

Chapter 11

The October 2012 General Strike of the Tunisian Journalists¹

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The revolution of 14 January 2011 in Tunisia put an end to 23 years of authoritarian rule by the former president Ben Ali. The country has since then lived through a period of democratic transition during which it has tried to rid itself of the very heavy legacy of the old regime, by acquiring new political institutions and laying the foundations for a genuine rights-based state. A profound reform of the media and journalistic profession was also necessary to ditch old practices and old reflexes that have lasted for decades.

The election of a Constituent Assembly on 23 October 2011 allowed the Islamist party Ennahdha, banned for decades by the deposed regime, to obtain a relative majority. This enabled Ennahdha to form a provisional government with the help of two other parties – hence its name, the Troika. The head of government was Hamadi Jebali, one of the historical leaders of the Ennahdha party. The coming to power of a party of Islamist obedience literally divided the country into two camps. Most of the secular political and social forces feared that through its majority, Ennahdha, would choose to create a society far from the modernist aspirations to which Tunisian elites were much attached.

There were also concerns about Ennahdha's intentions to control the media, especially the public media, which it considered unfavourable to it. Unfortunately, these concerns were not unfounded or exaggerated. Upon taking power, Ennahdha attempted to control the public media, thus perpetuating the practices of the fallen regime. Various means were used to put pressure on journalists and editors to change their editorial lines, which led to growing tensions between the executive and journalists, led by the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT). The tensions quickly turned into a long and painful battle that culminated a year later, on 17 October 2012, in the first general strike of journalists in Tunisia. It was also the first general strike of the press in the Arab world.

What were the various stratagems and tactics used by Ennahdha to secure control over the Tunisian media? And what were the means of resistance of the journalistic

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body and civil society? Finally, how was the general strike of journalists used as the ultimate weapon in pushing back the Islamist government and forcing it to accept democratic rules and let the press play its role of fourth estate? These are the central questions which this research will try to answer.

Methodology

The main objective of this chapter is to provide an account of an episode that is considered a major event for professional journalists and press specialists in Tunisia. I will analyze its root causes and the immediate reasons for its triggering. I will also try to show that this strike was the ultimate answer to a methodical plan that was developed and applied for months by the Ennahdha party in order to domesticate public, and sometimes private, media.

To achieve this, I have used historical and documentary methodology. The best way to reflect past events and make them meaningful is to situate them in their political and social contexts while analyzing their underlying and immediate causes (Prost 1996). The researcher starts by collecting materials relevant to the research from the different available sources, and after conducting external and internal criticism of its sources, he or she proceeds to link historical facts by performing multiple cross-checking. In this quest for truth and this reconstruction of facts, the researcher must demonstrate intellectual honesty and ‘distancing and impartiality’ since absolute objectivity is impossible (ibid:228).

In this study, I have used four types of sources: print and online media content, in-depth interviews and testimonials, SNJT archives, and a number of reports published by the SNJT and other national and international NGOs. About 180 newspaper and magazine articles and news articles were consulted and communiqués from the Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP), the national news agency, were scrutinized. Public media were most used since they have tended, since 14 January 2011, to cover events in a balanced way. However, I also consulted the content of the private media in order to cross-check. The bulk of the analyzed content is available online.

In-depth interviews with a number of people, who had a direct or indirect relationship with the events, also allowed me to acquire valuable testimonies. In-depth interviews were conducted with two members of the SNJT executive board: Rezgui Ayman and Chakakou Mohamed. Both are practicing journalists. I also interviewed Bouriga Jamel, former editor-in-chief at Assabah newspaper, Atrous Essia, a journalist at Assabah newspaper, Khedir Jelmen Chadia, a journalist at National Television (ETT), Labidi Kamal, President of INRIC until its self-dissolution in 2012 and currently president of the Tunisian association, Vigilance, and Belaid Habib, former CEO of National Radio (ERT) and currently a member of the HAICA.

These in-depth interviews helped to understand a lot of facts and allowed me to carry out a great deal of cross-checking.

The SNJT graciously made available to us its private archives, including all the minutes of the meetings of the Executive Board, the expanded Executive Board and the ordinary and extraordinary General Assemblies. This gave me valuable insights into the events and enabled me to live from inside the role of one of the main protagonists in this conflict. Annual or episodic reports prepared by a number of official or civil society bodies have been of great assistance to us in obtaining documentary and statistical data. What is missing is the official archives of the administration and the state which are only consultable in Tunisia 30 years after the concerned facts.

The general strike of journalists, which is the subject of this research, took place on Wednesday, 17 October 2012. But the temporal extent of the study will cover almost a year, starting in October 2011 and ending in October 2012. This is necessary to understand the underlying reasons for the strike and the main points of discord between, on the one side, the provisional government which emerged from the 2011 elections and, on the other, the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) and the National Authority for Reform of Information and Communication (INRIC).

From January to June 2012, the incidents multiplied and tension between the two camps steadily increased. But the months of July and August 2012 were a real turning point in the crisis. Following a number of events and decisions taken by Lotfi Zitoun, Minister-Counsellor in charge of political affairs at the head of government, the SNJT became certain that Ennahdha would continue to apply its control plan to the public media. Escalation was therefore inevitable and the process of triggering the general strike of journalists commenced at the end of August 2012.

Legal vacuum and procrastination of the Troika

The two interim governments that had assumed office following Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia had taken some initiatives with regard to the press – especially two Decrees-Laws to regulate the media scene after the Revolution. Decree-law 115, on the freedom of the press, printing and editing, granted Tunisian journalists, for the first time, the same immunity as enjoyed by public officials in the exercise of their functions. Decree-law 116, meanwhile, concerned the freedom of the audio-visual media and created an 'Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication' (HAICA), a regulatory body for public and private media (see chapter 2 on the three countries). The government of Beji Caid Essebsi left the task of promulgating these decrees to the government that was to emerge from the elections.

However, after the victory of the Islamist party, it seems that Caid Essebsi was more inclined to think that there was much to fear for press freedom and free expression under a government dominated by Ennahdha, and that the Decrees-Laws constituted a guarantee against a possible temptation to seize public media (Labidi 2016).

The attitude of the government of Jebali with regard to the decrees-laws was very ambiguous if not outright contradictory during the first weeks. Hamadi Jebali had never

ceased to declare in public that he was for the freedom of the press and for the application of international standards on media law and ethics. But his entourage and his two advisers, Ridha Kazdaghli and Lotfi Zitoun, were less positive about press freedom. Their public utterances, particularly after February 2012, were not very reassuring. Zitoun finally declared that ‘the government has no intention of implementing the decrees-laws ... and will revisit them, insofar as they have not been the subject of the consensus of professionals of the sector.’ At a press conference, the INRIC denounced ‘the double language of the government’ and the ‘multiplication of contradictory and discordant statements’ (Dami 2012). Taking advantage of the declared hostility of the owners and directors of the television and radio stations (STDM), with regard to the details of the decree-laws defended by INRIC and the SNJT, Zitoun adopted the role of neutral mediator in order to achieve his purposes. He prepared ‘a National Consultation on the legislative framework for the information sector’ scheduled for 27 and 28 April 2012, only three days before INRIC was to present its final report. The conference was boycotted by key stakeholders, including journalists and their main representative, the SNJT (La Presse de Tunisie 2012a).

How can this inextricable imbroglio be understood? In retrospect, it seems that the information and communication portfolio escaped, in part, from the head of the government and became the informal prerogative of Lotfi Zitoun, who had the eye of Ennahdha’s leader, Rached Gannouchi, in Jebali’s cabinet. Ennahdha had an interest in adjusting these decree-laws and delaying their implementation for as long as possible. The party wanted to take advantage of the legal vacuum in order to appoint loyal men to the key positions in the main public media.

Appointments and attempts to control the public media

The Jebali government’s first change at the head of the public media occurred just ten days after taking office on 26 December 2011. Jebali announced, by a press release on a Saturday afternoon, the appointment of six general directors and directors and three editors-in-chief at three of the most important public media organizations: The national news agency Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP), Tunisian Television Establishment, and the SNIPE company, which publishes two daily newspapers, La Presse de Tunisie in French and Essahafa in Arabic (TAP 2012a).

This decision caused a general outcry among journalists, political parties and civil society. The SNJT expressed ‘its refusal of the mode of appointment’ by asserting that certain designated persons were ‘devoted servants under the despotic regime of Ben Ali and that others are related to corruption cases’ (TAP 2012b). INRIC took the position of ‘strongly denouncing these decisions’, considering them ‘a return to control and censorship practices and submission to the political diktat’ (TAP 2012c). Chokri Belaid, spokesman for the Democratic Patriotic Movement and one of the fiercest opponents of Ennahdha, meant that these nominations were ‘likely to make the media

simple propaganda machines' (Ben Brik 2012). A large protest demonstration was organized in place of the Kasbah, opposite the seat of the government, to express the protesters' refusal of any form of guardianship on information. The event brought together hundreds of journalists from the public and private media, representatives of civil society and parties and members of the Constituent Assembly (TAP 2012d). Artists, bloggers, trade unionists and ordinary citizens were also present (TAP 2012e).

At the end of this protest rally, talks were held between a SNJT delegation, chaired by Nejiba Hamrouni, and the government adviser, Ridha Kazdaghli. The meetings resulted in the cancellation of the appointments of the editors-in-chief of the two SNIPE newspapers and the director of information of the first channel of national television (La Presse de Tunisie 2012b).

Several indications suggest that Ennahdha did not consult its two allies in the Troika. Indeed, the spokesman of the Ettakattoul party, one of the Troika members, was among the protestors at the Kasbah and publicly condemned the actions of the government (Soueidi 2012). Neither *Congres pour la Republique*, CPR, Ennahdha's second ally, seems to have been informed, as an INRIC member revealed that 'the Authority has received several phone calls from allied parties of Ennahdha, they were not aware of these decisions' (African Manager 2012).

At the end of April, it was the turn of the National Radio to be absorbed by Ennahdha. On 24 April 2012, Habib Belaid, the CEO of the National Radio, learnt from his service driver (sic!) that a new CEO had been appointed in his place (Belaid 2017). To the astonishment of the journalists in the organization, it was discovered that the appointee was a technician who dealt with sound archives and with a service record that was far from brilliant (Sboui 2012). As it turned out, the new CEO stood close to the Ennahdha party and was appointed to the position in order to carry out the party's instructions. Not so surprisingly, there was widespread discontent that resulted in a series of resignations.

Propaganda, harassment and violence

Ennahdha had over time developed a very critical discourse with regard to the media. The media, it was said, inflated all the problems of the elected government and concealed all its achievements. A term often used in order to slander those accused of not being in favour of Ennahdha was 'the media of shame'.

These ideas, repeated endlessly by politicians and on social network sites, and even in mosques, generated an explosive mixture. Indeed, this discourse had been increasingly radicalized over time, growing into an incitement to hatred and violence.

A real strategy of harassment and destabilization of journalists developed, and several stratagems and means were used for this purpose, in particular dozens of Facebook pages. The phenomenon was so widespread that we began to talk about the 'Facebook militia' (Fouad 2012).

Many of these pages had a lot of resources and human resources, which suggests that they were not individual initiatives but the work of professional bodies. The Union of Journalists denounced the collaboration between Ennahdha and the people behind certain Facebook pages. (These 'Facebook reporters', really supporters of the new regime rather than journalists, attended press conferences and covered events that were boycotted by the real journalists.)

However, even more serious than the Facebook campaigns were the attacks on the journalists that were merely doing their job. The most exposed were those who carried out fieldwork, and were in direct contact with the public. Correspondents working in small provincial towns were also vulnerable because they were easily identifiable. From October 2011 to May 2012, the SNJT recorded 17 attacks committed by Islamist groups against journalists (SNJT 2012:13).

The sit-in at National Television (ETT) which lasted more than 55 days, during the months of March and April 2012, was typical in this respect. Tents and camp beds were set up at the entrance to the facility, and a daily supply of water and food was provided. Armed with megaphones, the Islamists began every afternoon to insult the journalists by calling them 'corrupt' and 'enemies of Islam'. Journalists, as well as visitors to the television station, were also harassed at the entrance and exit of the television station, and all was done with the knowledge of the police officers, who could not do anything because the prosecution had deemed there should be no intervention unless there was bodily harm and destruction of property (TAP 2012g).

Countdown during a hot summer

In hindsight, it can be estimated that the months of June and July 2012 were a turning point in the evolution of the situation. We saw the last elements that would contribute to the blockage and lead to the total confrontation between the two protagonists and the resultant general strike.

After having been alone on the political scene for many months, a serious competitor to Ennahdha appeared as the party Nidaa Tounes (Appeal of Tunisia) was born. Founded by Beji Caid Essebsi as a simple initiative in April 2012, it was officially launched as a political party in June 2012. Claiming to be social-liberal, Caid Essebsi considered himself above all a Tunisian nationalist and progressive. His goal was to create a 'front that would bring together a group of centrist and left-wing parties to participate in the next parliamentary elections' (Ben Abdallah 2011) and thus constitute a real counterweight to Ennahdha.

After holding its ninth congress in mid-July, the Ennahdha Movement started experiencing several problems: a decline in popularity in surveys and pressure by its allies within the Troika for a profound ministerial reshuffle and a more equitable distribution of portfolios.

But the most serious problem for Ennahdha was undoubtedly the deadline of 23 October 2012. This marked the end of the one-year mandate given to the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and the provisional government to both draft the new Constitution and organize legislative and presidential elections. Nothing had been done so far, and voices had begun to be raised demanding a government of National Union as soon as 'the legitimacy of the ballot boxes' came to an end on 23 October.

For its part, the UGTT, the main trade union in the country, which had had a role in the political life of the country since the struggle for national independence, launched in mid-June what was known as The National Dialogue Initiative. It was call for concerted action to reach consensual solutions to all the country's major problems during this transitional period (Assabah News 2012). At the beginning of October, the date of this Dialogue Conference was fixed for the 16th of the same month – one day before the date of the general strike of journalists which was fixed for 17 October (Al Asouad 2012).

In anticipation of a busy and disturbed comeback, in addition to the growing popularity of Nida Tounes, the Jebali government apparently decided to launch its assault against the public media during the summer season; a period when party political activity is on the back burner and public opinion was rather preoccupied by the summer holidays.

As usual, it was Lotfi Zitoun who was going to take care of matters. He chose to start the clean-up with the radio: on 2 July 2012, four national radio directors and four regional radio directors were changed at once, unilaterally and without consultation. He was questioned by some media about the reasons for the new appointments. He told them that they had been decided by the CEO of the National Radio, Mohamed Meddeb, who was appointed the previous April, and that the changes were within the government's prerogatives according to the laws in force (Weslati 2012). For Kamel Labidi, President of INRIC, these decisions were the straw that broke the camel's back. He decided on July 4 on the self-dissolution of the Authority proclaiming that, 'we refuse to serve as decor, simple showcase for the parade' (Belhassine 2012).

Zitoun was probably comforted by the fact that the radio appointments in early July had gone smoothly and not caused much noise or provocation. He chose the end of the month of Ramadan, the fasting month whose end is crowned by the Eid, to effect the changes at the head of the Tunisian Television Establishment (ETT) and Dar Assabah.

Despite some protests from journalists, the appointment of the new CEO of ETT, who knew the organization well since she had been director of its second channel since January, had not really posed big problems for Zitoun. It was completely different with Dar Assabah.

Indeed, its new CEO, Lotfi Touati, had the perfect credentials to unite everyone against him and trigger a deep crisis within the company, sparking sit-ins, hunger strikes and street protests. Touati was previously deputy editor-in-chief at *Le Quotidien*, a French language newspaper which is part of the Al Anouar stable, and after

2011 he had discreetly rallied the Ennahdha ranks (Kalima 2012). Touati's aggressive attitude and provocative decisions did nothing to calm the situation. He dismissed the editor-in-chief, Bouriga, and appointed in his place a person previously dismissed for gross misconduct. Outside collaborators known for their critical attitudes towards Ennahdha were prohibited from continuing to publish their articles in Dar Assabah's three newspapers.

The protracted conflict, which lasted more than 50 days, mobilized public opinion and civil society and national and international organizations concerned with press freedom (Atrous 2016).

Zitoun against all

Nejiba Hamrouni, President of the SNJT, responded quickly to the appointments and called for an extraordinary general assembly of journalists for 24 August 2012. About 700 journalists were present, and the principle of the general strike got unanimous support (SNJT Archives 2012a).

Once the strike was publicly announced by the SNJT, Lotfi Zitoun promised a 'total and open war' against all those he suspected were his 'enemies'. Zitoun used all means to scare and even terrorize those who criticized him or criticized his decisions (Rezgui 2016). He first threatened to publish a 'black list' of corrupt journalists who were compromised with the old regime. He then organized a campaign on Facebook in protest against the Jebali government's lax attitude towards 'the enemies of the revolution' and the losers of the elections 'that spread on the media and on Facebook unfounded, lying and humiliating rumours' (Business News 2012). He subsequently called for a series of demonstrations in Tunis and in provincial towns. Always present at these popular meetings, Zitoun harangued the crowds present, and repeatedly attacked 'the media of shame and corrupt journalists' (Le Temps 2012).

This pressure and continued agitation stimulated a protest movement against Zitoun, not only among journalists, but also among politicians, NGOs and civil society in general. This period of extreme tension convinced the SNJT that the situation was blocked and there was no hope that the government would make concessions. This pushed Hamrouni at the end of September to confirm the strike order for 17 October 2012 (Chakakou 2016).

A few days later, and following a meeting of the President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) with the head of government in the presence of Zitoun, things changed dramatically. After this meeting, responding to journalists who had asked him if the problems of the journalists were to be resolved and if the appointed CEO of Dar Assabah was to be dismissed, Zitoun replied that 'all solutions are possible' (Alfajr News 2012).

IFJ pressure was not the only cause of this sudden change. It is now known that there were deep discrepancies between Jebali and his advisor, and that Zitoun had managed

media policy on his own. During a meeting in early September 2012 which brought together Jebali, Zitoun, Ghannouchi, the President of Ennahdha, and some members of the party, there was a violent quarrel between Jebali and Zitoun. Jebali allegedly blamed Zitoun for mismanaging the press policy and corroding the relationship with journalists and asked him to dismiss the CEO of Dar Assabah in order to calm the situation. The latter refused, supported in this by Ghannouchi (Ben Hamadi 2012).

What was the reason for the change that took place in the meantime? It seems that the attack on the US embassy and the burning of the nearby American school on 14 September, which left four dead among the Salafist attackers, completely upset the situation. At that time, according to recent statements by Jebali, there was a real threat of American withdrawal from Tunisia (Negueze 2016). This probably gave Jebali more arguments to impose his point of view and to make concessions to journalists. He was aided by pressure from the two Troika allies who were demanding a quick solution to this problem in view of the date of October 23, feared by all three parties.

The epilogue: The general strike of Tunisian journalists

The executive bureau prepared the practical details of the general strike and informed journalists in the various public and private media. The journalists had been called to their media outlets without working, and then assembled at 1 pm at the headquarters of the SNJT. It was expected that the print and online media would not cover any current events. The television and radio stations would limit themselves to news headlines focusing on the strike. As far as the TAP Agency was concerned, it would only cover important information and releases (SNJT Archives 2012b). A systematic work of information and communication was carried out with the journalists of the different media to explain to them in detail the modalities of the strike (Chakakou 2016).

17 October was a beautifully sunny day. People started gathering at ten o'clock in the morning in front of the SNJT headquarters. As the hours passed, the crowd grew to such an extent that car traffic became impossible at times. All ages and all conditions were represented. There were a lot of journalists, of course, but there were also many familiar politicians, many representatives of civil society, intellectuals and artists and ordinary citizens. There was also a significant presence of Arab and international organizations, notably the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which was represented by its Secretary General and the Arab Federation of Journalists (FAJ) represented by its Vice President. The latter said that journalists from 320 media outlets, affiliated to his organization, had observed an hour long strike that day, in solidarity with their Tunisian colleagues (Rezgui 2016). The representatives of the main NGOs related to the press field, were also there. Moreover, the strike was widely publicized internationally – dozens of foreign journalists and television crews came to Tunis to cover the event (Chakakou 2012). This international support far outstripped

journalistic circles. Some diplomatic circles accredited in Tunisia expressed more or less openly their support for the strike.

A multitude of banners celebrating the freedom of the press and the will to move forward, were deployed. Slogans supported the struggle of the Dar Assabah hunger strikers and declared a determination to see all demands accepted and endorsed by the government. The most urgent concerned implementing Decrees-Laws 115 and 116 and the HAICA, respecting editorial independence and the non-use of unilateral appointments.

By the middle of the day, the first counts of the signed lists of the strikers already gave figures exceeding 90 per cent and it did not fall below this level. At the National Television, a minimum service was respected, consisting of a few news flashes written very briefly and presented in voice-over, focusing mainly on the strike and its causes. Several talk shows were presented on that day of 17 October and they discussed the problems of the Tunisian press and its future. It was the same for public and private radio stations in the capital and the different regions of the country. The TAP agency also scrupulously respected the strike and published only a few dispatches concerning the event. The online information sites also displayed the strike slogan and published only some information about the events of the day.

The next day, Thursday 18th, there were few newspapers and those that appeared took the form of very light editions with a very limited number of pages and the content was dedicated exclusively to the strike and the problems of the press and journalists in Tunisia (SNJT Archives 2012c).

This general strike of journalists, which was a first in Tunisia and throughout the Arab world, was an opportunity for Tunisian journalists to unite around the ideal of the defence of a newly-won freedom of the press, defying a power determined to return to old practices.

This fierce struggle of journalists led by their union, which lasted for almost a whole year and was concluded by this general strike, had some concrete results. In a laconic and unclear press release, the government announced its decision to implement the Decree-Laws while regretting that the SNJT took the decision to carry out its strike threat despite the promises given (Ben Hédi 2012). Some officials, including, Lotfi Touati, were removed. The audiovisual regulatory body HAICA was created. But many other problems remained unresolved. This largely explains why a second general strike of journalists took place, less than a year later, in early September 2013.

Conclusion

In retrospect one can draw some conclusions and have a fairly faithful image of the year's events and twists and turns. This is thanks to some information that has been communicated by prominent figures who have since left the political scene, in addition to leaked information. One can put together this chronology of events despite the

absence of Tunisia's official archives and those of the principal protagonist, Ennahdha.

Ennahdha, and especially its hard wing, had on its accession to power a pre-established plan to clean up the public media sector of all the elements that it considered hostile towards it. It would seem that the minister-counsellor, Zitoun, who was supported and protected by Rached Ghannouchi himself, took possession of the press policy from the very beginning of the Troika government.

However, Zitoun seems to have underestimated the potential resistance of the journalistic body, and the unprecedented mobilization of the journalistic body was the main factor that finally forced Ennahdha to retreat. Here, a determining factor was the President of SNJT, the late Nejiba Hamrouni. Her integrity, commitment, deep belief in freedom of the press and unbridled combativeness, at the expense of her private life and even at the expense of her own health, were important reasons behind the positive outcome of the crisis.

This strike constituted a strong signal addressed by journalists to those in power. It declared that they would defend, by all possible means, the gains they had obtained. They also understood that nothing was gained once and for all, and that other battles would be necessary in the future – freedom of the press is an everyday struggle.

Note

1. In memory of the late Nejiba Hamrouni, President of the SNJT, who dedicated her short life, so rich in fighting, to freedom of the press and expression.

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