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... in Tunisia

“*Weldek fi darek!*” *The return of the Supreme Combatant*

By JOACHIM BEN YAKOUB

Page | 105

Not long after its official inauguration, two rebellious students tag the marble pedestal of the legendary equine statue of first president of independent Tunisia. Ghassen Bouazzi, head of the syndicalist student movement and Hamza Nasri, activist of the Popular Front, adorn the foot of the presidential sculpture with the phrase *weldek fi dārek* (“Your children should stay in your house”) and added *we-nsībek zēda* (“and your brother-in-law too”). #weldekfidarek is only recently going viral after the catchy three word slogan was first thrown in the Parliamentary Assembly for the renewal of trust in the government Habib Essid by one of the deputies of the Popular Front [[↗Social Media](#)]. It is a direct message to president Beji Caid Essebsi not to favor his son Hafedh’s accession in political life as head of ‘Nida Tunes’. The complementary phrase referring to the brother-in-law, is meant for Youssef Chahed to question his potential nomination as head of the government of National Unity. The graffiti action echoes the griefs of a growing part of the population, apparently fed up with the seemingly persistent regime nepotism, now hiding behind a veil of historicity [[↗Manīsh msāmīh](#)]. Bouizi an Hasri are eventually arrested for vandalizing the statue and accused of offense against the head of state, but the Court eventually dismisses their case [[↗Court Trials](#)].

On a regular working Tuesday morning in May, commuters and passers-by on Bourguiba Avenue bump into a new statue in front of Ministry of the Interior in Tunis [[↗Downtown/Centre-ville](#)]. Still packed in plastic, it shows the contours of a recognizable and familiar form. It surely is not any statue, but thé triumphal equine statue of Habib Bourguiba, once displaced by Ben Ali to the port town in the Northern suburb of Tunis. As promised during the presidential elections and as he already stated seven years before in his visionary memoir “Habib Bourguiba: the wheat and the chaff”, Beji Caid Essebsi, the first elected president in post-revolutionary Tunisia, brings back the father of the nation in the center of public attention. The equestrian statue is effectively unbolted and removed from its previous location in La Goulette, where it stood for 29 years. As commuter can see with their own eyes, the statue now stands in front of the Clock Tower, on exact the same place as once thousands of protesters stood demanding the departure of Ben Ali [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#)]. It is not sure if—with the benefits of hindsight—the masses would converge again to wipe out the autocrat. As *7 views*, a clever documentary by Lilia

BLAISE and Amine BOUFAIED convincingly shows, it did not take long for a considerable part of society to publicly express their regret to have ousted their president and to admit their nostalgia for the times before the revolution, when Zine El Abdine was leading the country as a firm but fair leader. Seen from this vantage point, the return of the ‘Supreme Combattant’ is a strategic move. After all, there can be only one *pater familias*.

The return of the image of Bourguiba does not come as a surprise. Most people notice how, since the presidential elections, the new president of the republic assimilates different features of the “Eternal Leader”. He adopts a same form of speech, rich in popular proverbs, altered by sporadic Koranic verses, often time using sharp and applicable allegories, always spiced with a subtle sense of humor. Even his looks, especially the glasses and his body language reminds that of his predecessor, making the same gestures, particularly with his hands. To manage the massive protest in the region of Kasserine and beyond after the cruel death of Ridha Yahyaoui, the president makes a curious appearance on public television [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#)]. Everybody can see that the presidential address is filmed from exact the same decorative setting as Habib Bourguiba speech that contained the bread revolt in 1984. Now, to contain the riots that followed unfulfilled employment promises by the government in Kasserine but spread again all over the country, the president is addressing the people sitting behind the same desk, with the national flag on his left and in front of the same classic brownish map of Tunisia framed in leather with golden stars. Different memes are spreading across social media, mocking “Bajbouj” his unabashed mimicry. The most viral diversion comes from Anour L. who pastes a “Confused Travolta” in the historical setting and created an animated GIF making John Travolta wonder how history could repeat in such literal sense over a period of only 32 years [[↗Present = Past \(Stuck\)](#), [↗Social Media](#)].

Different politicians, artists and activists are annoyed by the decision to reinstate the Bourguibist imagery, supposedly unbecoming the context of growing marginalization and revolt [[↗Affluence vs. Destitution](#)]. Mohamed Abbou (Ex-CPR and founding member of the “Democratic Current”) is one of the first politicians to publicly contest the return of the image of the ‘Father of the Nation’ and proposes to launch a contest for artist to imagine a monument that would symbolize “the end of dictatorship”. Architect Ahmed Zaouche endorses that proposition as it should mobilize the whole city in a democratic way through an extensive consultation. Under the title “One of the most important achievements” a certain Malek Feki uploads a series of digitally altered images of the concerned equestrian statue, so it salutes from atop of a garbage pile in the city center, in the middle of a street blocking the way of a congested bus, on the roof of a concrete container school, somewhere in the South of the country in a desert in the background of a hungry Bedouin family or somewhere in a city as witness to flooding streets [[↗Social Media](#), [↗Alsh](#), [↗Affluence vs. Destitution](#)]. In Feki’s collage, Bourguiba is no longer proudly saluting ‘his’ people, but real social and environmental issues. The series resonates with the critique by Rym Thairi of the ‘Mahaba Current’. In the ‘Assembly of Representatives of the People’, Thairi condemns the monumental intervention as unjustifiable, trivial, futile and even counter-revolutionary symbolic politics. Taking into account the precarious socio-economic condition of the country, it would neglect what he considers the real preoccupations of the people [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#), [↗Affluence vs. Destitution](#)].

On the other hand, according to an op-ed written by architect Moncef Kamoun on the Kapitalis website, Bourguiba is today, even without its equine statue, more present and more alive than ever before. Bringing the equestrian monument back to its original place is therefore the least you can do as a recognition to “one of the few true modernist references” in an “Arab world that is looking to the past and haunted by the forces of death”. Renown Professor Mohamed Kerrou also writes in the Huffington Post, that the political use and rehabilitation of the charisma of the ‘Father of the Nation’ can be understood as a form of resistance to the “Islamist and populist threat” engendered by the Troika before the elections. The popular historian Kmar BENDANA joins the debate with a contribution in *Le Quotidien d’Oran* and states that the return of the Bourguibist imagery is the logic consequence of the ubiquitous “present absence” of Tunisia’s former leader in the last two decennia. When Ben Ali took power in 1987, Bourguiba was put on house arrest, from the day of the coup until his death April, 6th 2000. The regime not only removed every reference to the legacy of the former president, it also actively silenced Neo-Destourian partisans and Bourguiba loyalists. His 17 yearlong permanent isolation and abandonment passed without public opposition, until the day of his death. His coffin, embellished with a portrait depicting him as an old sick man, was carried from Tunis to Monastir in the belly of a purple plane stamped with a “November 7” logo, referring to the official regime imagery praising “the change” Ben Ali allegedly brought to the country. The funeral was not even broadcasted on national television. In short, the death of “The Father of the Nation” was never properly mourned over. Bendana thus argues that this unchallenged abandonment still carries its repercussions today, enhancing a feeling of guilt, remorse and frustration over the fact the Zaïm never really received a rightful place in national history. In an unexpected post-revolutionary context lacking clear leadership, this discontentment only reinforces the general appeal to Bourguibist symbolism.

Evoking an ounce of the legacy of Bourguiba during “The Era of Change” was indeed unthinkable and nearly considered a form of treason [↗ **Freedom vs. Constraint**]. During the autocratic times of the Ben Ali regime, different artist nevertheless engaged with the imagery of the “Father of the Nation” as a form of dissent. The photograph of the de-located statue of Bourguiba in La Goulette, central in Faten Gaddes’s series “La Rue” exposed at the Ammar Farhat art gallery in 2009, not only shows the regime’s wish to eradicate the historical event of national return in 1955 that the statue represents, it also sensibly illustrates the ongoing process of irreverent demarcation. The image of a bronze Bourguiba sitting on the back of his horse, apparently standing on the dilapidated and nearly collapsing construction site in La Goulette instead of the marble pedestal, is also testimony to the expropriation of some long-time residents of what was once known as Tunisia’s Little Sicily for the benefit of lucrative real estate projects closely connected to the regime [↗ *Ashwā’iyyāt*]. The graffiti stencil of Wassim Ghoslani (2002), the Warholian screenprints of Bassem Jelali, the speed-painting of Selim Tlili (2010) or the painting of Mehdi Bouanani (2010) also show the dissidence engrained in the reproduction of Bourguiba’s portrait during the Ben Ali Era. Mehdi Bouanani, for instance, crossed the border of political sensibility with his painting of different portraits of Bourguiba. When he tried to exhibit his paintings in an art gallery in 2010, he was refused entry by Tunisian customs, and had to submit to a police interrogation. His exhibition was eventually canceled.

The most cutting edge response to the return of the Bourguibis imagery comes from art philosopher Adnen Jdey in an op-ed for the online Nawaat platform, where he compares the

second life of the statue of Bourguiba to the figure of Don Quixote, galloping and confusing the order of the real and the symbolic to reinforce the prevailing political consensus. The double exile and the double triumphal return of the Zaïm, once in 1978 and once in 2016, functions as a fiduciary *jouissance* facilitating the real reproducibility of the status quo. For Adnen the two apparent different bodies of Bourguiba, the patriot and the despot, the “supreme combatant” and the “enlightened tyrant” are two different sides of the same coin, that throws a shadow on the still present Novemberist Clock Tower that together with the equestrian statue form the still erect phallus of an entrenched power structure.

Despite all criticism, the great return is inaugurated on “Victory Day”, the first of June, for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the mythical return of Bourguiba from exile in 1955 [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. Escorted by security services and covered by a dozen security agents, Beji Caid Essbsi is welcomed by Mariem Bourguiba the granddaughter of the first “Father of the nation”, her husband and a couple of others highly esteemed guests, before opening the red curtains, hiding the golden inscription on the marble pedestal of the equine monument. The famed filmmaker Hicham Ben Ammar is the only one noticing the absence of the sculptor of the original statue, Marzouk Hechmi. He stands there all by himself behind the security fences, humiliated and hurt – nearly crying – during what he imagined would be the apotheosis of his oeuvre. Notwithstanding Marzouk passionately worked for months to restore what he considers his lifetime achievement, he is apparently not invited to the ceremonial inauguration [↗**The Honourable Citizen, ↗Hope vs. Hell**]. Inside the security perimeter, surrounded by a horde of journalist, Essebsi explains he choose today as an inauguration date not to re-instate a new personality cult, but to commemorate a day of national cohesion without precedent. For Essebsi, the return of the imagery of Bourguiba answers a shared need for a solid national unity. It is a condition sine qua non to get Tunisia out of the situation it has fallen in since the revolution. The president further reminds the journalists present that the Bourguiba Avenue, used to be named after Jules Ferry and that the statue of Bourguiba replaces the one of the instigator of the French protectorate. Beji Caid Essbsi tries to convince the journalists and their audience that a symbol of colonization is replaced by a symbol of liberty and independence.

The statue of Ferry was indeed the most imposing emblem of the protectorate, embodying the French civilizing mission [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**]. Placed vertically in height, the monument sculpted by Antonin Mercie faced the city, Feery’s back turned to the Mediterranean port, looking down from his pedestal to three subservient bronze figures: a Bedouin statuette offering a bundle of wheat, a settler colonist looking up in full admiration and a schoolboy looking up towards Jules Ferry, in honor of his role in educational development. After being dismantled, the statue of Jules Ferry, was temporarily stocked on an island on the Lake of Tunis. The Municipality of Tunis has however never fulfilled her intention to offer the unbolted statue to the municipality of Saint Dié, the hometown of Ferry. The statue of Jules Ferry is now indeed replaced by the one of Bourguiba, that eternalizes the image of the historical moment when Bourguiba, the “Mujahid El Akbar” or “Supreme Combattant” returned from exile from Brittany’s Groix Island, in the port town of La Goulette, after signing the Franco-Tunisian agreement recognizing the internal autonomy of Tunisia, June 1, 1955 [↗**Prison**]. Reminiscent of the equestrian statue of Louis XV on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, the statue of Bourguiba pursues the French Monarchical trend in equestrian monumentalization [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority, ↗Dual**

Identities / Masking. The president is monumentalized strongly perched on a galloping horse, confidently and triumphantly saluting the cheering mass, dressed in a modern tailored suite and a fez, the traditional ottoman red hat.

The comeback of Bourguiba in the capital is not the first, nor the last time the government decides to move its historical markers, making the whole effort a national endeavor [**Center vs. Periphery**]. As the wave of protest in Kasserine settles down, a truck deposes a restored bronze equestrian statue in front of the presidential palace of Skanès (Ksar Al Marmar) at the entrance of the city. The statue depicts the Zaïm wearing not a fez but a *mdhalla*, a traditional straw hat [**Beautiful vs. Ugly**]. It also seems to be from the hand of sculpture Hechmi Marzouk, but was originally erected in the city of Kairouan. It had first to be restored, as it was vandalized in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, but captured by the military who kept it save in the casern of Sidi Saâd. The equestrian statue is unveiled by president Beji Caid Essebsi in person, during the festivities commemorating the 16th anniversary of Bourguiba's death [**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. One of the statues symbolizing Bourguiba's triumphant return in 1955, is also resettled in the coastal city of Sousse. The equestrian statue was relocated to its former location as it was installed in 1977 at the intersection of Bab Bhar, [**Downtown/Centre-ville**] Sousse. The inauguration, planned for the celebrations of 'Republic Day', the date of the establishment of the Republican regime on July 25th is postponed until August 13th for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the promulgation of the personal status code, the historical code that facilitated the emancipation of "La Femme Tunisienne" under Bourguiba [**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. The vacant place of the father is indeed eagerly solicited, in contrast to the figure of the mother that remains largely unnoticed and unmentioned [**Male vs. Female**].

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *ʔAlsh* ♦ *ʔAshwāʔiyyāt* ♦ Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Court Trials ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Dual Identities / Masking ♦ *Manīsh msāmih* ♦ Prison ♦ Social Media

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Center vs. Periphery ♦ (Individuality vs. Collectivity) ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ "The System" vs. "The People"

CODES COLLAPSED – Present = Past (Stuck)

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