

Since January 2008, the people of the urban and resource-rich Gafsa Governorate, located in the Republic of Tunisia's southwest, have been living in a continuous state of agitation. Many factors have contributed to the unrest in this area, which is located between the high steppes and the Sahara Desert. Despite Tunisia's ample natural resources, great poverty exists, which has been exacerbated by increasing food costs. But the number-one issue that provoked the area's inhabitants to take action against the status quo was corporate and government corruption.

Unrest in Gafsa Basin

In late 2007, the state-owned Gafsa Phosphate Company (*Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa*) held an employment competition for white-collar positions that were opening up within the company. After Gafsa made the results public, many citizens concluded that the examination standards for these jobs were fixed. Rejected applicants, along with other citizens, accused Gafsa of conducting a competition that lacked even the most basic standards of transparency, probity and neutrality. They further accused local officials of collaborating with Gafsa to carry out the scheme.

Soon after, the town of Rdeyef erupted in protest, and the unrest spread. A great number of people organized open sit-ins on the roads leading to the company's gates. Protesters also blocked the railway the company used to ship phosphate. Poor and marginalized Tunisians crowded onto other streets and public areas to protest against both the company's administration and the local authorities.

The protest grew to embrace other social justice issues that were seen as connected to governmental economic policies, issues whose roots go all the way back to Tunisia's independence in 1956. Men and women, old and young, graduates and illiterates, workers and unemployed, along with teachers, peasants, syndicalists and jurists, all met in the streets to chant slogans and call for reforms.

Little by little, the protest developed and varied in unprecedented fashion. The widows of mineworkers who had died from on-the-job diseases without receiving the least compensation joined to hold hunger strikes until their demands were met. Marches accompanied by tire burnings became numerous.

Other needy families pitched tents near public administration buildings and along the road leading to the railway. They remained there day and night in the hope that justice would be done.

The Gafsa Mine Basin has suffered from dire poverty for decades. According to official statistics, Tunisia's overall unemployment rate is 14 percent. However, the Gafsa Basin suffers disproportionately: The unemployment rate in the city of Moulares is 38.5 percent; in Mdhylla, the rate is 28.4 percent; in Snad, 28 percent; and in Rdayef, 27.7 percent.

The Committee of Support of the Gafsa Mine Inhabitants formed and issued the following demands:

- Job creation for college graduates, who make up 50 percent of Tunisia's unemployed workers.
- Government creation of huge industrial projects to employ the jobless.
- Gafsa Phosphate Company adherence to international treaties concerning the environment, based on rules requiring those responsible for environmental damage to pay compensation.
- Guaranteed availability of necessary public amenities, such as electricity and drinking water, in the Gafsa region.

The Authorities React

Tunisian authorities at first showed a great deal of intelligence and self-control, despite their reputation for overreacting to previous protests by students, politicians, lawyers, syndicalists, and other groups. Security forces avoided any form of confrontation with protesters and showed they were aware delicacy and difficulty surrounding the issues. Authorities showed a desire to take a different approach from the one they had taken during the last 20 years in other ways as well.

However, three months after the protests began, authorities realized that the crowds were not going to fade away entirely (even after some sit-ins disbanded following negotiations). The authorities finally ran out of patience after the storming of a police station in the heart of Rdayef by an unknown group who vandalized police equipment. At the point, they turned back to their old habit of using force.

On Monday, April 7, 2008, huge numbers of security forces invaded Rdayef and arrested protest leaders, including Adnane Hajji, spokesperson for the Gafsa Basin protest. (Hajji was also a regional syndicalist leader who was fighting corruption in the powerful national trade union *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*.)

The people saw the authorities' actions as an unfair punishment directed against everyone. Instead of sowing fear and ending the protests as expected, the actions worked as a unifying force, leading to even stronger resistance. The authorities quickly backed down, releasing protest leaders the following Thursday, April 10, without taking further legal action.

The protests continued, and soon there were casualties. A youth named Hichem Alaymi died on May 7 during the forcible expulsion of workers who were staging a sit-in at an electrical station. A month later, on June 6, Hafnewi Maghzawi was shot in the back and killed during confrontations between protesters and police. At a press conference held that very night, Bechir Takkeri, Tunisian minister of justice, declared that the shooting was in response to protesters who had been throwing Molotov cocktails. This explanation failed to convince those who had witnessed the event.

On the night of Saturday, June 21, Adnane Hajji was again arrested, along with hundreds of others. More than 140 protesters were charged with offenses; some of them were convicted and sentenced to jail terms. On October 30, 23 young men who had served the majority of their sentence for their part in the protests — which varied between two and four months — received a presidential pardon. Nevertheless, Adnane Hajji and 37 others remained under arrest. They went to trial on December 4, accused of “forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property.”

Then, on December 11, the Gafsa court sentenced 33 trade union activists and protesters to prison terms of up to 10 years on charges of “armed rebellion and assault on officials during the exercise of their duties.” Among those charged were a journalist and a French human rights advocate. Police reports noted that the journalist, Fahem Boukadous, sent video footage of the protests to his TV network in Tunis, even though he had not actually participated in them. He was sentenced in absentia to six years in prison.

Amnesty International has called on the Tunisian government to order an independent investigation into allegations of torture and other abuses committed by security forces responsible for quelling the protests. Amnesty International further reported that “serious violations of fair trial standards have been committed. The trial raises yet again questions as to the independence of the judiciary in Tunisia and shows Tunisian authorities' determination to quell any independent voices inside the country.”

Petitions against Corruption

Protests against endemic corruption are not new in Gafsa. On an earlier occasion, protesters circulated an open petition that denounced as fraudulent the results of a teacher-recruitment program. The petition appeared in Tunisian Internet newsletters such as Tunisnews and urged authorities to investigate alleged abuses committed by former Minister of Education Sadok Qorbi, who stands accused of corruption and abuse of power.

On March 20, 2008, the 52nd anniversary of Tunisia's independence, a number of activists again petitioned the government, this time to create laws to fight corruption and return rights to citizens while guaranteeing respect for the constitution and laws.

This petition, entitled A National Application against Corruption, contained several accusations and protests.

- It accuses a number of individuals of exploiting their kinship with Tunisian President Zinelabidine Ben Ali in order to amass personal fortunes from public funds. (These individuals are mostly the president's in-laws from the Trabelsi and Matri families.)
- It protests increasing incidents of bribery in various areas. The absence of such principles as equity, equality of opportunity and transparency in public dealings, and the illegal awarding of positions to government supporters. These are the kinds of political patronage that place loyalty over competence and that helped spread hatred and anarchy in both public and private institutions.
- It articulates the signers' frustration over the justice system's abandonment of its duties and the absence of an authority that would both guarantee respect for law and ensure citizens' feeling secure in themselves and in their property.
- It declared that the current conditions of corruption could no longer be tolerated. It warned that despotism, along with the absence of any authority opposing it, could cause Tunisia's citizens, especially its young people, to turn away in despair from peaceful actions to extremist reactions.

The signers affirmed they would resist corrupt practices with every possible peaceful and legal means until they achieved their goals. They also urged those victimized by corruption to defy their fear and stand up for their rights. It declared that erasing the culture of fear and creating one its place, based on peaceful resistance against despotism, was the only way to achieve democratic change.

Young Businessmen Express Concerns

On Thursday, December 4, 2008, in association with the Adenauer Stiftung Konard Company, the Young Managers' Office, which is connected with the Tunisian Union of Industry and Commerce, hosted a day of study they called

Management Conditions and Environment Exploitation from Young Managers' Point of View. One study, presented by university researcher Professor Karim Ben Khala, reported on a number of issues that other international organization reports, including the Dafus Economic Forum, insist on ignoring, such as the condition of Tunisian institutions. The study stated that these other reports also fail to pay the least attention to the concerns of young managers in Tunisia.

Study-day participants strongly protested the corruption, patronage and lack of transparency that threatens to undermine public institutions and the administrative apparatus. They discussed how unethical treatment of workers by their employers can create feelings of despair and discourage other young Tunisians from entering the workforce.

Tunisia faces many crucial challenges, but its citizens are convinced that by bringing about a democratic and open political system that guarantees more freedom and transparency, they can better secure their country and protect it from the forces of religious fundamentalism and from interference by powerful neighbors.

