could be interpreted as a symbol for beggars. This imagery serves to underscore the idea that the working class is treated as disposable and insignificant by those in power. The cartoonist uses multiple symbols to convey the idea of poverty. For instance, the immigrant's teeth look bad, and his clothes are an easy sign of poverty.

The cartoon reminds the reader of the Tunisian diaspora in France, and their role in helping the economy. Not only did these immigrants keep their ties with their families in Tunisia, but they introduced Tunisians to different modes of consumption, bringing different products and foreign

currency, while at the same time creating different needs for the population. The initial surge of returning migrants grew to such an extent that it compelled the Tunisian government to take structured action, leading to the organization and establishment of formal agreements. Moreover, the cartoon can be interpreted as a jarring portrayal intended to provoke contemplation and perhaps even reconsideration among those considering emigration to Europe. The issue of immigration would come up later on and take an illegal form that would consume the lives of many Tunisians.

### **Images of the Enemy:**

From the outset, Israel was deemed an adversary by virtue of its occupation and aggression, with Tunisians aligning with Palestinians and Egyptians in their conflict with the Israelis. Tunisian press, particularly those with leftist and pan-Arab nationalist inclinations, regularly featured cartoons that commented on the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, each offering distinct interpretations and proposed resolutions. Habib Bourguiba stood out for his advocacy of a two-state resolution as early as his Jericho<sup>68</sup> address, contrasting sharply with Gamal Abdel Nasser's stance, which posited armed struggle against Israel as a necessary course of action.

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<sup>68</sup> A speech given by Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba in Jericho, in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, on 3 March 1965. Alluding to Tunisia's own struggle for independence, Bourguiba reaffirmed the support given at the 1964 Arab Summit to the Palestinian cause, vowing to liberate "every inch of the Arab nation that remains under foreign grip". He decried the policy of "all or nothing", that brought Arabs defeat in Palestine, and endorsed a "policy of stages" and the possibility of temporary compromise. <https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/5>

Habib Bourguiba championed the Palestinian resistance and allowed them to have their headquarters in Tunisia, after they were ousted from Lebanon.



Figure 38: Al-Amal (Work) UN Resolution...1985

In 1985, Israel bombed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Tunisia. The PLO was considered a terrorist organization by Israel and the bombing was part of their efforts to eliminate PLO's capabilities to launch attacks against Israel. The attack upset large swath of Tunisians, and as a result Israel became the new enemy of all Tunisians. This attack, known as Operation Wooden Leg, was an Israeli airstrike that targeted the PLO's headquarters on October 1, 1985. The raid resulted in the death of approximately 60 people, with many more wounded. The PLO had relocated its base to Tunis after being expelled from Lebanon in 1982, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The strike in Tunis was a clear demonstration of the conflict reaching across the Mediterranean, affecting countries and peoples outside the immediate zone of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This cartoon depicts a handshake between Palestine and Tunisia, symbolizing their solidarity and alliance against the violence inflicted upon them by Israel. The handshake, as a symbol of friendship and unity, is marred by the bombing carried out by Israeli jet fighters. This visual representation of the event brings attention to the shared experiences of both countries, and the indiscriminate violence that they are subjected to. The visual metaphor of the handshake is crucial in this cartoon as it underscores the political solidarity between Palestine and Tunisia, despite their geographical distances.

The depiction of the two arms, one from Palestine and one from Tunisia, highlights the bloodshed caused by the bombing, where Palestinian and Tunisian blood was spilled. The scarring on the arm representing Palestine, suggests a history of violence and trauma, which the current bombing only adds to. The blood from the two arms, writes the names of the two countries, serves as potent visual metaphor. It suggests that the relationship between the two countries has resulted in bloodshed, with the blood literally spelling out the involvement of the

nations and reminding the reader of the loss of innocent lives. The blood trickling down to write the names of the countries of origin symbolizes the connection between the two countries, as well as the shared experience of suffering under colonialism. In this cartoon, the crimson script that forms the countries' names is a stark reminder of the deep scars carved by colonial legacies, a common thread of anguish and resistance that binds them.

The dove's serene repose amid chaos invites reflection on the inherent contradiction between aspirations for peace and the harsh realities of aggression, suggesting a silent yet forceful critique of the air strikes' destructiveness. The artist's choice to foreground the dove could imply a lingering hope for peace that perseveres despite the turmoil, or it could represent the fragility of peace in the face of overwhelming violence. The caption, "the decision of the UN Security Council is a new victory for Bourguiba," adds a layer of political commentary to the cartoon. Bourguiba was the President of Tunisia at the time, and the caption suggests that the UN's decision was a victory for him and his country. The reference to the UN decision could be a direct reference to Security Council resolution 573 (1985) [Israel-Tunisia]<sup>69</sup> on the Israeli bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunisia, and the use of the word "victory" implies a sense of triumph or success. The caption frames the UN Security Council's decision as a political victory for Habib Bourguiba, rather than Tunisia.

This event would mark the Tunisian-Palestinian relationships forever. In fact, the strong solidarity of Tunisians with Palestinians in times of conflict like the first and second "Intifada". The cartoon can also be interpreted as a celebration for Bourguiba's continuous support to the Palestinian cause. In 1946, the man who would become Tunisia's president was in Egypt,

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<sup>69</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unsc/1985/en/80053>

seeking backing for both his personal mission and the broader Arab cause. During this period, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians was escalating, prompting the future leader to publicly address the issue for the first time.

### Images of Authoritarianism:

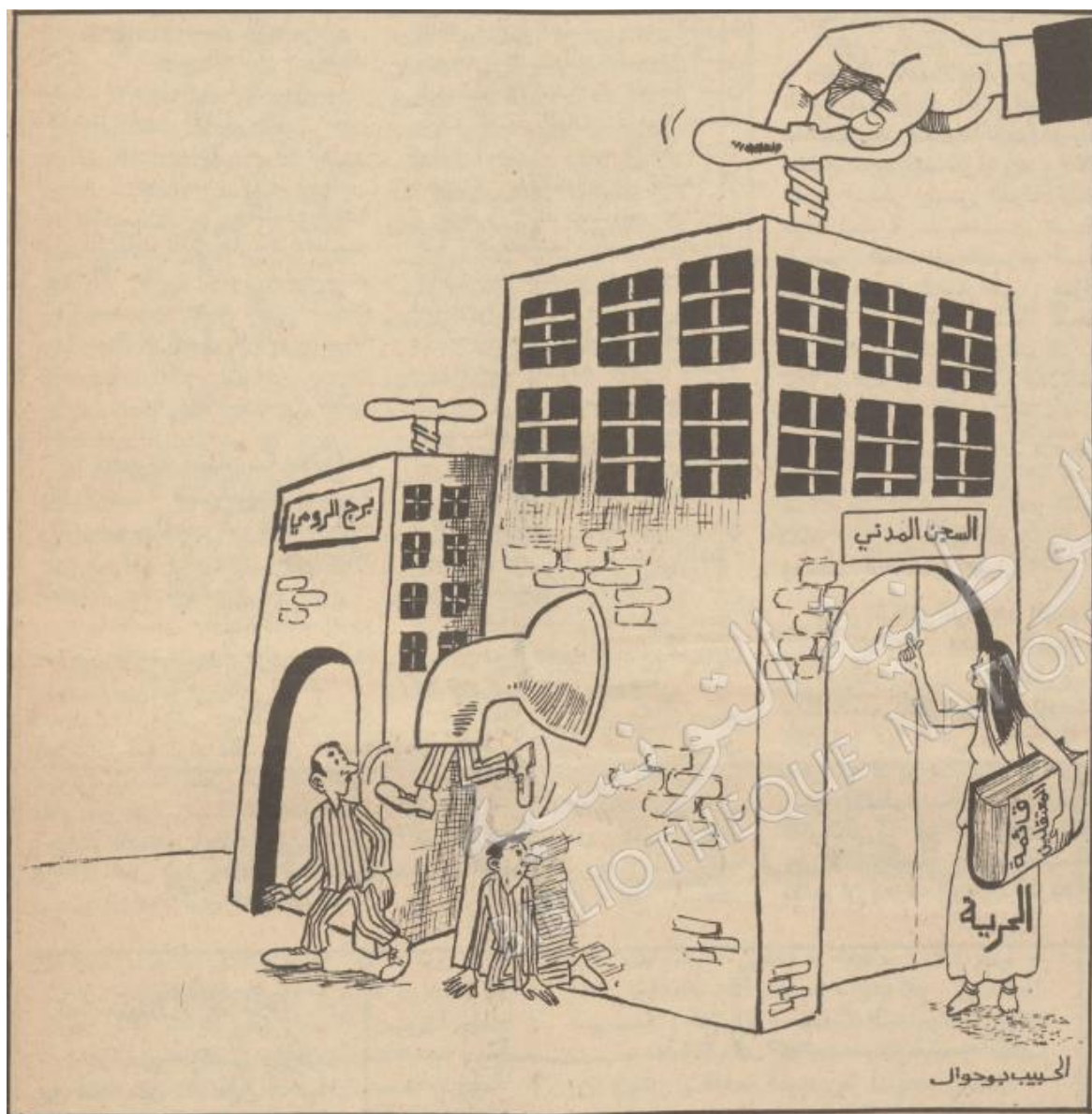


Figure 39: *Er-Rai*: Prisons. July 1978

This political cartoon by Habib Bouhawel is a critique of Habib Bourguiba's regime, particularly in reference to the events of 1978 when there was a crackdown on dissent and a significant number of people were arrested for opposing his policies.

The two buildings labeled "السجن المدني" (Civil Prison) and "برج الرومي" (Borj El Amri, a known prison in Tunisia), represent the state's apparatus for incarcerating political opponents. The prisoners being depicted as flowing out of faucets suggests that the release of prisoners is controlled by the government, as indicated by the oversized hand, seemingly wearing a formal suit (Government), turning the faucet. This implies that the government has a tight grip on the judicial process and uses the release of prisoners as a mechanism to regulate political activity and dissent. The woman standing with a book labeled "قائمة السجناء" (List of Prisoners) represents the concept of freedom. Her presence and the book she holds suggest an accounting or acknowledgment of those who have been imprisoned, a nod to the need for transparency and perhaps an appeal to the conscience of the society or international observers about the human rights situation.

Stylistically, the cartoon utilizes clear, simplistic imagery to convey a complex political situation. The use of iconic prison names makes it immediately relevant to the Tunisian audience, who would most likely recognize "برج الرومي" as notorious for holding political prisoners. The faucets are an effective metaphor for the control the government exerts over political prisoners, a theme central to the criticism of Bourguiba's approach to opposition. The oversized hand is a common motif in political cartoons, representing an overbearing or controlling government force. The woman's calm demeanor and the book of prisoners she holds stand in contrast to the chaos and control depicted elsewhere in the image, offering a hopeful

counterpoint to the oppression illustrated by the prisons and the controlling hand. The stark, almost austere style of the cartoon serves to highlight the seriousness of the commentary on political repression.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the period following Tunisia's independence in 1956 up until 1987 was one of significant transformation, not just for the nation but also for the art of political cartooning. Under the authoritarian rule of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia embarked on a path that was envisioned as progressive, albeit not without internal political strife, with ideologies ranging from Islamism to Communism, Pan-Arabism, and the governance of the Neo-Destour Party clashing for influence. In the realm of political cartoons, these tensions and transitions were vividly illustrated.

Cartoonists, operating under the omnipresent influence of Bourguiba, often portrayed him as the nation's rescuer—an image that was seemingly beyond reproach. Any cartoonist daring to satirize Bourguiba faced severe repercussions, including harassment and exile, underscoring the lack of tolerance for dissent. Nevertheless, a few cartoonists such as Ali Abid and Habib Bouhawel could publish their satirical cartoons while circumventing the obvious criticism towards the president. This era also witnessed the portrayal of women's evolving status in society, often depicted as beneficiaries of Bourguiba's progressive policies, gaining freedoms and ascending to positions of power that had previously been inaccessible.

The focus of satire often veered away from direct political confrontation, instead spotlighting societal mores, the observance of Ramadan, and everyday social conduct, with a particular penchant for lampooning the arts scene. Sports, too, particularly soccer, the nation's beloved pastime, became a canvas for caricature, offering a lighter venue for artistic expression amidst a politically charged atmosphere. This chapter also delved into the complex narratives surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a topic that Tunisian cartoonists did not shy away from. Their work captured and reflected the prevailing sentiments towards the conflict, with their art serving as a barometer for the national and regional attitudes of the time.

Thus, Tunisian political cartooning post-independence was a dance of nuance and nerve, a visual commentary that not only mirrored the socio-political landscape but also revealed the undercurrents of change and the spirit of a nation grappling with its identity, aspirations, and the very concept of freedom itself.

Most satirical newspapers vanished post-independence, after having survived more than a decade between being published and banned. Two decades after the disappearance of satirical press and political caricature following independence—elements that had been present in the Tunisian press during the protectorate period—the satirical titles made a comeback at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Newspapers began featuring political cartoons that critiqued the political, economic, and social conditions. By the mid-1980s cartoons were offering a reflection of the quality of satirical criticism, adding to the content of newspapers that critiqued the government to express the degree of freedom of speech and the emerging media pluralism in Tunisia at the start of that decade. Both independent and opposition news and political newspapers began to compete in publishing caricatures to adorn their front pages as well as their inside pages. The official press, including government publications and those affiliated with the

ruling Socialist Constitutional Party, joined in to respond to the opposition and independent critique of the government's actions and directions.

After Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the political system's turn during the era of the late President Habib Bourguiba and his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali towards monopolizing power and the tyranny of the single-party system, most of the country's satirical newspapers disappeared due to the loss of an environment conducive to freedom of expression. They would return, both technically and stylistically more advanced, after the fall of the regime, taking on more developed forms. Ultimately, Habib Bourguiba's rule would also be marked by the events of 1978, during which protesters were attacked by the police and army forces, and again, in 1984 during the bread riots. The president's health was deteriorating at this time, but having appointed himself president for life proved to be a big mistake. On the morning of November 7, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the prime minister, led a coup against Bourguiba citing that the latter cannot continue his duties as president because of old age.

## Chapter Four

### Cartooning and Dictatorship 1987-2011

The nineteen eighties were a culturally and politically exciting period, with a simple margin of freedom that allowed many cartoonists to flourish. However, when Ben Ali rose to power, he began to slowly restrict freedom of expression. The press was the first to be suppressed, followed by cartoonists, causing many of them to stop practicing their profession (some emigrated, while others taught or worked in other fields). Only a few cartoonists remained, in a few newspapers that maintained their presence and the cartoon tradition, including Chedli Belkhamza and Lotfi Ben Sassi in *La Presse* newspaper, Hatem Belhaj in *Le Temps* newspaper, Imad Ben Hamida in *Tunis Hebdo* newspaper, Majdoub and Hadhfi in *Al Akhbar* newspaper. In January 1995, a significant satirical newspaper emerged after the Tunisian media landscape experienced a stagnation in caricature newspapers. This was the *Assarih* newspaper, which addressed social topics.

Suzan Waltz describes the percepts of the moral matrix climate during the early nineteen eighties:

In Tunisia, as elsewhere in the Middle East in recent years, Islamists' invoke a re-valuation of the role of Islam in society and question the secularization of cultural life, social practices antithetical to Islamic precepts, and the implementation of positivist law. Especially condemnable is the influence of Western society, held responsible for having carried Muslim society far from the basic tenets of organic Islam. Even without the

specter of Iran hovering in the background, many of these ideas are anathema to a class of Tunisian elites who have comfortably integrated selected Western norms into their lives and for whom Islam is little more than a code of ethics. (653)

As soon as he took over the presidency, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) and his party built what Joachim Ben Yakoub and Sami Zemni call “The Novemberist Dispositif” (173). The Novemberist dispositif refers to the various institutional, physical, administrative mechanisms, and knowledge structures that maintain the exercise of power under the rule of Tunisia's former President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This symbolic power was characterized by three main elements: the reference to 7 November (the date of Ben Ali's coup), the color purple, and Ben Ali's image. The regime used these elements to permeate society and reinforce its power. Reproducing this political imaginary became a symbol of affiliation and loyalty, imposed by the ruling party and reproduced in different layers of society. The image of the president was always present in the streets, fixed on the walls of grocery stores and public institutions; there was no escaping from his seemingly innocuous presidency. However, as time went on, artists, activists, and the public began to question and subvert these elements, undermining the regime's power. Examples of such subversion include digital activism against the 7 November rituals, the use of numerical diversions to mock the regime, and artistic installations and films that criticize state corruption and political repression. Like a crescendo, these acts of subversion gradually chipped away at the foundations of the regime's image and power, culminating in the Tunisian revolution that swept across the nation in late 2010 and early 2011. The Novemberist dispositif, once seemingly impregnable, ultimately crumbled under the weight of a people determined to reclaim their agency and forge a new path.

Tunisia bears an intriguing history of political satire and cartooning, one that thrived even under the oppressive regime of Ben Ali. The curious interplay between censorship, dissent, and humor shaped the Tunisian cartooning landscape, paving the way for artists to assert their subversive creativity in the face of stifling state control. The Ben Ali era, defined by its tight grip on the media and freedom of speech, inadvertently sowed the seeds of dissent by forcing cartoonists to cultivate a subtle, yet potent, language of satire. These visual artists wove intricate tapestries of allusion and metaphor, concealing their critiques beneath the veil of humor, knowing that the regime's patience for overt dissent was paper-thin.

The reign of Ben Ali also saw the rise of a new generation of cartoonists who wielded the power of digital platforms to amplify their messages. The Internet granted these artists the opportunity to reach wider audiences, both within Tunisia and beyond its borders. This newfound connectivity served to embolden their resolve, inspiring them to push the boundaries of their art even further. The Tunisian cartooning scene during the Ben Ali era can be likened to a delightful dance of satire, subversion, and struggle, one in which the dancers navigated a terrain riddled with restrictions and dangers. The oppressive regime inadvertently set the stage for an artistic renaissance, transforming the act of cartooning into a form of resistance, a silent protest that resonated with the masses.

Tunisia seems to have found a way to reconcile its pro-Western views with its Arab identity, resulting in a society that is remarkably progressive compared to other Arab nations. This is especially evident in the increasing importance and recognition of women's rights, such as the high number of female students in law and medical schools, their prominent presence in parliament, education, and the arts, and their legal equality in family matters, including family

planning, divorce, and travel. These rights are becoming more entrenched both in theory and in practice.

The transfer of power elicited no protests on behalf of a restoration; nor were there jubilant celebrations. Rather, the prevailing mood was one of gratitude that the transition had occurred constitutionally, peacefully, and seamlessly. Ben Ali promptly stepped into Bourguiba's role not only as head of state but also as head of the PSD, suggesting that whatever transformations might flow from the "Historic Change," they would not include a disentangling of the thoroughly interwoven lines between the state and the party (Hopwood 188).

In evaluating the Ben Ali era through the prism of political cartoons, social historians can discern the complexities of Tunisian society and its relationship with the authoritarian regime. Historian James C. Scott, in his work "Domination and the Arts of Resistance," observes that "in the face of power, the truth of the dominated is often expressed covertly, behind the scenes" (Scott 4). The cartoons, with their intricate weaving of visual metaphors and allegories, serve as a testament to the resilience and resourcefulness of the people who sought to express their dissent, even as the regime sought to silence them.

The visual narratives forged by Tunisian cartoonists during this period also illuminate the interplay between the public and the regime. Historian T.J. Clark, in his seminal work "Image of the People," argues that "the meaning of an image is inseparable from its publicness" (Clark 11). The cartoons reveal a populace that, despite the suffocating grip of censorship, was able to decode the hidden messages embedded within the images, engaging in a subtle, subversive

dialogue with the artists. This clandestine exchange underscores the deep-seated yearning for freedom that permeated the society, a yearning that would ultimately manifest in the 2011 Jasmine Revolution<sup>70</sup>.

Moreover, the political cartoons of the Ben Ali era provide social historians with a unique lens through which to examine the shifting dynamics of power and resistance within Tunisian society. The cartoons capture the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that defined the era, offering insights into the delicate dance between the regime and its subjects. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley, in his work "Race Rebels," notes that "daily acts of resistance can be powerful agents of change" (Kelley 12). Through the study of these visual artifacts, historians can trace the evolution of dissent, from the veiled critiques of the early years to the bolder expressions of discontent that emerged as the regime's grip began to falter.

In addition, social historians can also employ the political cartoons of the Ben Ali era as a means to explore the broader cultural and historical contexts that shaped the nation's identity during this period. By examining the ways in which cartoonists drew upon a shared cultural lexicon, historians can gain a deeper understanding of the values, aspirations, and anxieties that permeated Tunisian society. As Natalie Zemon Davis eloquently states, "The images of the past are part of a dialogue with the present" (Davis 9).

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<sup>70</sup> This is the name that was perpetuated in the French press before it was adopted everywhere. Local Tunisians refer to the revolution as ثورة البرويطة or ثورة الهندي the "Cart Revolution", for its association with the fruit seller, or the "Cactus Revolution" because over 2300 people died, and because of the widespread existence of cacti plants all over the country.

### Social Practices:

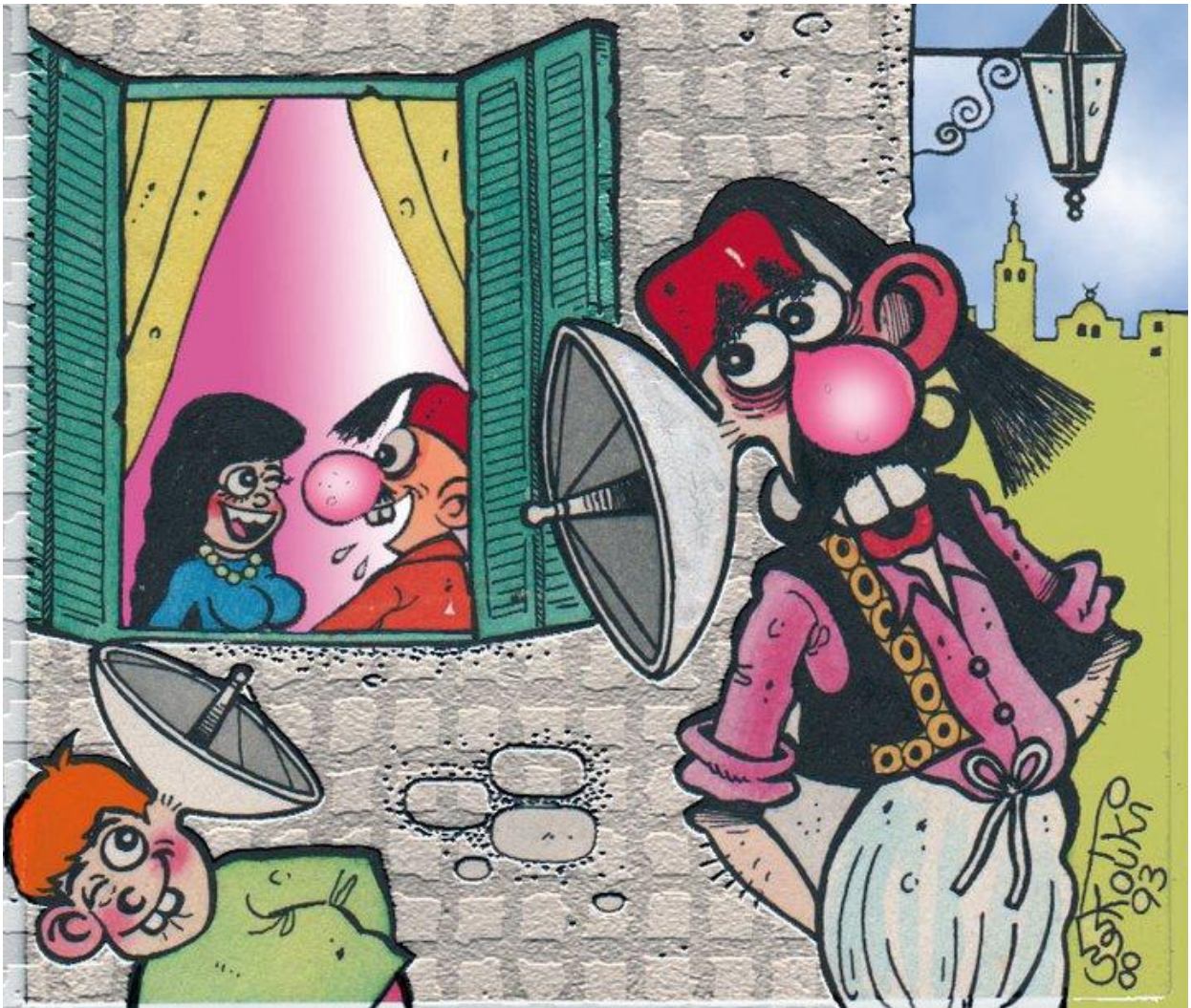


Figure 40: *Assarih* (Taoufik El Kouki) 1993

This cartoon by Tawfik El Kouki, drawn in 1993, is a vibrant and satirical representation of social behavior. El Kouki's style here is quite expressive and exaggerated, a hallmark of many political and social cartoons. The characters are portrayed with oversized features, such as large ears and noses, which humorously implies their nosiness and eagerness to eavesdrop. Such caricatured features are effective in conveying the cartoonist's message in a non-verbal,

universally understandable way. The bright colors draw attention to the main action — the eavesdropping — and the father and son's facial expressions are especially telling, both showing wide eyes and big ears indicative of their intense curiosity and gossiping nature.

The setting plays a crucial role in contextualizing the cartoon. The presence of the mosque in the background and the traditional clothing of the characters suggest a specific cultural and social setting. The inclusion of the mosque may imply a juxtaposition of the private behavior of individuals against the backdrop of a place associated with morality and public conduct. The penultimate message of the cartoon can be interpreted as a call against nosiness and interfering in other people's affairs, which the cartoonist sees as a social problem, transcended from one generation to the next.

Their attire indicates they are from the working class, highlighting the cartoonist's focus on everyday people rather than the elite. The clothes are drawn with attention to detail, such as patterns on the father's vest and the son's simple shirt, reinforcing their social status. This attention to detail is not only a testament to El Kouki's skills as an artist but also his commitment to reflecting the society he's commenting on. In addition, the cartoonist cleverly transforms the ears of both the father and son into satellite dishes, symbolizing their heightened ability to listen in, suggesting they are receiving every detail of the conversation with exceptional clarity. The overall composition is dynamic, with the diagonal lines of the satellite dish and the window leading the viewer's eye directly to the central scene.

During the dictatorship of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, many editorial cartoons dealt primarily with some political issues, such as the one-party system, the first Gulf War in 1991, the Palestinian Intifada, the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the Afghanistan war, and the Iraq war, sports, Ramadan, and culture. The lack of freedom of expression pushed artists and journalists to



The cartoon presents Tunisia as a modern woman, elegantly dressed and carrying a fashionable handbag. Her startled expression and open mouth, emphasized by the enlarged word "AHHHHHH," indicate her shock at the sight before her. This portrayal of the nation as a contemporary female figure is a powerful symbol of Tunisia's progressive aspirations and the desire for a modern identity that transcends the traditional confines of politics and society. The central image of the cartoon is the male figure, split into two distinct halves. On the left side, the man represents "The administration," while the right side is labeled with the Tunisian political party "RCDI" and bears a resemblance to President Ben Ali. The artist employs sharp lines and stark contrasts between black and white, creating a visually striking separation between the two halves. This graphic split suggests that both the government and the political party, while ostensibly separate, are in fact just two faces of a monolithic, archaic political regime. The character with four legs and dual heads symbolizes the grotesque beast born of Ben Ali's rule, underscoring the abnormality of such a creation. In this illustration, Bouhawel seeks to remind the audience of Ben Ali's pledge of political pluralism, contrasting it with the reality that the administration's loyalty lay exclusively with the president, not with the democratic principles he had once espoused.

The phrase on the top left corner of the frame is questioning whether this division is "natural or man-made," the cartoonist critiques the one-party system prevalent in Tunisia. The artist implies that the apparent separation between the administration and the political party is an illusion, artificially maintained to perpetuate the power of the ruling elites. The use of a rhetorical question in the text within the frame of the cartoon, invites the viewer to contemplate the true nature of this political divide and consider its implications for Tunisia's future. The

scared woman also indicates the startling sight of this unusual creature, a fear shared by the cartoonist:

The cartoon's visual elements, when considered alongside the nation's social history, highlight the desire for genuine political reform and democratic accountability. The representation of Tunisia as a modern woman contrasts sharply with the antiquated political system depicted by the bifurcated male figure. This visual tension between progress and stagnation underscores the urgent need for change in Tunisia's political landscape. In his article “Gulf Laughter Break”, Mohamed Salah Omri explains that:

In a culture that not only keeps alive its wide repertoire of popular sayings, but constantly invents new ones, Tunisian cartoonists seem to be well tuned in. Their verbal captions and commentary, as narrative, assume an implied reader (receiver) native to the culture and aware of its intimate (verbal) detail. Without knowledge of the soccer lingo, local proverbs, and the latest turns of phrase, the effect is likely to be lost and with it the whole effectiveness of the caricature. (140)

Chedly Belkhamisa explains the working atmosphere while Ben Ali was the President of the republic and points out:

Let's assume you created works that criticize the system, who will publish them? And if they are published, the consequences will be extremely severe, starting from the newspaper editor and reaching you. Then after that, the newspaper will only be read by a limited number of readers. I have drawings that I did previously and I decided not to

publish them today, in my opinion, they are an aimless movement today. Cartoons that are not seen by anyone in their time have no meaning. (Belkhamssa<sup>71</sup>, online)



Figure 42: *La Presse*. Lotfi Ben Sassi. 1995

Lotfi Ben Sassi's artistic contributions, especially through his political cartoons that are regularly published in the French-language newspaper *La Presse*. El Bocboc, a character that has become a staple in Ben Sassi's repertoire, emerged as a clever response to the restrictions

<sup>71</sup> Chedly Belkhamssa is a Tunisian cartoonist who published in multiple Arab and French language newspapers.

imposed by censorship. In contrast to Z's direct criticism of President Ben Ali and his administration, Ben Sassi adopts a subtler tactic, weaving commentary on everyday concerns such as food, pricing, and cultural celebrations into his work. This nuanced approach and the constrained narrative scope of *El Bocboc* underscore the challenges and limitations artists like Ben Sassi encounter in voicing dissent or critique in an environment where freedom of expression is curtailed. Through *El Bocboc*, Ben Sassi illuminates the delicate balance between critique and compliance, offering insights into the broader context of artistic expression under censorship.

The humor in Ben Sassi's cartoons is subtler, veering towards everyday social issues rather than explicit political critique. His cartoons appear as benign jokes on the surface, but underlying them is a coded critique of societal norms and pressures. For instance, discussions about food and prices can be seen as a subtle commentary on economic conditions. By creating this distance, Ben Sassi manages to stay within the acceptable parameters of the censored newspaper while still inviting his audience to reflect on broader issues.

*El Bocboc* becomes a lens through which Tunisian society is viewed; within this limited scope, Ben Sassi's nuanced understanding of the political landscape and his careful maneuvering around the strictures of censorship reveal a quiet resistance. His work underscores the precarious balance that artists must maintain in a restricted media environment – a balance between the urge to critique and the need for self-preservation. Ben Sassi took the safest approach to criticize social problems, sticking with satirical takes on Tunisian customs and traditions, from the perspective of a poor but progressive citizen.

Contrasted with Z's relentless attacks against Ben Ali's regime, Ben Sassi's approach appears more circumspect. However, it's important to recognize the unique challenges that both

artists faced and the distinct strategies they adopted to keep their art alive within an oppressive system. Their contrasting styles can be viewed as different responses to the same problem – how to use art as a form of political expression in a restrictive regime. Z's artistic persona is depicted as a Flamingo bird, symbolizing the ability to rise above and observe from a distance, suggesting a form of liberation and a broader perspective. El Bocboc, on the other hand, is portrayed as an astute yet average citizen navigating life under an oppressive regime. This contrast between the characters—Z's Flamingo as a symbol of freedom and detachment, and El Bocboc as a grounded, relatable figure dealing with daily challenges—illustrates the different strategies and scopes of their creators in engaging with the socio-political landscape of Tunisia. Through these personas, both artists offer unique insights and commentary, albeit from vastly different vantage points and with divergent approaches to risk and directness in their critique.

### **Tunisians and the Gulf War:**

The first Gulf War took center stage in Tunisia, transforming from a distant conflict into a domestic concern. A critical discourse against the West and certain Arab states emerged, dominating cultural production. Newspapers, poetry, and even classical imitations celebrated Iraq and its leader, reflecting the desire to overcome historical defeats that had marginalized the Arab world. Despite the division among Arab states, the war was perceived as a Western aggression against Arabs, reviving aspirations for unity and a shared destiny. Cartoons captured the hopes, apprehensions, and disillusionment of Tunisians during the crisis, ultimately evolving in scope and prominence. The admiration for Saddam Hussein replaced traditional cartoon heroes, with even young children proudly displaying his image. This fascination with the warrior

of the moment encapsulated the collective sentiment of a nation standing against the West, with Saddam Husein who was often portrayed in the Arab media as the most honorable and courageous leader who could annihilate Israel if he wanted to.

Tunisian cartoons expose two sides of media perception: the declining credibility of Western media, epitomized by CNN, and the importance of local media in countering distorted war reporting. Cartoons relentlessly caricature the Western media, exemplified by a gagged journalist or a news announcement from a guarded tank. This distrust extends to the West in general and highlights the need for independent local media to maintain national independence and freedom. The cartoons also showcase efforts to awaken public opinion using media, which is a reversal in the role of media institutions often criticized for distracting citizens. During the war, the media became an active agent in mobilizing disinterested individuals, even prompting cartoonists to turn the conflict into a war against Western media.



Figure 43: “A Siesta in the Gulf” Taoufik Kouki, 1991

Frame 1: Husayn: "You call yourself a man? Why don't you play face to face?"  
 Bush: "Cut this question! Don't put it on television!"  
 Frame 2: Husayn: "The first game was at our home field. Wait for the one on yours!"  
 Frame 3: Shamir: "Help!"  
 Bush: "What did you say?"  
 Frame 4: An Iraqi soldier with an eagle on one moustache and an Egyptian rooster on the other.  
 The soldier: "My only wish is to come face to face with Rambo".  
 (al-Akhbar 26 January 1991)

This political cartoon titled "A Siesta in the Gulf" by Taoufik Kouki, dated 26 January 1991, appears to be a satirical commentary on the dynamics and discourse surrounding the First Gulf War. It comprises a sequence of frames, each depicting a conversation or action that alludes to the conflict's international relations and character dynamics.

Frame 1 shows Saddam Hussein challenging President George H.W. Bush's manhood, suggesting a direct confrontation, which Bush rejects, insisting that the question be cut and not aired on television. This reflects the behind-the-scenes manipulation of public perception and the avoidance of direct, transparent dialogue.

In Frame 2, Saddam Hussein refers to a 'home field' game, hinting at the war's initiation in the Middle East and ominously suggesting that a reciprocal action will take place on American soil. This implies an ongoing conflict and a threat of its expansion.

Frame 3 captures a moment of perceived vulnerability with Yitzhak Shamir calling for help, and President Bush appears confused or concerned about Shamir's plea. This might be hinting at the political complexities and alliances during the war, and perhaps American surprise at needing to defend or intervene on behalf of allies.

Frame 4 humorously depicts an Iraqi soldier, adorned with an eagle on one end of his mustache and an Egyptian rooster on the other, expressing a desire to confront Rambo, an American pop-culture symbol of military prowess and individual heroism. This frame seems to mock the glorification of war and the idea of individual combat, juxtaposing it with the actual collective and nationalistic nature of warfare.

The characters and their conversations satirize the posture and rhetoric of political leaders, exposing the theatrical nature of international diplomacy and war. The cartoon suggests a critique of the disparity between the portrayed bravado of these figures and the mediated reality, as well as the manipulation of public perception through media and propaganda. It also highlights the complex web of geopolitical relations, the human cost of war represented by the soldier's longing for heroism, and perhaps a sense of disillusionment with the larger-than-life image of war portrayed by Hollywood compared to the gritty reality on the ground.

## The Palestinian-Israeli conflict:



Figure 44: Attarik Al Jadid “Is it Palestine or Swiss Cheese” (November 2001)

This political cartoon, which appeared in "Attarik Al Jadid," a leftist publication known for its opposition to the Ben Ali regime, employs sharp wit to critique the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is titled “Is it a Palestinian state or Swiss cheese?” suggesting the piece might have origins or inspiration from an English-language source. The cartoon depicts a large slab of cheese, metaphorically representing the fragmented geographical and political condition of the West Bank and Gaza. The cheese is riddled with holes and is being actively consumed, a visual

allegory for the encroachment by Israeli forces, as denoted by the prominently displayed Israeli flag.

Amid this, the solitary Palestinian figure is relegated to a mere sliver of land, symbolizing the displacement and marginalization experienced by the Palestinian people. The cartoonist has included a dialogue bubble that reads, "You have the right to a state on 13% of 40% of historical Palestine... provided that you agree to divide it fairly," which drips with irony. It is also noteworthy to point out that the text is translated and handwritten in Arabic, since this newspaper borrowed this cartoon from another publication.

The caricature of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, immersed in the cheese, utters a quote that sarcastically suggests Palestinians are entitled to a fraction of their historical lands, with the precondition of a 'fair division', juxtaposing the idea of equitable distribution with the clear consumption of the land. The accompanying onomatopoeic 'chomp' sounds emphasize the ongoing devouring process. The detail that the cheese is labeled as Kosher adds another layer of cultural and religious context to the visual narrative. The Star of David embellishment on one figure's hat and the scene of other characters, including a soldier, partaking in the feast reflect real-time usurpation. The presence of rat tails peeking from the cheese implies a pestilence, possibly likening the Israeli settlers to rodents in their relentless erosion of the territory. The cartoonist may be drawing a parallel between the settlers and rats, seen as unwelcome, consuming resources insatiably.

Moreover, a formidable cannon aimed outwards symbolizes the military might used to safeguard these actions. The cartoon is dense with symbolism, each element contributing to a critique of the Israeli settlement policies and military actions, suggesting they undermine the viability of an autonomous and contiguous Palestinian state. The cartoonist cleverly balances this

heavy subject with a satirical depiction that simplifies the complex issue into a single, accessible image, prompting reflection and dialogue on the matter.

## II- Ben Ali, Nepotism, and Corruption:

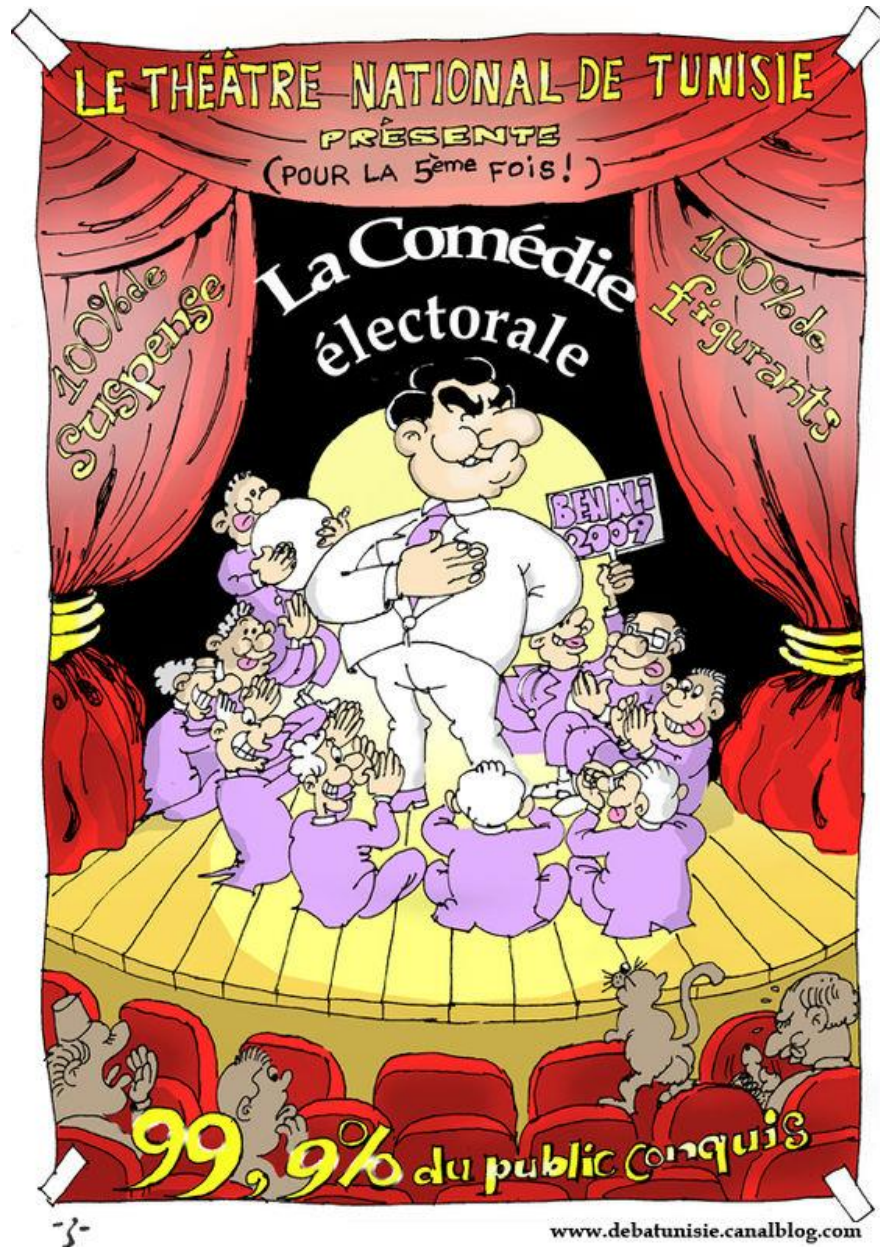


Figure 45: The Electoral Comedy, Z. (debatunisie.com) 2009

Z has been a playful yet perceptive figure, navigating the dangerous political landscape under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's rule (1987-2011). Yet, in the spirit of resistance and resilience, Z has emerged as a voice of dissent, using his artistic talents to critique the repressive regime. Drawing from the rich heritage of the West, the Middle East and North Africa, Z employs caricature, symbolism, and visual allegory to create a scathing indictment of the regime's shortcomings. In the tradition of Juha<sup>72</sup>, he uses humor and irony to expose the contradictions and absurdities within the government, as well as to highlight the everyday struggles of ordinary Tunisians.

Z's cartoons are as visually striking as they are politically incisive. He often portrays Ben Ali as a cartoonish figure, reminiscent of the exaggerated portraits of Middle Eastern despots. Through these caricatures, he emphasized the president's pomposity and disconnection from the people he governed. By reducing Ben Ali to a caricature, Z demonstrates the power of satire to subvert and undermine the authority of the ruling regime. Similarly, Z also targeted the pervasive corruption within the government, often drawing the president's family members as opportunists gorging themselves on the nation's wealth. He did not shy away from tackling sensitive issues such as nepotism and cronyism, which were rampant under Ben Ali's rule. By using animals and iconic characters to represent key figures, Z cleverly expressed his disapproval of authoritarianism, while simultaneously drawing on the rich symbolism of the region's folklore<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Juha (also spelled Joha or Djuha) is the name used in the Arab world and some other regions for the same legendary folk character known as Mulla Nasruddin in Turkish and Persian folklore. Juha is the protagonist of numerous anecdotes and is well-known for his wit, wisdom, and the comic twist he imparts to everyday situations and profound questions alike.

<sup>73</sup> Z represents himself as a pink Flamingo, an endangered species in Tunisia. The use of animal imagery grew stronger after the Arab Spring, notably after the election of Kais Saied in 2019.

Z creates complex and visually striking compositions that depict the physical and social environments surrounding his subjects with remarkable detail and accuracy. Take the following cartoon, for example, illustrating a poignant image of Tunisia as a large boat, being piloted towards the unknown by the president's brother-in-law. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, "the visual image is not merely a decorative illustration but an integral part of the message being conveyed" (Mitchell 12). Z's manipulation of perspective is a conscious stylistic choice, designed to produce a comic image that incites reflection. As Arthur Asa Berger notes, "the incongruity of perspective can generate humor, as it disrupts the viewer's expectations and creates an element of surprise" (Berger 27). In Z's cartoons, this incongruity often serves to satirize the political figures and situations he depicts, thus amplifying the comic effect. No other North African cartoonist possesses the same architectural advantage as Z, making his work both visually distinct and uniquely engaging. This advantage allows him a powerful tool for critiquing and challenging the status quo.

Z's anonymity also plays a large role in his creative freedom, as he enjoys being free of any type of censorship and persecution. Z's choice to remain anonymous is a cornerstone of his artistic identity and plays a crucial role in his ability to express himself freely. This anonymity is not merely a personal preference but a strategic shield that protects him from censorship and persecution. By withholding his true identity, Z sidesteps the risks that many outspoken artists face in restrictive environments, thus preserving his creative liberty.

This conscious decision to remain faceless allows Z to navigate sensitive political landscapes with agility, giving him the latitude to address controversial subjects without fear of personal retribution. His work often tackles issues that could invite backlash if attributed to a

known individual, making anonymity a necessary tool for ensuring that his voice, and the voices of those he represents, can continue to be heard.

In the spirit of the carnivalesque<sup>74</sup>, Z's work is subversive. His cartoons are a form of popular protest, inviting Tunisians to partake in a shared act of ridicule against their oppressors. They are also an expression of collective solidarity, fostering a sense of camaraderie among those who dared to challenge the status quo. This creates a space where social hierarchies can be mocked and inverted, albeit temporarily. The carnivalesque thus acts as both a subversive force challenging established order and a "pressure valve," providing a temporary release for the frustrations and dissatisfactions of the populace without enacting permanent change. Following the carnival, society often returns to its usual state—hence, the subversion provided by the carnivalesque is transient, offering a critique of the status quo while acknowledging its resilience.

"The Electoral Comedy", is a vivid satire on the 2009 Tunisian elections, in which President Ben Ali claimed a sweeping majority of 99.9%. The imagery presents the election as "La Comédie électorale" (The Electoral Comedy), implying that the electoral process was farcical or theatrical rather than a genuine democratic exercise. Set against the backdrop of "Le Théâtre National de Tunisie" (The National Theater of Tunisia), the cartoon underscores that the election was, in essence, a performance staged for the public, with Ben Ali as the central figure. He stands confidently center stage, basking in applause, which the cartoon cynically notes comes

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<sup>74</sup> The term "carnavalesque" refers to a concept introduced by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, relating to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos. The spirit of the carnivalesque pertains to disruption of authority and the normative worldview of society during carnival festivities, where traditional roles and rules of conduct are suspended, allowing for free expression, parody, and a certain level of anarchy.

from "100% guaranteed" extras — suggesting that the "audience" (the electorate) is in fact paid or coerced into showing their support.

The 99.9% figure at the bottom is an obvious jab at the improbability of such a high approval rating in a free and fair election, hinting at manipulation or outright fraud. The image of a lone rat in the audience, indifferent to the grandeur of the performance, could be seen as a metaphor for the few dissenting voices — inconspicuous and largely ignored in the grand scheme. The repeated show "for the 5th time" tagline hints at the repetitiveness of such "elections" under Ben Ali's rule, suggesting a lack of real change or choice in the political process. The cartoon serves not only as a critique of the 2009 election but also as a broader commentary on the state of democracy under Ben Ali, where elections are mere pageantry rather than an expression of the people's will.

The cartoon employs a number of symbols to convey its satirical message. The supporters clad in purple, Ben Ali's favorite color, are a visual metaphor for the uniformity and orchestrated loyalty in the political arena. Their attire signals not just allegiance but also the homogenization of political thought and expression. The president's sharp white suit contrasts with the purple-clad supporters, elevating him above the monochrome crowd and symbolizing his purported purity and the supposed savior status bestowed upon him by the state's propaganda.

The figure beating the drum is emblematic of the manufactured fanfare that often accompanies autocratic displays of power. This image evokes the hollow enthusiasm drummed up by the state apparatus during sham elections. The man in the lower right corner engaged in an act of self-pleasure while watching the spectacle introduces a starkly crude element, serving as a biting commentary on the self-serving nature of those who benefit from the regime's corrupt

practices. It might also suggest the debasement of civic engagement in such a manipulated electoral process, reduced to a voyeuristic act rather than participatory democracy.

The inclusion of a cat among the viewers adds an element of domestic normalcy, indicating that this political charade has infiltrated everyday life, becoming as commonplace as a household pet. Meanwhile, the varied reactions of surprise and boredom among the audience members reflect the mixed responses of the Tunisian populace — some shocked by the audacity of the electoral claims, others numbed by the predictability of the outcome. The bold declaration at the bottom that "99.9% of the public is conquered" further cements the message of the cartoon. The word "conquered" implies that the election was not a victory through consensus but rather a forceful subjugation of the will of the people, reminiscent of a conqueror claiming land by might.



Figure 46: “Lower your underwear, the marabouts are piloting us.”

In this cartoon, Z deftly captures the stark divide between Tunisia's ruling elite and the general populace. The boat, an allegory for the state, is comically disproportionate, with the ruling family luxuriously perched on an absurdly elevated deck. Leila Ben Ali is adorned with a crown, and the portrait of Ben Ali she carries indicates his looming presence despite his physical absence. Her brother's remark, "People like to play!" is a cynical nod to the use of national passions like soccer as a means of distraction from the pressing issues of dictatorship, corruption,

and economic strife. The security forces are humorously caricatured as gangsters and a policeman, underlining the perception of them as enforcers of the regime rather than protectors of the people. This representation serves to unmask the alleged megalomania of the ruling family and their sense of entitlement and disconnection from the reality faced by ordinary Tunisians.

At the rear, lounging comfortably, is Belhassen Trabelsi, further accentuating the lavish and carefree lifestyle of the elite. The marabouts floating behind him symbolize his proclaimed influence over Sidi-Bou Said, tying his personal identity to a place of religious and historical significance in Tunisia, perhaps suggesting a co-opting of cultural heritage for personal aggrandizement. The combination of words and pictures is crucial in driving the message of the cartoon. This particular cartoon is inter-dependent, as words and pictures work in tandem to convey its satirical intent<sup>75</sup>. The text "baissez vos culottes c'est Imed qui pilote" (lower your pants, it's Imed who's piloting) and the label "Tunisia, quality of life" serves to accentuate the visual elements and provide context for the satire. Z effectively critiques the Tunisian political climate, emphasizing the dissonance between the lavishness enjoyed by the ruling class and the harsh realities endured by the rest of the population.

In terms of perspective, the cartoonist has employed a bird's-eye view to depict the yacht and the raft. This choice allows the viewer to absorb the entire scene, observing the disparities between the president's family and the illegal immigrants, and invites them to reflect on the consequences of dictatorship and nepotism. This is conveyed visually by placing the wealthy

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<sup>75</sup> Scott McCloud, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, categorizes the interaction between words and pictures in comics into several distinct types. One of these is the "inter-dependent" type, where words and images go hand-in-hand to deliver a message that neither could convey alone. In this classification, the textual content and the visual artwork are synergistic, with the combination of both creating a nuanced narrative or, in this case, a satire that engages the reader on multiple levels.

characters on the top and the poor ones on the raft. Instead, the artist has chosen to focus on a single cohesive scene that effectively communicates the story. The vivid disparity between the spacious upper deck, occupied by the elite, and the cramped lower deck, filled with the general populace, starkly underscores the deep-seated social inequalities. Additionally, a raft, overflowing with individuals and bearing an Italian flag, symbolizes those who, having presumably "missed the boat" on the promises of their homeland, now seek refuge or opportunity on distant shores. The presence of the Italian flag not only marks Italy as their intended haven but also subtly comments on the broader phenomenon of migration as a response to the untenable conditions within their native Tunisia.

In the cartoon, the inclusion of a person inquiring "who scored?" even as they embark on a perilous journey to Italy aboard an overcrowded raft injects a layer of irony into the scene. This detail serves to highlight the continued preoccupation with trivial matters, such as the scores of a soccer game, amidst dire circumstances that drive individuals to seek a better life across the Mediterranean. It suggests a poignant commentary on human nature and the escapist tendencies that allow individuals to cling to normalcy and familiar comforts, even in the face of upheaval and uncertainty. This juxtaposition emphasizes the stark contrast between the gravity of their situation and the enduring appeal of cultural pastimes as a distraction from their predicaments.

Turning to the social context of the cartoon, it draws upon the rich history of political satire in Tunisia, connecting with a long tradition of resistance through humor. The recurring appearance of Ammar 404 in Tunisian political cartoons highlights the ongoing struggle against censorship and control (Afef Abrougui)<sup>76</sup>, while the depiction of the president's family living a

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<sup>76</sup> [https://www.penopp.org/articles/ammar-404-dead-long-live-ammar-404?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://www.penopp.org/articles/ammar-404-dead-long-live-ammar-404?language_content_entity=en)

luxurious life as illegal immigrants suffer underscores the corrosive effects of corruption and nepotism on Tunisian society. Ultimately, the artist has crafted a poignant, visually striking work that lays bare the issues of dictatorship, nepotism, and social inequality in Tunisia. Through the strategic use of iconicity, combination of words and pictures, perspective, and reference to the social history of political cartoons in Tunisia, the artist has created a piece that invites reflection and inspires change. The dire economic conditions in Tunisia pushed thousands of Tunisians to cross the mediterranean towards Italy, looking for a better future, but sadly many of them drown and perish in the sea, which explains why they are clinging to the boat in the cartoon.

The global reach of the internet, particularly the rise of social media, played a significant role in disseminating Z's work beyond the confines of Tunisia. In the years leading up to the Arab Spring, his cartoons spread like wildfire on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, resonating with a global audience that shared in the frustration and disillusionment with the political elites. This digital platform allowed Z to reach a broader audience, amplifying the impact of his work and ultimately contributing to the groundswell of resistance that culminated in the Arab Spring<sup>77</sup>.

Indeed, it is impossible to discuss Z's work without considering its role in the context of the Tunisian Revolution of 2010-2011. While it would be overly simplistic to attribute the revolution solely to the power of political satire, Z's cartoons certainly contributed to the climate of dissent that eventually erupted. The astute observer of Z's work will be struck by his clever manipulation of visual language to construct a potent critique of power. In the tradition of

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<sup>77</sup> This article by Chaker Mhamdi "The Use of Political Cartoons During Popular Protests" focuses on this historical moment in cartooning and popular culture.

African and Middle Eastern political cartoonists, Z employs a range of stylistic devices and visual tropes to convey his message with wit and acuity.

First and foremost, Z's use of caricature is a cornerstone of his style. Caricature, by its very nature, exaggerates and distorts the physical features of its subject, reducing them to a grotesque semblance of their true self. This technique allows Z to expose the absurdity and hypocrisy of Ben Ali's regime, stripping away the veneer of respectability and authority that the president sought to project. By rendering Ben Ali and his cronies as ludicrous, cartoonish figures, Z lays bare the inherent farce of their rule.

Additionally, Z draws on the rich symbolism and iconography of Middle Eastern and North African folklore and mythology to imbue his cartoons with layers of meaning. For example, his frequent depiction of the ruling elite as rapacious animals not only served to circumvent censorship but also alluded to the cultural and historical resonances of these creatures in regional storytelling traditions<sup>78</sup>. By invoking such potent symbols, Z is able to encode his work with, anchoring it firmly within the collective imagination of the Tunisian people.

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<sup>78</sup> The Tunisian oral storytelling tradition created several mythical creatures, ghouls, and monsters, usually meant to teach a moral lesson to kids who misbehave.

### Censorship in Z's Cartoons:



Figure 47: Ammar 404, Z (debatunisie.com) 2010

This political cartoon features an allegorical representation of censorship in Tunisia, specifically the shutting down of Z's blog, a vital platform for political commentary and satire. Z illustrates a funny scene where he is captured by the police, and brought to what looks like an office room, with Ben Ali's portrait hung on the wall. Ben Ali's portrait gives the order "Go ahead Ammar!", the police officer then give the order in Arabic to "Behead this son of a bitch!". Ammar 404, a symbol of censorship in Z's world, then asks "the birds too?", and the police officer says, "all the same, they're all animals!".

Ammar 404, a moniker given to the Tunisian Internet censorship system under the regime of Ben Ali, is personified here wielding scissors—a metaphor for the cutting off of free speech and access to information. The act of aiming scissors at Z's neck graphically suggests the

silencing of a dissenting voice and the extreme measures taken to enforce censorship. The portrait of Ben Ali appears to be giving orders to proceed with the censorship, characterized by its ability to talk, which infuses the scene with dark humor. This absurd personification underscores the ego and direct involvement of the president in suppressing freedom of expression. The presence of a police officer ensures the execution of the orders, emphasizing the role of state security forces in upholding the repressive actions of the regime.

Z's cartoons on censorship are an intellectual delight that challenge and provoke the reader to question the subtle nuances of the world we live in, where freedom of speech is often curtailed and monitored. In his inimitable style, Z delves into the intricate dynamics of censorship, focusing on the underlying causes and the consequences rather than simply showcasing overt instances of suppression. At first glance, Z's humor is more subtle, employing a refined, allusive wit that is both sophisticated and biting. The satire in his cartoons is not the blatant, judgmental attack type; it is more thoughtful, relying on multiple elements of Tunisian and foreign popular culture characters or icons.

Z recognizes that images can be more susceptible to imaginative interpretations than words and chooses to use a combination of both to ensure clarity and precision in their message. In these cartoons, the tripartite division may include: (1) censorship as a violation of human rights and an affront to democratic principles, (2) freedom of expression as a self-evident necessity, and (3) the celebration of individuals or organizations that fight against censorship and advocate for free speech. In this context, Z's depiction of censorship is characterized by a Manichean struggle between the forces of repression and the defenders of freedom.

### **The Multi-Panel:**

While the multi-panel style is more commonly associated with comics, Z has effectively incorporated this technique into his political satire, offering a fresh and innovative approach to political cartoon commentary. The multi-panel format allows Z to tell a more intricate story, delving deeper into the complexities of political governance and societal issues. By breaking down the narrative into multiple panels, Z guides the viewer through a thought-provoking journey, stimulating intellectual and emotional engagement with each frame. This narrative, storytelling mode adds depth and dimension to his work, inviting the viewer to appreciate the unfolding story and explore the underlying themes presented in each panel.

Z's multi-panel approach enables him to tackle pressing issues with greater nuance and sophistication, capturing the multifaceted nature of the subjects he addresses. In doing so, Z pushes the boundaries of political cartooning, expanding the possibilities of the medium and demonstrating its potential for insightful, in-depth commentary. Indeed, Z's unique style has placed him in the league of other renowned African political cartoonists such as Zapiro and Gado. However, while they operate within the more traditional, globally recognized realm of political cartooning, Z's work is decidedly more experimental in its stylistic and conceptual approach. His bold, inventive use of the multi-panel format speaks to his unparalleled artistic vision and distinguishes him as a trailblazer within the field.

In *Taking African Cartoons Seriously*, Tejumola Olaniyan asserts that:

With multipanels, the political cartoons begin to tell “stories,” stories conceived as narratives moving from one scene or segment to another, unlike the single-panel cartoon that must present everything it has to say and/or show in one space. If this sounds as if

the multipanel cartoonist has it easier, we must remember that we are still talking of the usual small, delimited space of the cartoon in the daily paper, and that telling a gripping story graphically in three panels is much more difficult than *writing* a story in the volume of the same space. It requires an acute sense of the appropriately “short and sharp” that captures a theme and graphically stretches it in space and time with drama and humor. Thus the task of the multipanel political cartoonist is at once related to but more complex and more multifaceted than that of either the single-panel cartoonist or the short story writer. (13)

The potency of political cartoons is engendered by their capacity to articulate complex discourses through seemingly straightforward sketches. The multi-panel design, one vital ingredient in this discourse, offers a sequence of images akin to a visual narrative or a story. Much like the contours of a written narrative, the multi-panel allows for the juxtaposition of ideas, temporal sequencing, cause-and-effect relations, and the development and resolution of tensions. Taking into account the political nature of these cartoons, the multi-panel becomes an effective tool in articulating the progression and regression of political events, the evolution of policies, or the transformation of societal values. It condenses an entire political narrative into the span of a few panels, offering an impactful snapshot of power relations and the socio-political landscape.

The work of Z, the Tunisian cartoonist, demonstrates an adept utilization of the multi-panel. His cartoons are far more than a collection of pictures; they are potent socio-political commentaries, painstakingly woven into the fabric of visual narratives. He explores the peculiarities of the Tunisian context, taking into account its socio-political realities, the vicissitudes of power, and the collective aspirations of the populace.

In addition to the multi-panel, Z employs the medium of comic strips to present multifaceted political narratives. By taking advantage of the serial nature of comic strips, he creates layered dialogues that develop over multiple panels. The progression of the narrative thread from one panel to the next allows him to build a complex, nuanced critique of political situations, a facet not always possible in standalone political cartoons. The comic strip format, therefore, transforms political cartooning from a single punchline format to a running commentary that can articulate complexities over time. Moreover, the comic strip's sequential nature enables Z to introduce elements of time and evolution into his work. This isn't just about chronicling a political event or figure but about showcasing their development or regression. The characters and situations in Z's work can grow, adapt, or deteriorate in ways that reflect the real-world dynamics of politics.

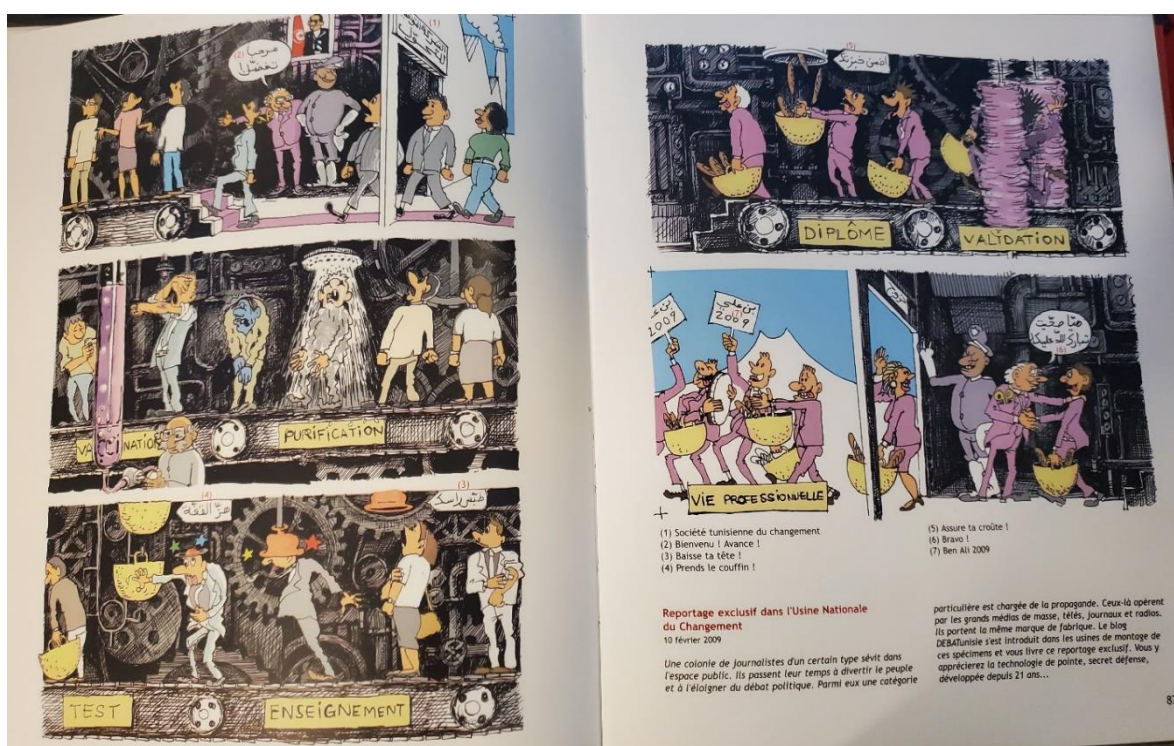


Figure 48: Exclusive report from the factory of change! From Z' book, *Revolution!* 2009

In this multilayered, richly detailed cartoon, Z presents an incisive critique of the transformation of journalism into a tool of state propaganda under President Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia. The cartoon is a potent satire of the manufacturing of consent, an allusion to the manner in which media, particularly journalism, was utilized to divert, distract, and subvert political consciousness.

The cartoon depicts a 'factory' where journalists enter as autonomous individuals and emerge as the government's mouthpieces. They are cleansed, brainwashed, and then equipped with the tools to commence their new roles as informants and loyalists. It is a chilling portrayal of the usurpation of press freedom and the indoctrination of individuals who should be society's truth-tellers. This systematic assembly-line process demonstrates how state apparatuses can convert potential dissenting voices into agents of their narrative.



Figure 49: zoomed in section of Z's multi-panel cartoon

The presence of President Ben Ali's portrait in the first panel symbolizes his overarching control and omniscience, suggesting his omnipresence within the machinery of state propaganda. This cartoon effectively mirrors the 'Tunisian Company for Change,' an ironic moniker that reiterates

the perversion of 'change,' where it only leads to more of the same — an affirmation of the status quo. The word “change” comes as a stark reminder of Ben Ali’s era, that he called “عهد التغيير” or “Era of change”. Z's critique of the "era of change" coined by President Ben Ali is both biting and brilliant. It is evident in the depiction of a "Tunisian Company for Change" that ironically churns out journalists who are clones of the government's narrative, a clear mockery of the hollow promise of change touted by Ben Ali's regime.

The cartoonist portrays the "Era of change" as an era of oppressive continuity where the promise of progress and transformation is leveraged to mask an insidious subversion of freedoms and autonomy. The depiction of journalists entering a factory and exiting as government henchmen and informers is a potent symbol of the coercive 'change' that has taken place. This factory, labeled the "Tunisian Company for Change," satirically embodies Ben Ali's era.

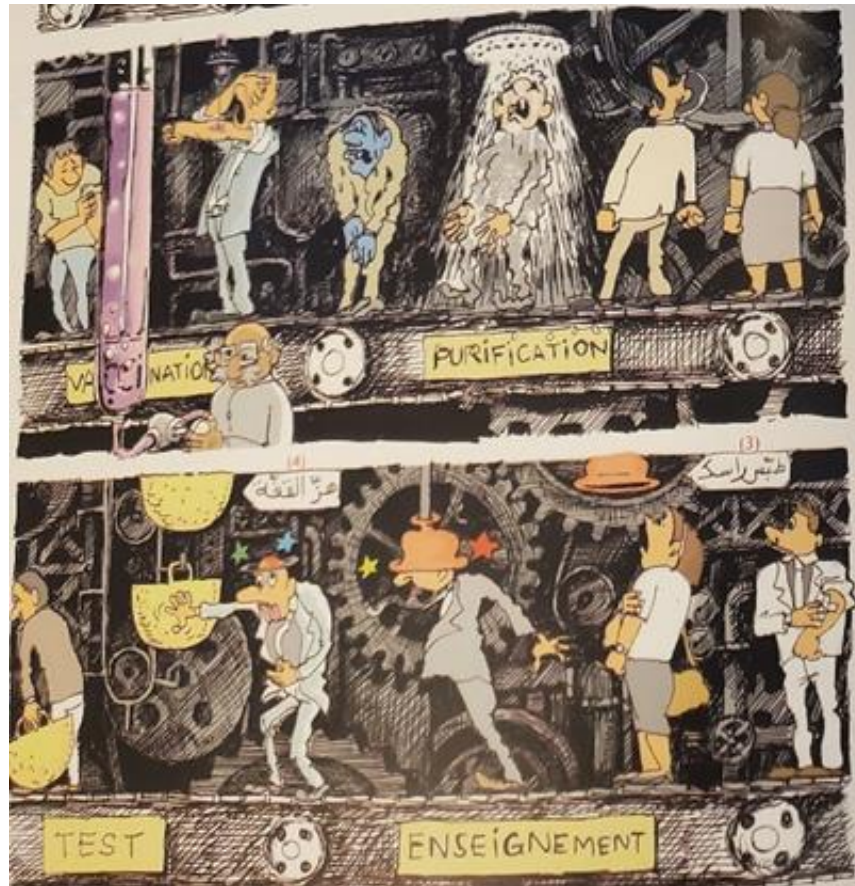


Figure 50: zoomed in section of Z's multi-panel cartoon

The cartoon, drawn in a multipanel format, adeptly uses time and sequencing, much like a comic strip, to chronicle the disturbing transformation process. The text labels within the cartoon, from purification to vaccination, education, testing, validation, and finally, professional life, underscore the meticulous, planned nature of this transformation. The process of purification involves the use of a shower head that washes the people standing on the conveyer belt. The next phase is also automatic, and this time a big plunger<sup>79</sup> drops on the people's heads as a form of

<sup>79</sup> For Z, the plunger affixed to a character's head emerges as a recurring motif, symbolizing folly or dim-wittedness. This particular iconography has been notably prevalent in his more recent satirical depictions of President Kais Saïed, who came into office in 2019. The plunger, in its comical absurdity, effectively conveys the idea of intellectual or political vacuity, and Z has

education, which turns them into hollow pawns and henchmen for the ruling party. The presence of the doctor who gives validations shows that this process is done under the observation of professionals, which would make good end products. The subsequent phase involves assessing their willingness to "carry the basket," a metaphor in Tunisia for individuals who unabashedly perform any task in support of the president, often to ensure their own livelihood. This phrase conjures the image of people carrying burdens — sometimes of questionable contents — without regard for the ethics or consequences, provided it serves the interests of those in power and secures their own sustenance.



Figure 51: zoomed in section of Z's multi-panel cartoon

The last phase is validation, where candidates get their diploma, guarantee their livelihoods, then Ammar 404 congratulates them, then a police officer sends them off in the

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adopted it as a visual shorthand to critique what he perceives as the ineptitude or misguided actions of the current presidency.

street to support the president. The prominence of the color purple, known to be the president's favorite, underscores the pervasiveness of his influence. The character of Ammar 404, a symbol of censorship and state control, serves as an eerie reminder of the oppressive regime and its pervasive surveillance system. With his meticulous attention to details, such as the background cogs signifying the relentless, grinding machinery of state control, Z brings forth a comprehensive critique. He alludes to the journalists' new role in distracting the public from critical political discourse, a sinister role reversal from their supposed duty of enlightening the public and fostering informed debate.

Most of Z's cartoons fall under the category of what Tejumola Olaniyan calls *cartoon of exploration* rather than the *cartoon of display*. In his book *Taking African Cartoons Seriously*, Olaniyan explains that:

Most political cartoonists in Nigeria and elsewhere operate in the latter mode, showing us specific failings of particular individuals, groups, and target figures at a point in time. The cartoon of exploration, on the other hand, is the more challenging and more head-scratching, because it, in addition to showing or displaying, points more to underlying processes and attitudes – the *how?* – that could not but produce any number of different kinds of the particular failings shown. (4)

## The End of Dictatorship?



Figure 52: Adieu ingrateful people! January 2011

In the vein of Olaniyan's analysis of African political cartoons<sup>80</sup>, one must consider the role of intertextuality in Z's work. The cartoonist often draws on recognizable images and themes from popular culture, literature, and art, subtly appropriating and subverting them to serve his own

<sup>80</sup> In his insightful article "The Traditions of Cartooning in Nigeria," Tejumola Olaniyan presents a framework for analyzing cartoons, highlighting the nuanced approaches required to fully appreciate this form of art. Olaniyan suggests that to understand the depth of cartoons, one must consider the interplay of imagery, cultural context, and the socio-political commentary embedded within the cartoonist's work.

satirical ends. This intertextual engagement not only demonstrates Z's erudition but also imbues his work with a playful irreverence, allowing him to engage with his audience on multiple levels.

Another significant aspect of Z's style is his use of visual allegory and metaphor. Z harnessed the power of visual language to convey complex political ideas and critiques in a manner that was both accessible and engaging. By distilling the essence of the issues he tackled into a single, striking image, Z demonstrated the power of political cartoons to communicate incisive commentary with economy and elegance. This is evident in the manner in which Z crafts satire within a single panel. In the above example, the irony of the phrase "Ungrateful people" is intensified by the fact that it is Ben Ali himself who betrayed his most ardent supporters, ultimately fleeing unharmed to Saudi Arabia. Z masterfully positions symbols of wealth and family—elements that were of utmost importance to Ben Ali—behind a police officer, who stands as a barrier. This strategic placement not only critiques Ben Ali's priorities but also comments on the obstruction of justice and the protection of personal gain at the expense of the general populace. Through this clever arrangement, Z encapsulates the disconnect between the ruler's actions and the values he purported to uphold, offering a sharp commentary on the betrayal and its impacts.

Furthermore, the interplay of text and image in Z's work is a critical element of his style. In many of his cartoons, he skillfully integrated words and phrases, sometimes in multiple languages, to reinforce the visual message. This blending of visual and verbal elements adds a layer of complexity and sophistication to his work, allowing Z to engage with his audience in a nuanced and multifaceted manner. Z is a master of character creation; inspired by Western and local TV shows, such as "The Simpsons", the movie "Titanic", the French *bande dessinée* Asterix & Obelix, which makes most of his characters recognizable.

In terms of visual style, Z's work is characterized by simple yet bold lines, minimalistic shapes, and expressive faces reminiscent of both Western comics and Arab iconography. His characters often have large eyes and exaggerated expressions, which are hallmarks of both traditions. Z's unique use of colors is another defining characteristic, as he tends to use a diverse color palette with strategic contrasts that make his cartoons visually striking. Drawing from the Western tradition of satirical cartoons, he incorporates elements of caricature, irony, and humor. At the same time, he also pays homage to Arab cultural traditions and aesthetics, merging the two seamlessly to create his distinct voice.

In addition to his remarkable work as a cartoonist, Z is also a skilled architect. This professional background manifests itself significantly in the composition and structure of his cartoons and comic strips. His architectural training is particularly evident in his mastery of framing, which he employs to direct the viewer's attention to specific elements within the cartoon panel. This meticulous attention to detail and arrangement allows Z to create a sense of depth, movement, and spatial awareness in his cartoons, lending an air of sophistication to his visual storytelling. Z's architectural expertise also informs his understanding of perspective, which he uses to great effect in his cartoons. By manipulating angles, viewpoints, and spatial relationships, he is able to create dynamic compositions that enhance the impact of his satirical messages. The interplay of scale and proportion in his work further underscores the power dynamics and social hierarchies he seeks to critique.

In his cartoons, Z galvanizes various visual elements to create a compelling visual narrative. He masterfully employs color, satire, and exaggeration to convey both the humor and the gravity of the issues he addresses. Z is unafraid to incorporate profanity into his work, using it as a provocative means of challenging societal norms and exposing the absurdities and

contradictions inherent in the subjects he explores. As a scholar examining Z's work, it becomes evident that his architectural background and artistic talent are inextricably intertwined. His keen understanding of framing, perspective, and spatial relationships, coupled with his penchant for satire and provocation, results in a powerful visual narrative that is both captivating and thought-provoking. In this way, Z's cartoons serve as a testament to the transformative potential of interdisciplinary creativity and the power of art as a vehicle for social critique and potential change.

Z publishes his cartoons on his blog, which serves as a platform for both his artwork and his insightful commentaries on current affairs. The blog is predominantly written in French, which reflects Z's bilingualism and his engagement with a wider Francophone audience. This choice also highlights Tunisia's historical connection with France and the broader influence of the French language in North Africa. Z Arabic and French as well as English, often using one language to convey a particular message or sentiment, and the other to provide context or nuance. This linguistic versatility allows Z to reach out to diverse audiences and create different types of humor depending on the pun or situation.

Z incorporates the art of caricature and comedy into his politically charged and socially conscious works. Drawing on a rich tradition of Tunisian, Arab, and Western iconography, Z masterfully uses recognizable cartoon characters to symbolize concepts like gullibility and lack of intellect, rendering his critiques both humorous and impactful. This satirical approach not only makes his cartoons amusing but also demonstrates a profound understanding of Tunisian culture and politics. For example, when he depicts individuals on a boat with their trousers lowered, it symbolizes their surrender of dignity and autonomy, accepting treatment akin to livestock rather

than as respected citizens. This stark imagery serves as a powerful metaphor for the loss of personal agency and the degradation of human value in the face of oppressive forces.

Z's work is not merely for entertainment; it is a clever blend of humor and acute social observation, wielding comedy as a tool to scrutinize and question prevailing power dynamics and societal norms. The humor in his cartoons functions as a Trojan horse, sneaking in incisive commentary and critical perspectives under the guise of levity. This approach grants his ideas greater accessibility and palatability, engaging a broader audience than straightforward political discourse might. Through laughter, Z aims to enchant viewers, making it easier to introduce complex and potentially contentious subjects, thereby sparking reflection and prompting discourse. Each cartoon, while humorous at first glance, also invites the audience to look beyond the surface and consider the underlying messages about governance, social injustices, or civic responsibilities.

### **Conclusion:**

Between 1987 and 2010, Tunisian cartoonists portrayed local and international politics, often using their art to critique a wide array of subjects beyond the dictatorship of Ben Ali. Their work frequently ventured into discussions on major global events, such as the First Gulf War, the Palestinian intifada, the September 11 attacks, the war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 Iraq war. These cartoons resonated deeply with the public sentiment of the time, capturing a collective feeling of injustice and a staunch support for Saddam Hussein, alongside a critique of American influence in the Middle East.

Following the Arab Spring and the election of Kais Saied in 2019, the political climate in Tunisia saw a marked shift. Saied's introduction of a special decree penalizing criticism against him led cartoonists to shift their focus once more, this time towards topics like Ramadan, consumer culture, and the scarcity of basic necessities. This period underscored the resilience and adaptability of Tunisian cartoonists, who continued to engage with societal issues amidst an increasingly restrictive environment. The re-emergence of authoritarian practices in Tunisia served as a litmus test, distinguishing cartoonists who persisted in their political commentary from those who ceased to critique the presidency directly. This era not only highlights the enduring spirit of political cartoonists in Tunisia but also reflects the broader challenges and pressures faced by artists in environments of political transition and repression.

Tunisian cartoonists, much like their counterparts across the Arab world, have been adept at capturing and expressing the prevailing public emotions regarding political matters, particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Through my research, it became evident that despite the diversity of opinions on domestic politics, there exists a unanimous stance among these artists concerning the Palestinian issue. The consensus advocates for the full and unconditional decolonization of all territories occupied by Israel. The call for a two-state solution diverges from this consensus and is heavily stigmatized. Any cartoonist suggesting such an approach risks being labeled as a "مطبع" (normalizer), a term that carries negative connotations of betrayal to the cause, potentially leading to a significant loss of respect and credibility within the community and among their audience. This reflects the depth of solidarity and the unified perspective within the Tunisian and broader Arab artistic communities regarding the Palestinian cause.

In the realm of political cartooning in Tunisia, there exists a pervasive skepticism regarding the feasibility of peace between Palestinians and Israelis, extending to the concept of a

two-state solution—a notion once proposed by Tunisia's own Habib Bourguiba. This prevailing disbelief underscores a deep-rooted sentiment within the Tunisian artistic community, where the idea of coexistence under the current circumstances is viewed with considerable doubt.

Consequently, the notion of advocating for a two-state solution is not only absent among Tunisian cartoonists but is also seen as contrary to the collective perspective that champions a more comprehensive resolution to the conflict. This reflects a broader cultural and historical context, wherein Tunisian artists align with a unanimous vision that transcends local politics, focusing instead on solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Tunisian political cartoonists often leverage their art to express a poignant critique of the Arab nations for their perceived lack of support for the people of Gaza, especially in times when Israel's military actions, perceived as disproportionate responses to attacks, result in significant Palestinian casualties. This sentiment was particularly evident following the events of October 7, where Israel's reaction to the Hamas' attack was seen as excessively severe.. With each escalating conflict, these cartoonists' portrayals become increasingly radical, serving as a conduit for the frustrations and feelings of powerlessness among those who yearn to offer more substantial support. Through their work, these artists amplify the voices of the silenced, embodying the collective angst and a deep-seated desire for a more concerted and effective response to the crises in Gaza.

The toppling of Ben Ali catalyzed a renaissance of political cartooning in Tunisia, with many emerging artists taking to the internet, particularly Facebook, to disseminate their work and cultivate a following. The Arab Spring ignited a sense of optimism for a brighter future among many. Nonetheless, this period also saw the return of expatriate politicians, including some Islamists with ambitious power agendas, who have been accused of furthering Tunisia's

exploitation, appropriating its wealth, and contributing to political tumult. This era, often referred to as "the black decade" by Tunisians and local media, was marked by heightened disillusionment as the initial fervor of the revolution gave way to the reality of ongoing challenges and struggles.



Figure 53: Ben Ali Celebrating...Z. 2011

## Chapter Five

### **Political Cartoons as Pivotal Tools for Social Commentary: An Exploration of Post-Revolution Tunisia**

Political cartoons have held a distinctive space within the realm of visual culture. They merge the serious with the comical, the mundane with the extraordinary, to deliver sharp commentaries on societal and political scenarios. Often, they are born from periods of tumult and change, in which the satirical becomes a poignant conduit for challenging narratives and fostering discourse. The importance of this medium burgeons significantly in a post-revolution context, where societies grapple with redefinition and reformation, and where cartoons can offer profound insights, critical reflections, and at times, much-needed laughter. This chapter aims to explore a substantial archive of such political cartoons, which has captured the vibrant and dynamic period of post-revolution Tunisia.

January 14, 2011, marked a momentous turning point in Tunisia's history. It marked the day President Ben Ali left the country and was never allowed back. The intensity of riots and bloody confrontations with the police force, pushed the military generals to lead a coup and put an end to the bloodshed. So, with the end of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's twenty-three-year authoritarian rule, the nation stood on the precipice of an era of reimagining and reconstruction. The reverberations of the Tunisian Revolution were felt not only within its borders but also set the stage for what would later unfold in many parts of the Arab world as the Arab Spring. Tunisia, post-January 14, underwent significant political and social changes, catapulting into a

turbulent transitional period with promises of democratization and human rights, as well as the inevitable struggles that come with such shifts.

Politically, Tunisia's landscape transformed drastically. The iron fist of Ben Ali's regime was replaced with a surge of political freedom, resulting in the birth or rebirth of numerous political parties, the majority of which were previously banned<sup>81</sup>. This newfound political pluralism opened up avenues for inclusive public participation, yet also set the stage for ideological conflict and power struggles. Additionally, the nation embarked on a journey to draft a new constitution, reflecting the hopes and challenges of a nascent democratic state.

Socially, the revolution brought a sense of empowerment, as well as a myriad of challenges. Public spaces became arenas for free speech and assembly, where citizens voiced their demands and aspirations. Yet, the scars left by decades of dictatorship ran deep. Socioeconomic inequalities persisted, leading to frustrations, social unrest, and occasional violence. Furthermore, the nation had to navigate the rise of religious conservatism against a backdrop of long-standing secular traditions. In fact, the return of the Islamist party “Ennahdha” or “The Renaissance”, initiated a turbulent decade where the country remained at a social and economic stalemate, short of a civil war.

In this context, Tunisia's cartoonists took up their pens to document, reflect upon, and critique these seismic shifts. With their unique blend of humor, satire, and stark visual imagery, they provided insightful narratives of this transformative period. They questioned the motives of new political actors, highlighted societal issues, and engaged in debates around freedom of speech and press. Often, they were both mirrors and magnifying glasses to the happenings of the

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<sup>81</sup> Michele Penner Angrist's article “Parties, parliament and political dissent in Tunisia” highlights the issue of repression of political parties during the Ben Ali era.

day, simultaneously reflecting and scrutinizing the evolving landscape of post-revolution Tunisia.

This exploration of the rich cartoon archive seeks to delve into the ways these artists navigated this tumultuous period. How did their work reflect the changing political and social dynamics? What were the recurrent themes and narratives in their cartoons? How did their styles and techniques evolve over time? To answer these questions is not only to trace the trajectory of political cartooning in Tunisia but also to better understand the complex journey of a nation navigating the uncharted waters of post-revolution existence. It is to gain a unique lens into the social history of Tunisia—a history that has been etched and sketched in strokes of ink and shades of satire.

The Tunisian Revolution of 2011 marked the genesis of a transformative epoch in the nation's history, ushering in a shift from authoritarian rule to a seemingly promising democratic horizon. This transition witnessed not only political recalibration but also a vivid cultural metamorphosis. As in many political shifts, the undercurrents of social change are often best captured not in legislation but in art, more specifically, in Tunisia's case, through the poignant strokes of political cartoonists.

Daniel Hammet observes that,

Political cartoons function as a key indicator of the democratic health of a polity. They are a barometer of press freedom, of government tolerance of free speech and critical thought, and of resistance to dominant power relations. The processes of democratization across African states, and the tensions and struggles of political transitions from (armed)

struggle to democratic government, should provide fertile material for political satire and dissent. (2)

Hammet underscores the pivotal nature of political cartoons in the landscape of evolving democracies, which stands true in the case of Tunisia. But just as the cartoons and the artists who pen them evolve, so does the medium through which they reach their audience. The blossoming of social media platforms gave birth to a new media landscape, and with it, a chasm between the new generation—tech-savvy and connected—and the older one, which in its hold on power often implemented laws to protect its interests.

Bakhtin's conceptualization of the 'carnavalesque' becomes highly apt when observing the Tunisian parliament of this era. The expansive array of cartoons showcasing the parliament seems to echo his thoughts. He once noted the carnival as a space where "the world is turned upside down; hierarchies are overturned" (Bakhtin 34). This resonates deeply with the chaotic, almost theatrical performance of the Tunisian parliament, where politicians often partook in absurd antics. A realm where the high and mighty were mocked and the previously voiceless were given a voice—albeit satirically.

However, democratization isn't merely about introducing new systems. It's about transparency. The live broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings on national television was an endeavor towards this transparency. Yet, instead of bridging gaps, it often deepened the divide, as every fault line in the political landscape was laid bare for all to see. With transparency came heightened convictions, and unfortunately, heightened violence.

Thus, political cartoons in Tunisia from 2011 to 2021 serve as a visual chronicle of the country's democratic evolution. They are not just sketches, but rather reflections—sometimes humorous, sometimes painful—of a nation in transition.

### **The Moral Matrix in Tunisia:**

The precepts of the moral matrix in Tunisia have been shaped by years of French colonialism and dictatorship, which resulted in the formation of a nebulous identity. The first constitution was drafted in 1861 under the Ottoman reign and it asserts that “The succession to power is hereditary between the princes of the Husseini family in order of age, according to the rules in use only in the case where the heir apparent would be prevented, the prince who would come immediately after him, would succeed him in all his rights”. When the French took over in 1881 they kept the same constitution until independence in 1956. Habib Bourguiba was a lawyer who finished his high education in France and returned to Tunisia to join a resistance movement that grew to become the ruling party after independence. Bourguiba and the ruling party tailored a constitution that would create a Muslim nation that embraces secularism, women’s rights, and the separation between religion and state. “Tunisia is a free, independent, and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its type of government is the Republic.”<sup>82</sup> In a way, Bourguiba’s image remains as the ‘Great Mujahid’; Mujahid in the sense that he was the leader of the national liberation front, and sacrificed years of his life in exiles and prisons.

Consequently, for secularists Bourguiba remains a champion and the father figure of modern Tunisia. One of Bourguiba's legacies, the Tunisian constitution of 1959, asserted the nation's

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<sup>82</sup> Article 1 of the Tunisian constitution

identity as Arabic and Islamic, aiming to foster unity over tribalism and division. However, this emphasis inadvertently marginalized minority groups, underscoring the complexity of achieving unity in a diverse society. But on the other hand, by ignoring minority groups such as the Amazigh or the Tunisian Jews and Christians, minority groups have had no rights or official recognition as part of Tunisian culture.

In her article “Islamist appeal in Tunisia”, Suzan Waltz describes the percepts of the moral matrix climate during the early 1980s; she describes that:

In Tunisia, as elsewhere in the Middle East in recent years, Islamists' invoke a re-valuation of the role of Islam in society and question the secularization of cultural life, social practices antithetical to Islamic precepts, and the implementation of positivist law. Especially condemnable is the influence of Western society, held responsible for having carried Muslim society far from the basic tenets of organic Islam. Even without the specter of Iran hovering in the background, many of these ideas are anathema to a class of Tunisian elites who have comfortably integrated selected Western norms into their lives and for whom Islam is little more than a code of ethics. (653)

The Islamists tried to fit in the Tunisian modern and secular model, but repressive tolerance<sup>83</sup> was the policy of the Ben Ali government and this allowed the Islamists some leeway for underground activism. According to Sarah Loudon, “the condemnation and repression of Political Islamism in Tunisia historically backfired and led to the further underground

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<sup>83</sup> Herbert Marcuse's concept of "repressive tolerance" emerges from his critique of advanced industrial societies, where he argues that the form of tolerance practiced paradoxically serves to reinforce and perpetuate existing social inequalities and power structures. In his 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance," Marcuse suggests that this form of tolerance allows for the expression of a wide range of ideas and opinions, including those that are critical of the status quo, but does so in a way that ultimately neutralizes their potential to bring about significant change.

radicalization of Tunisians, along with scores of human rights abuses by authorities” (1). True, but this is a half statement. Political Islamism has always been violent in its attempts to attain power. In Algeria, for example, the civil war started because of the fundamentalist political positions of the Islamists and the ways in which they convinced people to vote.

Consequently, “The Algerian experience of 1991 had already alarmed Western countries, including the European ones, to the point that they were happy to support authoritarian secular governments, perceiving them as the only ones able to guarantee stability in the region and thus Western interests” (Colombo and Voltolini 7).

In this respect, the Tunisian moral matrix operates within two opposing ideological forces, secularism and Islamism, primarily because of Ben Ali’s repression of religious activity and political pluralism. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali continued the same policy of secularization and championed moderate Islam as the moral code of the country. The influence of foreign TV channels on the Tunisian represents one major factor in conditioning a large portion of ordinary Tunisians. According to the Cambridge Arab Media Project ... “Another issue was the relation between religious channels and the distribution of power in society. The rapid growth of religious broadcasting had accompanied a general trend of Islamisation in the Arab world.” The wave of Islamic revivalism led to the funding and creation of hundreds of religious satellite channels; these channels invaded every household because they were broadcasting via satellite and resulted in the creation of millions of religious conservatives and sympathizers with the Islamist causes<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> This book by Ḥarūb and Khālīd. *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East* is a very illuminating study of the widespread creation and broadcasting of religious channels across the Arab world.

This wave of revivalism was welcomed among conservative families who have become more and more receptive to other interpretations of Islam<sup>85</sup>. Radical Sheiks who used to be banned from entering the country, have become the new moral leaders for young Tunisians who wished to engage in a cosmic conflict between Islam and its enemies. The multiple foreign preachers were invited to create a sense of religious trance among the population, which I think succeeded in recruiting fighters and convincing the population to vote for the Islamists because they will go to heaven if they do so. In his book, *Tunisia, An Arab Anomaly*, Safwan M. Masri points out that “they (the imams) preached in the suburbs of Tunis and rural areas such as Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine. Official imams were marginalized both because of their association with the ancient regime (41). The *dawa* principle of Salafists, which ensures the recruitment of young male Tunisians, who will ultimately serve the Islamic cause. But their approach was widely rejected among the Tunisian elite, scholars, and imams. As Masri points out “Imam of Kairouan, Sheikh Taieb Ghazzi explains that the way Salafist preachers and their recruits have gone “backwards” in adopting principles of jihad and *takfir* is very un-Tunisian. He blames foreign influences that infiltrated Tunisia during and after the revolution and gave Tunisians the illusion that they offered salvation” (40).

The ghost of radicalization will continue to loom over Tunisia, as it has all over the region and beyond. Polarization between religionists and secularists will also continue to define the Tunisian landscape. For the first time since independence, the role that Islam plays in politics and in Tunisian society has been up to Tunisians. Under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, religion was part of the official discourse, but in reality, there was no application of Islam, and religion had

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<sup>85</sup> In their article “Conveying Islam: Arab Islamic Satellite Channels as New Players”, Ehab Galal and Francis Nyamnjoh offer a closer look at the reasons behind this revivalism.

been removed from the public sphere. To hardline Islamists, the absence of any mention of Sharia and Islam from official discourse in the new democracy represents an additional loss in the sphere of the rhetorical (Masri 41).

### **Pan Arabism and Africanism:**

This concept emerged after the defeat of Arab countries in 1967 against Israel, leading to a shared interest in protecting themselves from colonialism and imperialism. It stands to reason, thus, that these nations built economic systems based on opposing cooperation with the West. Pan Arabism is fundamentally at odds with diversity; it champions homogeneity and excludes difference. “In Tunisia,” argues Pouessel, “the self-definition as “African” or “Amazigh” conveys an opposition to Arab nationalism or to the political Islam that ruled Tunisia from 2011 to 2014 (66).

The tropes of Pan Arabism and Arab nationalism do not include all ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Pan Arabism had one vision of a bigger nation of Arabs and Muslims as an entity rather than distinct people with distinct cultures and backgrounds. This vision excluded minorities and championed uniformity. Today, Pan Arabism manifests itself in the first article of the Tunisian constitution of 2014<sup>86</sup>. The article declares “Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language Arabic, and its system is republican. (This article might not be amended)”. A constructive re-articulation of Tunisian identity has never been discussed, because

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<sup>86</sup> On January 26, 2014, the new constitution of Tunisia was adopted by most the deputies of the National Constituent Assembly, with 200 votes for the constitution and 12 against. Article 1 from the 1959 constitution was kept the same in the new constitution.

this would endanger the Islamist party. Or, as Pouessel suggests “This African paradigm appears, therefore, as a challenge to the Arab and Islamic affiliation of the Maghreb and to the party that embodies it, Ennahda” (66).

Tunisians have been conditioned to belong to the “Arab Nation” mainly because of the post-independence policies of Habib Bourguiba. As Jacob Abadi explains, “Bourguiba understood that to maintain a good rapport with the Arab states, his country had to identify with major Arab concerns” (493). By reinforcing these policies in education and the mainstream political discourse, Tunisians discarded their diversity over time, leading to the foundation of an ostensibly homogeneous society. This social structure has led to latent racism and continuous offences against blacks, who are not perceived to fit under the Arab umbrella. In fact, the state policy of uniformity has created a sense of animosity towards those who are different. The legislator continues to protect religion by enforcing laws and measures that limit the freedom of speech.

In recent years, the global political landscape has been profoundly shaped by the ascension of Islamist groups to positions of governance. The dynamism of political Islam and its intersection with democratic processes has fostered a renewed academic interest. Particularly, the debate has evolved from a broad consideration of the compatibility between Islam and democracy to a nuanced study of Islamist practices and commitments within political frameworks. This analytical essay endeavors to critically examine the repercussions when Islamists ascend to power, pivoting on key case studies like Tunisia and Egypt, and against the backdrop of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis.

The inclusion-moderation hypothesis developed by Jillian Schwedler posits that the integration of political groups into pluralist political processes results in their moderation. At the heart of this discourse lies the distinction between 'moderates' and 'radicals'. While moderates are

seen to support democratic reforms, radicals tend to oppose them. This binary demarcation has been fundamental to Western political science, with terminologies like hard-liners/soft-liners, technocrats/theocrats frequently employed to highlight distinctions. Notably, Nancy Bermeo critiqued the “moderation argument”, observing that transitions during the 1990s placed significant emphasis on elite negotiations. The underlying question, especially relevant to the Middle East context, is whether inclusion in pluralistic processes genuinely fosters moderation among Islamist groups.

Islamists, who advocate for reforms based on the teachings of the Islamic faith, have become indispensable actors in Middle Eastern politics. The significance of their political voice cannot be understated, given that authoritarian regimes have stifled alternative opposition voices for years. However, the real challenge emerges when differentiating between the various strains of Islamist thought. The Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi groups, and institutions like Egypt's al-Azhar, despite their common non-violent stance, have varied political ambitions, ranging from limited reforms to comprehensive overhauls of existing governmental systems.

Drawing from the lived experiences of Tunisia and Egypt, it becomes evident that the theoretical assumptions of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis may not always play out as expected in real-world scenarios. In Tunisia, the Islamist party Ennahda did participate in democratic processes post-Arab Spring and showcased moderate tendencies. However, over time, tensions arose between the party's conservative base and the secular factions of Tunisian society. The challenge here was in navigating the balance between religious convictions and the demands of a pluralistic democracy.

Egypt's political landscape was even more tumultuous. The Muslim Brotherhood, under President Mohamed Morsi, took office in 2012. Despite participating in democratic elections,

Morsi's rule was characterized by allegations of authoritarianism, economic downturns, and failure to address social grievances. The military coup in 2013, which removed Morsi from power, underscores the complexities of Islamist governance and the challenges of reconciling ideological rigidity with the demands of governance.

The Islamists had to play the democratic transition game, and make concessions, while knowing full well that those concessions were in direct conflict with their power playbook. Netterstrøm points out that,

Because Ennahda's leaders needed their members to accept freedom of conscience, the abandonment of shari'a, and other secular principles, the leadership put forth an interpretation of Islam that supported such concessions. The strategic calculations of the Ennahda leadership thus generated an ideological change among the members of the party. The process changed how many members perceive Islamism and Islam. (122)

The repercussions of Islamists reaching power are multifaceted and cannot be boxed into a singular narrative. While the inclusion-moderation hypothesis offers a valuable framework, the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt underline the need for a more nuanced understanding. The challenge lies in recognizing the vast spectrum within political Islam, ensuring that the intricacies of regional, cultural, and historical contexts are taken into account when assessing the successes and failures of Islamists in power.

The Tunisian historian Hedi El Timoumi labeled El Nahdha Party's politics as "Regressive Bonapartism", as Gramsci saw it, is when a traditional ruling class retains control by imposing a form of dictatorship or autocratic rule to counteract the threat of subaltern (subordinate) classes. In this situation, the ruling class sacrifices some of its previous liberal-

democratic freedoms to safeguard its overall position of dominance. It's a reactionary move, hence the term "regressive."

### **Kais Saied and The Coup of July 25, 2021:**

On July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied suspended Parliament and extended his executive powers in a move he described as “in the interest of the country”, but his opponents called a power grab<sup>87</sup>. The president eventually dissolved the parliament and called for a new constitution to be drafted up. With a very low turnout, the new constitution was adopted, and Saied gained more powers, effectively becoming an autocrat, and just like Ben Ali, he started using the police state. Kais Saied had no political party, but what made him win the elections is the fact that he speaks Modern Standard Arabic with a baritone voice, projecting the image of a sage who would save the nation, even before he was elected.

Francesco Tamburini explains that “His message during the electoral campaign for the presidency was directed to propose a fundamental restructuring of the state and a radical reform of the political system through a theory outlined for the first time in 2013 and suggested by his advisor, a radical left-wing intellectual, Ridha Chiheb el-Mekki, nicknamed ‘Lenin’.”

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<sup>87</sup> “On July 25, Tunisian President Kais Saied froze the parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and announced he will temporarily rule by decree. Flanked by military and security officials, Saied also rescinded parliamentary immunity, threatening to subject corrupt parliamentarians to the law “despite their wealth and positions.” <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kais-saieds-power-grab-in-tunisia/>

Ennahda, the Islamist party that had been part of the Tunisian government, played a significant role in the events leading up to Saied's actions. The party's leadership admitted its failure to manage the affairs of governance in Tunisia and acknowledged the mistakes it had committed since its entry into power, which contributed to fuel street anger against it. The constitutional flaws and the chaotic parliamentary situation, coupled with the uninterrupted presence of the "state of emergency" regulating Tunisian political and social life since 2011 and the absence of the constitutional court, created the "perfect storm" and the breeding ground for Saied's overpower. President Saied used the classical tools of populism to present himself as the savior of Tunisia, articulating and developing it long before he came into politics, with his theories of the "new institution" and his negative attitude toward political parties and the traditional political system (Tamburini 5).

Saied's political maneuvers, draped in the cloak of populism, summon familiar echoes from the corridors of global politics. However, it's essential to approach his story through a lens that captures its nuances, even as it resonates with global patterns. To invoke the words "the people want" is to make a powerful assertion of representation. But in the case of Saied, these words seem to take on an almost surreal quality. Is it genuine representation, or a ploy for consolidated power? As with the sounds of many populist beats, discerning the rhythm can often be challenging. Saied's seemingly autocratic impulses, fortified by the judiciary's compliance, evoke uncomfortable reminders of periods when justice was more an instrument of power than an embodiment of fairness.

In many political cartoons, Saied is sometimes depicted as a Robot, Robocop, or as a strongman. However, the Arab Center in Washington D.C maintains that:

in sharp contrast to the populism of former US President Donald Trump—whose “Big Lie” was ultimately exposed by the courts—Saied has depended on a revamped Ministry of Justice and judiciary to pursue his opponents using indictments that constitute a legalized regurgitation of his own conspiracy theories. This almost complete subordination of the judiciary to his whims and fantasies has been undergirded by a state security apparatus that was never reformed during the country’s post-2011 democratic period, and by a professional military whose leaders the president has openly courted, and whose courts have been used to imprison Saied’s critics. (Daniel Drumberg)

Additionally, free speech has been suffering since Saied claimed power. Besides closing oppositional news outlets, critics of Saied have been prosecuted and silenced in civilian, as well as military courts using charges like “insulting the president” or “defaming the army.” An example of such a case includes social media commentator Selim Jebali who has been sentenced to six months in prison for calling Saied a “dog” and a “coup maker” on his private Facebook page. The targeting of critics also includes members of parliament who, after being lifted off their immunity, now fear repression. Saied is being seen to lead a campaign of arrests and suppression that also alarms journalists. Such disproportionate coercive measures hint rather toward authoritarian tactics than to further democratization.

### **Cartooning the Arab Spring:**

Against the backdrop of the revolutionary turbulence that characterized the Arab Spring, Tunisia emerged from the shadows, showcasing an unforeseen vitality in its realm of political cartooning. The convulsion of socio-political norms birthed a new era of artistic liberation and

initiated the advent of a new breed of cartoonists. These artists took advantage of the expanded freedoms to challenge existing norms, satirize the status quo, and bring their unique perspectives to bear on the national conversation. This discourse delves into the transformative post-revolution period, shedding light on the dynamism of emergent Tunisian cartoonists including Lilia Halloul, Nadia Khiari, Tawfiq Omrane, Chedly Belkhamza, Rachid Rahmouni, Zied Mejri, Si Tahar, Adenov, Zied Mejri, Nadia Dhab (Dlog), Oussama Bardaoui, Imed Ben Hamida, Z, Dlog, Seifeddine Nechi, Selmen Arts, Abdel Karim Jridi, among others. Their illustrious work unveils, in vivid detail, the intricacies of Tunisia's social history.

Lilia Halloul, a resolute feminist, creatively interweaves her advocacy for women's rights within the fabric of her cartoons. Through the deft strokes of her pen, Halloul chronicles the triumphs and tribulations of Tunisian women, empowering her audience to rethink societal norms. Her illustrations subtly reveal the battle for gender equality, and her portrayal of strong female characters embodies the struggles of Tunisian women in their fight against patriarchal structures. Halloul's work, therefore, stands as a testament to the gradual evolution of women's roles in a predominantly male-dominated society.

Nadia Khiari, better known as Willis from Tunis, uses her feline character, "Willis," to embody the voice of the Tunisian populace. Through Willis, Khiari satirizes the post-revolution political scene with biting wit and unvarnished honesty. She reflects the disillusionment of the masses, their hopes, fears, and the constant struggle for a democratic society in the aftermath of revolution. Her work encapsulates the absurdities of the political system and echoes the sentiments of ordinary Tunisians caught in the flux of post-revolution turmoil.

Tawfiq Omrane's cartoons, heavy with symbolism and sharp commentary, delve into the contradictions of post-revolution Tunisia. His visual narratives confront the socio-political

climate head-on, provoking introspection and encouraging dialogue. Omrane's cartoons depict the societal fractures, the class struggle, and the political maneuvering that characterize the new Tunisia, revealing a society in flux grappling with change.

Chedly Belkhamza, Rachid Rahmouni, Zied Mejri, Chakib Daoud (Si Tahar), and Adenov have equally harnessed the power of satire and symbolism to comment on the Tunisian society. Their collective work probes issues of corruption, human rights, freedom of speech, and socio-economic disparities. Through their cartoons, they cast light on the sociopolitical vicissitudes of Tunisia, challenging authoritarian tendencies while championing democratic principles.

Oussama Bardaoui and Imed Ben Hamida, on the other hand, employ a more subtle approach. Their illustrations offer nuanced reflections on societal issues, invoking empathy and instigating introspection. Bardaoui's work dwells on themes of youth disillusionment and economic inequality, while Hamida uses humor as a tool to provoke thought on political and social inequities.

The elusive artist known only as "Z" has gained notoriety for his audacious critique of the state. His cartoons delve into controversial themes, revealing the harsh realities of the socio-political landscape. Z's stark black and white illustrations bear a distinct, edgy aesthetic that underscores the grittiness of his narratives, offering an unfiltered glimpse into the heart of Tunisia's socio-political scene.

In their distinct ways, these artists have employed political cartooning as a powerful medium to expose, critique, and challenge the status quo. Through their work, they have echoed the voices of the marginalized, satirized the powerful, and encapsulated the struggles and hopes

of the Tunisian people in a rapidly changing society. The evolution of political cartooning in Tunisia thus serves as a testament to the power of art in galvanizing social change, providing an intimate lens into the socio-political realities of post-revolution Tunisia.

In the aftermath of Ben Ali's regime, Tunisia experienced a whirlwind of transformation that nurtured a burgeoning wave of cartoonists. These artists found in the period's dynamism and in the rise of public figures and political debates fertile ground for their satire. As Tejumola Olaniyan emphasizes, the intersection of political upheaval, increased visibility of leaders, and the spread of Islamist thought provided a rich narrative for post-revolutionary Tunisia's discourse, one that cartoonists were keen to engage with and shape. The polarization of Tunisian society, especially the division between secular and Islamist ideologies following the Arab Spring, offered a backdrop ripe for the incisive commentary of political cartoons. These visual satirists used their craft not just to reflect society but to interrogate it, dissecting the pronounced sociopolitical dichotomy with irony and wit. Their work illuminated the stark ideological conflicts and power struggles characterizing this new chapter in Tunisian history.

While contemporary artists have embraced digital platforms, leveraging technology to widen their reach, many of their forerunners remain committed to traditional media outlets like daily newspapers. As Douglas and Malti-Douglas note, Arab comics navigate both high art and journalism, reflecting a cultural transformation driven by Westernization and modernization. This cultural shift, part of the larger transformation of societies, had its origins in the extended suppression of cultural expression, particularly among cartoonists who often dual-hatted as journalists. This repressive period led to a cultural landscape that, when compared to other African nations, was left somewhat barren. Despite these challenges, political cartoons have persisted as powerful cultural mediators, condensing the complexities of events into sharp

graphic critiques. The post-Arab Spring era in Tunisia showcases the profound impact of these visual narratives. Here, the skilled strokes of the cartoonists capture a decade of historical tumult and transition, demonstrating the enduring power of comics and cartoons to embody, inform, and shape their times.

In the forthcoming section, we delve into the dynamic realm of cartoons as performance, unpacking how these visual narratives act out political commentary and societal critique, engaging the audience not just as observers but as active participants in the unfolding narrative.

### **Cartoons as performance:**

The performative dialogue between the artist and the audience, especially in the realm of political cartoons, is a fascinating phenomenon. These illustrations are not merely passive reflections of socio-political narratives, but they are active discourses, potent stages where the drama of revolution unfolds, visually archiving the public's quest for emancipation. Tunisian political cartoons thus become an arena of socio-political performances.

On one layer of this performance, we find the real-world act of revolution, the tangible uprising against years of socio-political repression. The Tunisian populace, in their quest for emancipation, donned the roles of performers in a grand theatre of dissent. The streets became their stage, their cries and actions the script, their collective hope the grand narrative.

This performative spectacle of revolution then gets translated and transposed into another medium - the political cartoon. This constitutes the second stratum of the performance. Here, the cartoonist takes on the role of both the observer and the participant, the director and the actor, sculpting and molding the raw emotion and energy of the revolution into a visually compelling

narrative. The artistic canvas of the cartoon becomes a microcosm of the revolutionary theatre, echoing the voices of dissent and aspirations for liberation.

A palpable theme in these cartoons is the contrast between the ordinary citizens - often represented as faceless but resilient - and the leaders, grotesquely caricatured to symbolize the oppressive power structures. The yearning for emancipation manifests in the juxtaposition of the masses against these structures, painting a picture of the collective public sentiment.

Yet, the performance doesn't conclude with the creation of the cartoon. Olaniyan's perspective reminds us of the critical role of the audience in this performance. As the observers, interpreters, and reactors, the audience completes this trinity of performance, their varied interpretations adding further layers to the performance of the cartoon.

Hence, Tunisian political cartoons of the revolution are not merely depictions; they are performative dialogues, powerful stages where the revolution comes alive. They encapsulate the socio-political zeitgeist, reflecting the dreams, the struggles, and the indomitable spirit of the revolutionary era. These cartoons invite us, the audience, into the performance, compelling us to engage, comprehend, and participate in their quest for emancipation. They serve both as mirrors reflecting the revolutionary spirit and windows opening into the heart of the uprising. In essence, they beckon us to join the performance, to experience, engage, and embody the spirit of the revolution and its thirst for liberation.

## The Islamists and Democracy:



Figure 54: Chedly Belkhamssa *Democracy* 2011 Facebook

In the vast expanse of visual political commentary, the art of caricature demands an immediate and visceral response. Chedly Belkhamssa, a celebrated Tunisian cartoonist, crafts an image that encapsulates the tension between religion, particularly the rising tide of Salafism in Tunisia, and democracy. The image – a gigantic Salafist, his beard transforming into an unpredictable sea, on which a boat bearing the Tunisian flag, symbolizing democracy, precariously balances – is an audacious portrayal of the country's political climate.

The cartoon is a representation of the wave of Islamism that affected the country. Islamism as an ideology was a new phenomenon fueled by years of religious repression, and the capacious impact of religious TV shows on the population. Kasper Ly Netterstrøm asserts that.

Islamism is not a conservative ideology that takes the existing society as a model.

Islamism rejects the actual tradition of governments within the Muslim world such as the Ottoman and Safavid empires, dismissing both as “un-Islamic.” Islamism is an a priori ideology that wants to transform society according to a set of predefined ideas. In this regard, Islamism has many similarities with socialism and communism. (112)

The aspiration of the Tunisian Islamists of the Ennahda movement during the post-revolutionary period had always been the transformation of societies into the most conservative type of primitive societies, following the footsteps of the prophet Mohamed and his disciples in a literal way<sup>88</sup>. He adds that “Many of the protests against the Ennahda-led coalition in Tunisia were, for example, fueled by the opposition’s fear that Ennahda wanted to establish an Iranian-style theocracy” (112).

Interpreting the cartoon brings us to an intriguing contention found in the quote which posits that anti-Muslim and anti-Arab cartoons could be seen as hate crimes. Said’s “Orientalism” (1978) and Shah’s works (2017) are invoked to underscore the dangers of reinforcing stereotypical and prejudiced imagery. However, a deeper dive into the context of Tunisia, and the politics of cartooning therein, challenges this broad stroke.

Firstly, it is essential to situate Belkhamsa within the Tunisian framework. Following the rise of the Islamist Party and its perceived leniency towards religious fundamentalism, Tunisia experienced an unprecedented wave of religious zealotry. This shifted the landscape, making religious discourse not just about faith, but also about politics, control, and identity. Cartoonists,

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<sup>88</sup> Although Ennahda claimed to be moderates, the party was a strong ally to the Salafists who were generally more prone to violence during protests. Ennahda used them as a sort of parallel security apparatus on multiple occasions.

in response, have taken a more radical stance, sharpening their pencils not out of contempt for the faith, but as a critique of how it is wielded in the political realm.

By categorically branding such images as products of Islamophobia or Orientalism, we potentially undermine the nuances and resistances within Muslim societies. Muslim cartoonists, like Belkhamssa, critique from a place of intimate understanding, aiming not to vilify their faith but to challenge its political co-optation. Such self-reflexivity is not unique to Tunisia. Across Muslim-majority nations, artists, writers, and intellectuals have historically critiqued, satirized, and even lampooned religious figures and ideas, not out of irreverence, but out of a deep desire for introspection and progress.

Belkhamssa's cartoon, when seen in this light, is a visceral reaction to the turbulence in Tunisia's post-revolutionary period. The corpulence of the Salafist in the cartoon is not merely a dig at physicality but is emblematic of the overwhelming influence and reach of Salafism. The fragile boat of democracy, tossed on the waves of the Salafist's beard, is symbolic of Tunisia's nascent democratic journey, constantly at risk of capsizing under the weight of religious fundamentalism. Netterstorm maintains that "Islamist movements may make concessions against their will, purely for tactical and pragmatic reasons, but once these compromises have been made, they may affect the ideological position of the Islamists" (113)

The revolution and the dream of emancipation:

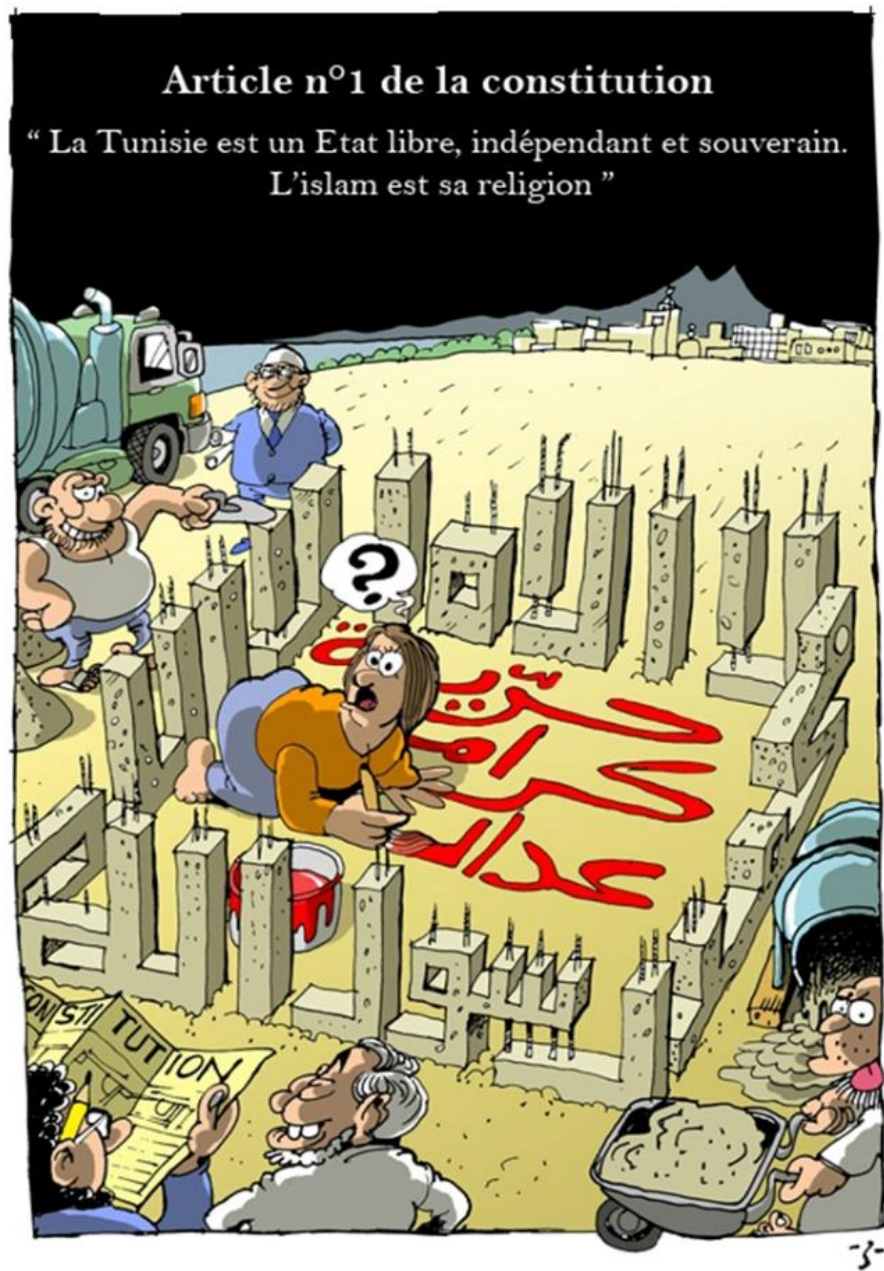


Figure 55...Z

The cartoon stands as a stark representation of the contested space of political discourse and identity in post-revolution Tunisia. At first glance, the focal points are clear: the woman, the

embodiment of the revolution's ideals, and the encroaching group of Islamists who seemingly threaten these ideals. Their actions appear to seek to redraw the boundaries of her discourse, encapsulating her demands within a religiously prescribed framework. A civil engineer seems to be reading the constitution, while the concrete structure is being built, and Rached Ghannouchi is observing the process.

Nicholas Mirzoeff in "How to See the World" observes that visual culture does not merely represent the world but helps constitute it, allowing us to shape and form our understandings and relationships to the world and each other. In this cartoon, the woman writing "freedom, dignity, and justice" represents not only the agency of the Tunisian people in shaping their own future but the broader feminist struggle for autonomy, rights, and recognition. This scene encapsulates a form of 'embodied resistance', a term coined by cultural anthropologist Daphne Patai to indicate the resistance against oppressive structures through bodily expression. Her act of writing on the ground is a form of embodied resistance against the systemic repression she has experienced. The woman's act of writing on the ground, set in the solitude of the vast landscape, symbolizes a moment of liberation, a personal space where she can express herself freely. However, the Islamists' deliberate choice to intrude upon this very spot, despite the expansive space around, underscores a poignant message about the infringement of personal liberties. Their presence in her chosen haven highlights a disturbing reality: even in places that seem removed from the confines of urban life, individual freedoms are not immune to violation. The Islamists constructing their religious structure around the woman can also be interpreted as a visual metaphor of the struggle between secular and Islamist forces in Tunisia's transitional democracy. The Islamist structure in this cartoon signifies not just the religious dimension of the

debate, but the ideological and political contestations that have marked Tunisia's transition since the Arab Spring.

The text referencing the first article of the Tunisian constitution translates to "Tunisia is a free, independent, and sovereign state. Islam is its religion.", which declares the state's religion as Islam, brings attention to the intersection of religion and politics in the country's constitutional framework. While it does not necessarily mean an Islamic state, it has been a contentious point, especially in the context of defining individual freedoms and national identity.

By using symbols and actions, the cartoonist demonstrates how the struggle for "freedom, dignity, and justice" is not a simple linear progression but one that is subject to interruptions and contests. The cartoon highlights the tensions that have marked Tunisia's democratic transition and the questions around the role of religion in the country's evolving political and social fabric. The interaction between the woman and the Islamists reflects the ongoing societal negotiations about Tunisia's future as a democratic state, and the role of religion in this process.

This cartoon illuminates a critical socio-political issue using artistic expression, aligning perfectly with Olaniyan's notion that art and performance are platforms for societal commentary and negotiation. As observers, we are invited to partake in this performance, to reflect upon the themes presented, and, in doing so, further enrich our understanding of Tunisia's complex socio-political landscape.



Figure 54: Mazhoudi (2013)

The cartoon under consideration, crafted by the talented Mazhoudi of the Tunisian newspaper “Assabah,” captures an intricate web of the post-revolutionary political climate in Tunisia during the early 2010s. The canvas, while ostensibly whimsical with its flying cows and festive backdrops, is charged with intense sociopolitical commentary. The flying cow, an animal traditionally revered and associated with bounty in many cultures, as the carrier of this cart is particularly intriguing. Is Mazhoudi suggesting that the political developments in post-revolutionary Tunisia were as unbelievable or miraculous as a flying cow? Or is he suggesting that the nation's politics is being driven by something unstable and unpredictable?

In this cartoon, Rached Ghannouchi and Beji Caied Essebsi are presented not only as individual politicians, but also as symbolic representations of the broader tensions in Tunisian

society – between secularists and Islamists. Their shared ride suggests a mutual dependence, despite ideological differences. Yet, Mazhoudi seems to allude that this coalition was not an equal partnership. The juxtaposition of the two figures, adorned in their party colors of red and blue, presents a visual harmony, but the undercurrents of their alliance were anything but harmonious. Mazhoudi introduces a nuanced level of satire by placing the two politicians on a cart that is emblematic of the revolution, alluding to Tarek Bouazizi's cart. Bouazizi was the street vendor whose act of self-immolation became the catalyst for the Arab Spring. By depicting the politicians riding on a symbol so closely associated with Bouazizi's protest and the ensuing uprising, Mazhoudi is infusing the image with irony. This choice suggests a juxtaposition between the politicians' current state and the revolutionary fervor that initially challenged the status quo, implying that the politicians are now co-opting or riding on the legacy of the very movement that may have once opposed them.

Olaniyan frequently highlighted the cartoonists' ability to simplify and amplify simultaneously, revealing the core of political tensions. Ghannouchi and Essebsi, known for their political acumen and cunning strategies, are not merely politicians here – they symbolize larger political maneuvers, strategic alliances, and the malleability of power dynamics. Their presence on the same cart implies an uncomfortable alliance, a merging of two distinct paths for a shared journey.

This cartoon utilizes a combination of bold lines, vivid colors, and dynamic composition to create a satirical image. Scott McCloud discusses the importance of the line as a means of expressing visual and emotional information. The lines in this cartoon are bold and confident, with a cartoonish quality that conveys a sense of whimsy and exaggeration. The lines are not aiming for photorealism but rather for an expressive, stylized depiction that's common in

political satire. The use of color in this cartoon is vibrant and attention-grabbing. McCloud notes that colors can be used to convey mood and emphasis, and here, the choice of bright colors against a darker background creates a striking contrast that draws the eye to the characters in the sleigh and the celebratory fireworks.

The backdrop of fireworks exploding to reveal the New Year 2014, combined with an Islamist with a grin donning a Santa hat, is replete with irony. It suggests that beneath the festivities and the façade of celebration, there's an underlying tension. The Islamist figure's mocking smile underscores the possible manipulative control the Islamists exerted in this alliance, thereby gaining a stronger foothold in Tunisia's political realm. The appropriation of the Santa hat, traditionally a symbol of Western Christian festivity, by an Islamist figure, serves as a satirical comment on how political figures co-opt symbols and narratives that best serve their agenda. Santa's image, synonymous with joy and gifts in popular culture, is juxtaposed here to show an irony. The “gift” of the revolution, while bringing hope, also brought along political compromises. Were these compromises, as symbolized by Ghannouchi and Essebsi's alliance, in the best interest of the Tunisian populace? Or were they mere political strategies to consolidate power?

## Female Cartoonists:



Figure 55: Nadia Khiari. *So, your pencil is a weapon?* Facebook

Nadia Khiari is one of the new artists who appeared in 2011 and followed the development of the Tunisian revolution through her collection of cartoons and chronicles; she proved to be a brilliant example of feminist artists who defend women's rights, and who bring to light issues of police brutality, religious fundamentalism, and gay rights. Her main character is a feline dissident called "Willis from Tunis" whose cynical tone and comments give him an amusing personality. On her beginnings with cartooning Nadia Khiari points out "When I started drawing this character I was anonymous, and people thought I was a man. My humor was perceived as masculine. I used a lot of vulgar words, because I talk like that. And I also got comments—that I'm macho, and that if I were a woman, I would never say these things. It was very funny."

This cartoon represents an example of her work, her thematic and stylistic choices are largely influenced by local and Western traditions of cartooning; the cartoons' main focus is not on the complexity of the image, but by simplifying this mode of communication. In this cartoon, the cat Willis represents the cartoonist herself, confronting four bearded cats holding weapons, evoking a sense of impending violence. The main idea of the cartoon is reinforced by the French text and displays how cartoonists feel threatened by fundamentalists who killed the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists<sup>89</sup>, especially after the emergence of terrorist attacks against foreigners and security officers. Willis the cat stands on the right, while the terrorists stand on the left; outnumbered and scared, he only holds a notepad and a pencil.

The artist creates this polarity to reflect the reality of the political and social undercurrents. The visual language employed in this cartoon projects the idea of fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. The link between images and words not only confirms the aesthetics of evil but it also gives it a penetrating voice. Political cartoons actively sculpt the political concept of evil rather than passively reflecting it. They wield images and words as tools to crystallize and sometimes oversimplify the enemy, guiding public perception and debate. By giving form and voice to "the enemy" through satirical representation, cartoons become participants in the contentious dialogue over political and moral landscapes. This interplay shapes the collective imaginary, assigning form to foes and arming viewers with a visual vocabulary to engage with complex ideological conflicts. As such, these cartoons don't merely reproduce existing notions of evil; they are a dynamic forum for the negotiation and construction of political adversaries within the social narrative.

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<sup>89</sup> This BBC article contains a detailed account of the attacks: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>

The discourse on evil within political cartoons extends beyond mere representation; it functions as a mechanism that both embodies and enacts societal values and biases. By presenting "evil" in a form that is tangible and recognizable, cartoons condition viewers' responses, molding 'evil' into an entity that should be opposed, ridiculed, or ostracized. This framing not only conveys what constitutes evil but also implicitly prescribes the appropriate emotional and moral reaction to it. Consequently, the concept of evil within this medium often overwrites nuance, compressing complex political and social issues into a binary of right versus wrong. In essence, political cartoons do more than depict—they actively participate in sense-making, instructing audiences on how to interpret and react to different aspects of societal life. This influence underscores the importance of understanding not just the portrayal of 'evil' in these works, but also the underlying intentions and effects of such portrayals on public perception and discourse.

By employing the image of bearded cats, the cartoonist communicates the typical image of the fundamentalist, without having to use a caricature of a person to convey the same idea. The use of animals in Nadia Khiari's work is deliberate because all the characters she uses are cats, who can talk and comment on the current affairs of Tunisia. In her work, Nadia Khiari uses French as her main language that she includes in her cartoons. This linguistic choice has to do with her upbringing, as a middle-class, highly educated woman, she uses French to reach a wider audience in Tunisia, and abroad. The iconography in this cartoon speaks volumes through its simplicity; the yellow represents a barren cultural/intellectual context, with opposition to the blue color that represents freedom and openness. A kamikaze explosive jacket, a stick, a sword, and a rifle are deliberately included to highlight the dangers of violence against all forms of artistic creations.

The cartoon prompts a reflection on the intricate relationship between images and language in political satire, and how they can serve as potent devices in the construction of political adversaries. Through the lens of political cartoons, we come to understand that evil is not only a philosophical or moral concept but also a political one, made tangible through the artist's pen. The visual caricature, when coupled with incisive words, doesn't just reflect societal views but actively contributes to shaping them, delineating the contours of "the enemy" or that which is to be resisted.

In terms of circulation, this cartoonist shares her work in local and international newspapers that are interested in Tunisian politics and society. In addition, “Nadia Khiari has collaborated with both Cartooning for Peace and the OMCT on different initiatives abroad. Preparations for the cartooning project in Tunisia, she told us, began well over a year ago as organizers coordinated with school and prison establishments” (Szakal, Nawaat).

In more recent works of hers, she worked on promoting a new proposal of a law that would guarantee equal inheritance for men and women. This is a big deal in the Arab world because women can only inherit half of what a man can get. Thus, the cartoonist, in Nadia Khiari's case assumes the activist's role in society, not only to advance popular culture, but also to educate and raise consciousness.



Figure 56: Dlog 2020

This political cartoon provides a satirical commentary on Tunisian President Kais Saied and presents a critique of his stances on various issues. The text at the top reads "Le président un homme épris de droit et de justice," which translates to "The president a man fond of law and justice." This statement sets a tone of high regard for law and justice, suggesting that these are values the president holds dear. However, the cartoon simultaneously contrasts this declaration with two of his positions depicted as balancing on his outstretched arms. On one side, it says "Pour la peine de mort," which means "For the death penalty," and on the other side, "Contre

l'égalité dans l'héritage," meaning "Against equality in inheritance"<sup>90</sup>. These contradictory positions indicate a complex approach to justice and legal rights, one that supports the ultimate legal punishment while opposing progressive policies regarding inheritance equality.

Dlog is a cartoonist who changes her style according to the situation. In the example above, she portrays the Tunisian president in a more realistic way, and the cartoonist focuses on the details of the face. The president's facial expression is stern and unyielding, which may reflect his firmness on these issues. The contrasting stances on the death penalty and inheritance laws present a nuanced picture: although he is described as a man of law and justice, his interpretation of these principles leads to positions that might be seen as traditional or conservative, possibly conflicting with international human rights perspectives.

The cartoon uses exaggeration, a common technique in caricature, to draw attention to President Saied's features, amplifying his expression to convey an attitude of sternness and perhaps intransigence. The exaggerated size of his eyes, in particular, may suggest a heightened sense of vision or insight, while the furrowed brows could imply deep concern or disapproval. Such exaggerated features are used to enhance the cartoon's communicative efficiency, making the subject's emotional state and character traits immediately recognizable to the viewer.

Color is used strategically: the background is a wash of pink, which is not a traditionally authoritative color, potentially indicating a contrast between the subject's austere policies and a more nuanced, perhaps softer or more controversial, backdrop of his presidency. The suit is drawn in a muted blue, a color often associated with stability and responsibility, reinforcing the

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<sup>90</sup> The Tunisian president Kais Saied killed the law project that attempted to give equal rights to women in inheritance. See this article by Marie Verdier “En Tunisie, le président enterre le projet d’égalité hommes-femmes en matière d’héritage”

image of the president as a serious figure. The balance scale metaphor created by the outstretched arms with opposing policies highlights the dichotomy in his stance on law and justice. The visual imbalance created by the differently shaped text boxes — one a rigid rectangle and the other an unsteady triangle — might suggest an inherent imbalance or tension in his positions.

The cartoon invites the audience to reflect on the nature of justice and how it can be variously interpreted by political figures. The portrayal of President Saied with the weighty issues in each hand suggests that his administration's legal philosophy carries significant consequences for Tunisian society. The cartoonist uses this visual metaphor to challenge the viewer to consider the implications of such policies and to question what truly constitutes law and justice in the context of contemporary Tunisian politics.

The President, catering to his staunchly conservative supporters, effectively vetoed the proposed law that sought to grant equal inheritance rights to women. This move was aligned with the views of his conservative base, which includes opposition from both men and women to the idea of equal inheritance. Despite the progress desired by many Tunisian women and activists for gender equality, the President's decision underscored the prevailing influence of conservative beliefs on the country's legal reforms regarding gender rights.

*L'assemblée des représentants du peuple, ou*  
**LA FOIRE AUX IDOLES**

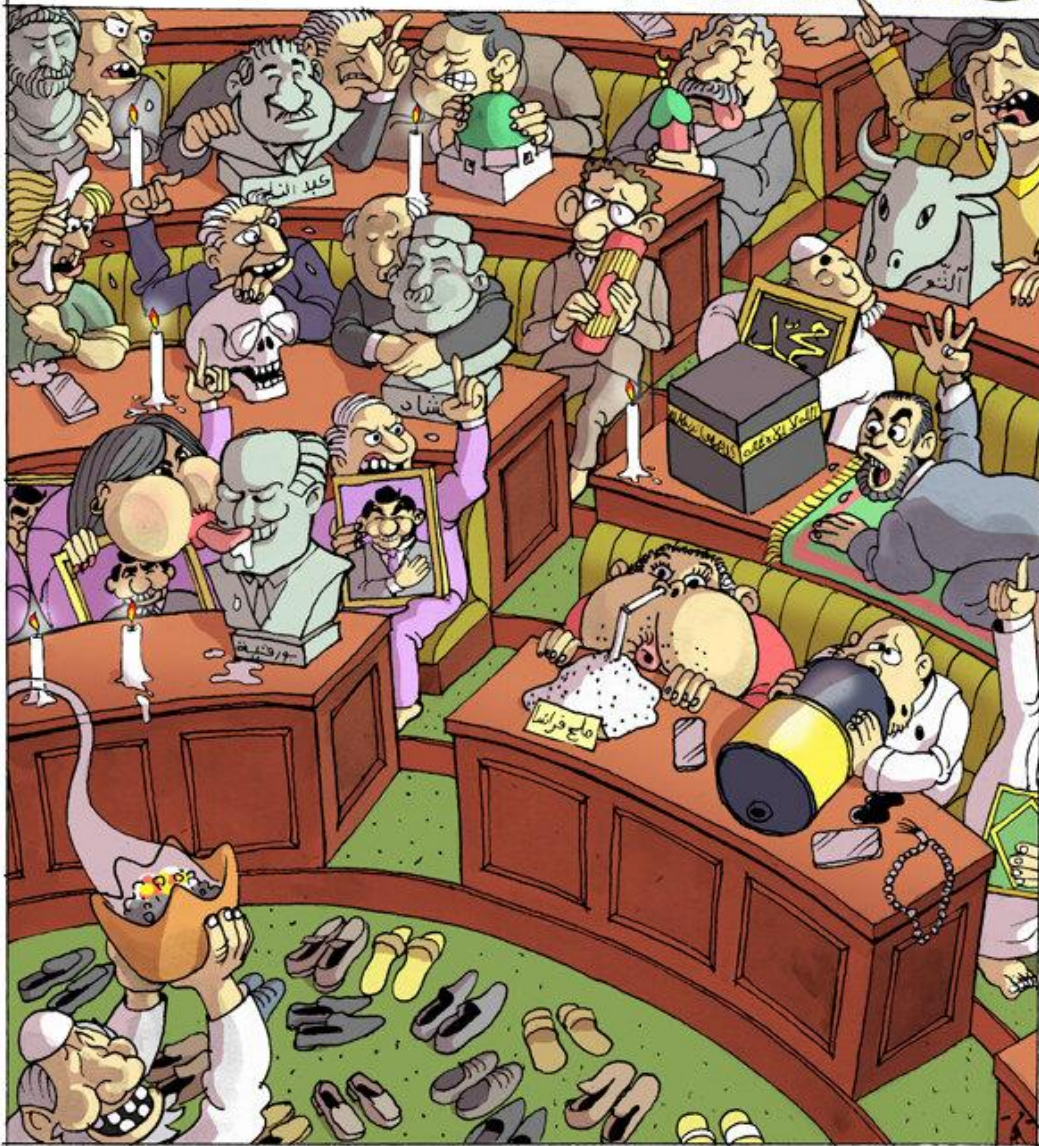


Figure 57: The Idol Fair, Z 2019

This cartoon by Z offers a satirical and critical portrayal of the Tunisian political scene after the Arab Spring, with the parliament depicted as "The Idol Fair" where politicians worship their own interests rather than serving the people. Each character in the cartoon is shown with an object or symbol that represents their particular vices or allegiances, painting a vivid picture of

individual self-indulgence and ideological fixation. On the floor, Rached Ghannouchi with a "Kanoun"<sup>91</sup> implies a traditionalist stance, and his position is reminiscent of an orchestra maestro, but what he brings to the floor is more "heat", signaling his inflammatory politics. The shoes scattered on the floor evoke the cultural practice of removing shoes before entering a sacred space, hinting at the sacrilege of turning the parliament into a marketplace.

The man guzzling from an oil barrel exemplifies gluttony for wealth and the natural resources that are often at the center of political greed. Adjacent to him, the man with a face resembling a buttock snorting "French Salt" critiques the exploitation of Tunisia's resources, such as the undervalued sale of salt to France. Abir Moussi, portrayed with a buttock-face and shown with tokens of both Habib Bourguiba and a portrait of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, is criticized for her nostalgic admiration for past authoritarian figures, highlighting her contradictory stances and associations with previous regimes.

In the center, a figure praying with four fingers raised evokes the Rabaa massacre<sup>92</sup>, expressing solidarity with the victims of state violence in Egypt. Nearby, an Islamist character is depicted with Islamic sacred symbols—the Kaaba and the name of the Prophet Muhammad—indicating a religious commitment that overshadows national interests. Other figures are shown with items that allude to personal interests or historical allegiances, such as a pack of spaghetti, possibly referencing the lack of basics, and a bust of trade union leader Farhat Hached, suggesting a clinging to past social movements that still have a foothold in society.

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<sup>91</sup> A Tunisian pot used to hold flaming charcoal, used for heating of small rooms.

<sup>92</sup> According to Human rights Watch "The Rab'a massacre, a likely crime against humanity, took place in Cairo on August 14, 2013, and kick-started a mass repression campaign targeting government critics, precipitating one of Egypt's worst human rights crises in many decades."

The man and woman with a skull and bone, respectively, hint at the darker elements of politics, perhaps involvement in violence or fatal political machinations. A woman sitting in front of a cow bust represents revolutionary symbolism, but her loud approach to politics is called into question. The sexually suggestive handling of a minaret and the small model of the Dome of the Rock indicate the misuse of religion and sacred symbols for personal or political ends. A bust of Gamal Abdel Nasser<sup>93</sup> suggests a nostalgia for pan-Arabism that might conflict with current political realities, while the figure with the bust of Hannibal evokes historical grandeur, potentially overshadowing contemporary concerns.

The style of the cartoon is rich in color and detail, featuring a lively and exaggerated form of caricature that is common in political satire. The artist uses bold lines and a wide-ranging color palette to differentiate characters and emphasize their unique attributes. Each character is drawn with a degree of hyperbole, accentuating specific features to convey their personalities and the vices or values they represent. The cartoon's composition is crowded and bustling, mirroring the chaos of a marketplace, which in this case symbolizes the congested and self-serving nature of the Tunisian political environment. The illustration style is not aiming for realism but instead uses distortion to capture the essence of each political figure and their ideological attachments, a technique that enhances the satirical message.

Through caricature and the inclusion of diverse ideological symbols, the cartoon is a critique of the Tunisian political class's perceived idolatry of their own interests and ideologies at the expense of true democratic governance and public service. Each character's attachment to their 'idol' serves as a metaphor for the various ways individual and factional interests have

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<sup>93</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian army officer who served as prime minister (1954–56) and then president (1956–70) of Egypt.

shaped the post-revolution political landscape, often undermining the ideals that ignited the Arab Spring.

In this vibrant single-panel cartoon, applying Tejumola Olaniyan's analytical framework<sup>94</sup> reveals a high degree of iconicity with exaggerated features and recognizable caricatures, satirizing Tunisian politicians' idolization of personal and ideological interests. The title "The Idol Fair" frames the visual narrative, where the detailed imagery laden with symbolic objects carries the main story, drawing the viewer into the chaotic marketplace of self-interest. The bird's eye view perspective places the audience directly into the scene, but also places them above all these politicians. The lack of multiple panels encapsulates a complete, complex moment, inviting viewers to piece together the frozen actions and bring their own interpretations to the fore, emphasizing the critique of political figures who prioritize self-service over public duty.

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<sup>94</sup> See Tejumola Olaniyan's article "The Tradition of Cartooning in Nigeria" where he explains this framework in detail.

# Images of Exploitation:

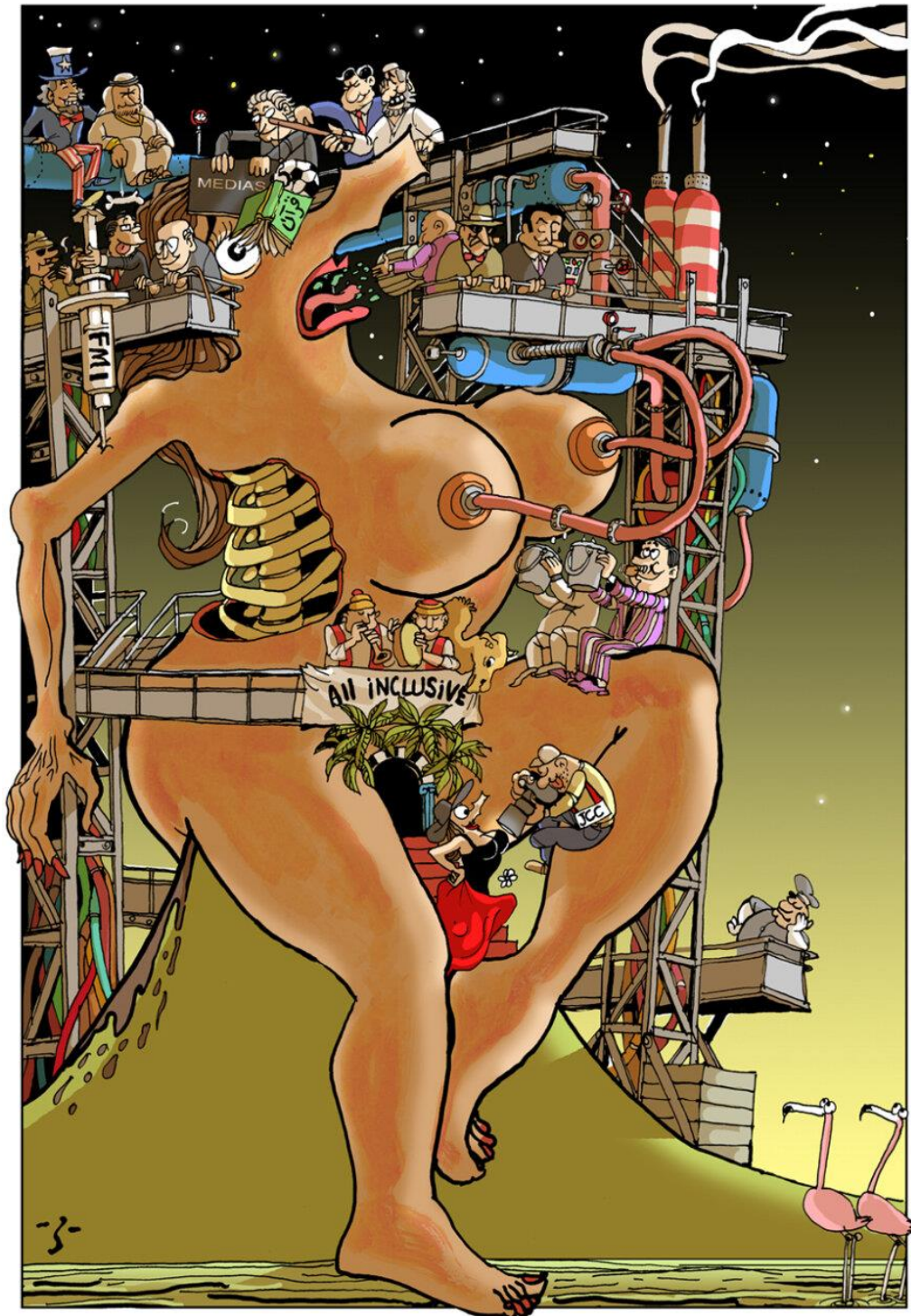


Figure 58: A portrait of Tunisia, Z, 2023 (debatunisie.com)

The cartoons themselves are not meant to be exact replicas of reality, but rather icons that capture the essence of a subject or idea. Z's cartoons, for instance, are distinguished by their visual opulence, with each panel containing unique caricatures that can stand alone as individual works of art. These cartoons evoke a range of emotions, from downright humor to tense, vivid imagery, often exploring themes of physical disintegration and psychological trauma. The ideological underpinnings of each cartoon are reinforced by every element surrounding it, further consolidating the artist's intent and message. For example, here Tunisia is represented as a large, reclining woman being exploited by various actors, both local and international. Z crafts a striking visual narrative that encapsulates his perspective on the nation's exploitation; the IMF (International Monetary Fund), represented by the initials "FMI" (Fonds Monétaire International), is seen drilling into the figure, an allegory for foreign economic influence and intervention. Political figures are depicted creating spectacles—a smokescreen to distract from the underlying issues—while select individuals milk the situation for personal gain.

This cartoon presents a harrowing image of Tunisia as a woman in a degraded state, seated atop a mountain with excrement flowing from her, a visceral metaphor for the exploitation and waste of the nation's resources. The visible bones on her back, with flesh stripped away, powerfully illustrate the extent of depletion and neglect the country suffers. The folklore band playing at a location that is sexually suggestive symbolizes how cultural festivities, such as the referenced Carthage Film Festival, can be used to distract the public and international observers from underlying socio-economic issues. This diversion tactic is a common theme in political satire, critiquing how entertainment is used to placate or obscure the grim realities of a situation.

The folklore band playing at a location that is sexually suggestive symbolizes how cultural festivities, such as the referenced Carthage Film Festival, can be used to distract the

public and international observers from underlying socio-economic issues. This diversion tactic is a common theme in political satire, critiquing how entertainment is used to placate or obscure the grim realities of a situation. Beneath the facade of festivity, opportunists with buckets represent those trying to capture whatever residual benefits they can from the exploitation, no matter how meager. The milking machine attached to the woman underscores the systematic extraction of Tunisia's assets, reducing the country to a mere source of wealth to be tapped. The sleeping police officer adds another layer of meaning to the scene, suggesting negligence or willful ignorance on the part of authorities meant to protect the country's interests. His slumber implies a lack of oversight and accountability, enabling the exploitation to continue unabated.



Figure 59: *The next step? Z*, 2024 (debatunisie.com)

This cartoon offers a poignant and satirical commentary on the political climate in Tunisia after the coup by President Kais Saied on July 25, 2021. It cleverly personifies the revolution as a beheaded bull, with the Arabic word for revolution, "ثورة" (thawra), containing the word "ثور" (thawr)—meaning 'bull,' symbolizing how the revolutionary spirit may have been decapitated or brutally compromised after the coup. The main title of the cartoon says, "Next

Step?" (La prochaine étape?) alluding to Tunisia, who is personified as a woman, next in line to have the same fate as the bull. The central figure in this cartoon is President Kais Saied who is portrayed with a plunger on top of his head, a symbol of stupidity and foolishness. The President shouts "The people want!" which is a populist slogan par excellence, and only reflects what a portion of Tunisians who voted for him (less than two million out of 7 million voters).

The juxtaposition of the text "Le peuple veut" (The people want), which was a slogan from Saied's presidential campaign, and the current scene of potential execution indicates a stark contrast between the promises of the presidency and the current state of affairs. The beheaded revolution, represented by the bull, might imply that the people's demands and the spirit of the revolution that brought Saied to power have been betrayed or undermined by the same hands that were once raised in support. However, his supporters are repeating the same slogan with a stern look on their faces. The guillotine is the instrument through which he beheaded the revolution, and possibly "Tunisia" who is next in line.

The spare yet moving language highlights the uncertain future in the wake of President Kais Saied's coup. It does this by posing questions such "The next step?" against a backdrop of a blind public reaction that is repeating the same campaign slogan. As a single-panel cartoon, it encapsulates the entire narrative in one potent image. This requires the viewer to bring in their understanding of the political context to fully grasp the implications of the scene, as it does not offer a before or after but a significant, charged moment. The perspective places the viewer within the crowd, creating an immersive experience, but the cartoonist himself, represented as the flying flamingo in the background seems to distance himself from the whole scene.

The ritualistic nature of repeating the words of the president is a comment on loyalty and the power of discourse. Kais Saied rewrote the Tunisian constitution by himself, arrested all the

Islamist leaders, and put all his political opponents in prison, effectively killing democracy and the revolutionary demands of a better future. From 2021 to 2024, President Kais Saied effectively neutralized all forms of opposition—be they politicians, artists, or journalists—through the strategic application of decree number 54. Furthermore, he harnessed social media platforms to disseminate propaganda, instilling fear by branding political figures as corrupt, compromised by Western influences, or as operatives for Zionism. Saied has resurrected the oppressive tactics reminiscent of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras, refining the mechanisms of a police state into a more resilient dictatorship bolstered by the unwavering loyalty and tacit approval of his followers.

## Conclusion

There are four challenges that the Arab Spring and its ongoing convulsions and transformations, have posed for Tunisian cartoonists. Some of the challenges appear as contrary pulls among or between directions, which creates disparateness both thematically and stylistically, and both within the corpus of a single cartoonist, and across bodies of work by different cartoonists.

The first of the challenges manifested itself as a common disequilibrium in the old tension between the conception of the political cartoon as art and as illustration. The political cartoon as Art is that cartoon with the greatest visual stimulation and widest metaphorical and sociopolitical resonance. Illustration, on the other hand, is that visually guileless and thematically transparent cartoon, one that merely indicates rather than stimulate the eye and the mind. These categories are subjective and questionable, especially scholarly speaking, but they are also real in many senses and the goal of every cartoonist is to create cartoons that would be acknowledged by peers and scholars as art. Granted, few cartoonists working anywhere really have the talent to consistently tilt that equilibrium toward art—which is the desired ideal, much less maintain a consistent balance—which would be a handy achievement in itself. But these are under more or less normal and normative conditions. In the context of the Arab Spring uprisings, a sizeable portion of the work of North African cartoonists—especially those who had to produce cartoons daily—has tended to be more of illustration than art. This is totally understandable, as work produced in the flaming kiln of an epochal crisis. Plus, in terms of effect, we hardly need to quibble over whether a cartoon is good or bad—the threshold for a cartoon’s attack to reach its target is very low, after all.

The second challenge is what I call the “documentary imperative.” Unlike most works of art, what gives political cartoons their sharpest edge is their topicality: that is, their

coverage of specific topics of interest located in specific space and time. In fact, this unique feature of political cartoons (it is not a feature of “cartoons” in general) is so taken for granted that it is always assumed. And political cartoonists have always obliged by using as subject matter the latest or hottest events right off yesterday’s headlines. But it is also the case that an effective political cartoon is not supposed to merely document; it is also supposed to provide a suggestive springboard for a contemplation of the future, that is, to be visionary. It is supposed to not just reflect but also refract its social context. The documentary imperative, so important as it is to the essence of a political cartoon, is supposed to be balanced by the contrary pull of “speculative imperative.” The tension here is related to that in the first challenge – the tension between the cartoon as illustration and as art – but is not at all collapsible into it.

The third conceptual issue is on geopolitics and ideology, and focuses on the representation of Europe and United States in the Arab spring cartoons. We know of the popular and infrastructural support and solidarity the Arab uprisings received from outside the region, particularly Europe and America. We also know that popular support apart, there were the official pressures by Euro-American heads of states on Arab leaders to speedily reform or leave. Even when politicians and opinion makers in North Africa and the Middle East call for some sort of pro-people rather than pro-regime Euro-American intervention in the crisis, they showed no doubt that Euro-America would do that only within what it figures would be in its best interests, short or long term. Given the longstanding suspicions of Europe and the US in the region, it has been revealing to follow the representation of Europe and America in the cartoons on the Arab revolts. That representation has, on the whole, been somewhat more equivocal than usual.

The typical critique of the US as lead oppressor, exploiter, anti-Muslim, and as blind defender of Israel, still remains, but the antagonistic edge appears dulled a bit, as attention has shifted more to a relentless critique of Arab states and their client status in relation to the US. The old “The West and Us” or the “West and the Rest” handle seems to be getting some dose of complication.

Finally, the fourth conceptual issue is the big issue of what the Arab spring revolts mean for women in the Arab world and gender relations generally. This has been a particularly major issue for several reasons. First, the uprisings are in the name, supposedly, of all fragments, all constituencies, of and in the nation. This is not by any declaration but by the nature of its emergence or eruption. Second, it is clear now that the implicit dominant understanding of the revolt by most of those right in the middle of it is that it is primarily political—that is, a struggle for reform in the political structures of governance in the society. Since the political realm is usually everywhere conceived as separate from the social domain of gender relations, the revolt was not expected by many to majorly restructure gender relations, and especially in a context in which women’s rights are still automatically stereotyped as foreign Western import. Third, political cartooning is in Africa and indeed everywhere an extremely male-dominated profession. By omission or commission, a benign and unreflective masculinism is deep in its DNA.

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