PERSPECTIVES: You have returned to Tunisia after 13 years of exile. What made you leave the country and return?

BEN GHARBIA: In 1998 the Tunisian police arrested and interrogated me on the grounds that I had studied in Iran. I visited Iran because I was interested in political Islam and how the revolution had developed there. I also wanted to understand how this process transformed into a dictatorship. When I was summoned again to the Interior Ministry, I fled first to Libya. Then a long odyssey through several countries followed, until I finally ended up in Holland where I was granted asylum. It was the revolution that brought me back to Tunisia. Ten days after Ben Ali left Tunisia, it was officially announced that political refugees could enter the country. I immediately applied for a passport which I received within a day, packed my bags and came back here.

Nawaat.org is an independent collective blog on Tunisia. It was launched in order to provide a public platform for oppressed voices and debates. Today, it provides information on the Tunisian revolution.

I was interested in political Islam and how the revolution had developed there. I also wanted to understand how this process transformed into a dictatorship. When I was summoned again to the Interior Ministry, I fled first to Libya. Then a long odyssey through several countries followed, until I finally ended up in Holland where I was granted asylum. It was the revolution that brought me back to Tunisia. Ten days after Ben Ali left Tunisia, it was officially announced that political refugees could enter the country. I immediately applied for a passport which I received within a day, packed my bags and came back here.

PERSPECTIVES: What are you doing right now?

BEN GHARBIA: I’m catching up with family and friends who I haven't seen in 13 years. There are many people I left behind here, others have gone into exile as well and are now coming back. It is a very emotional time for me. For many years, writing has been the only means of expressing myself and dealing with exile. I’m still in a state of utter surprise that the revolution that is now spreading throughout the Arab world, started in Tunisia. I didn’t expect it, and now suddenly my life has changed. For the moment I cannot plan, I still have to get adjusted to the new reality. But of course I’m very busy working on the media and providing information and analysis about developments in Tunisia. There is actually no time to do anything else. So many things are happening every day that it consumes all of my time to stay on top of events.

PERSPECTIVES: When and why did you become an Internet activist?

BEN GHARBIA: I first got connected to the Internet when I was applying for asylum in Holland. I had to research information about human rights violations in Tunisia in order to make my case. This is also how I came into contact with Tunisian organizations and activists. I began to write on the Internet and engage in digital activism. Later I set up my own blog and joined the organization Global Voices, which is a platform for non-Western blogs. In 2004 I co-founded Nawaat.org.

PERSPECTIVES: What is Nawaat.org about?

BEN GHARBIA: Nawaat.org is an independent collective blog on Tunisia. It was launched in order to provide a public platform for oppressed voices and debates. Today, it provides information on the Tunisian revolution, culture, socio-economic and political developments, corruption, governance, and issues of censorship. Most of the coverage of Al-Jazeera
that you see on Tunisia is provided by us through our Posterous alerts blog hosted at 24sur24.posterous.com. We made available for them the footage, and translated and contextualized much of the Facebook communication about the Tunisian revolution.

PERSPECTIVES: Why does an Arab-language news channel like Al-Jazeera need translation of Tunisian Facebook communication?
BEN GHARBIA: The Tunisian Facebook world is actually quite difficult to access for nonlocals, even for other Arabs. Facebook users here communicate in Tunisian dialect, which in addition is written in Latin.

PERSPECTIVES: A long-standing idea of yours is to encourage the linkage between digital activism and what you call “offline activism.” Is this not precisely what happened during the current revolutions?
BEN GHARBIA: Yes. We still have to assess how far the connection between Internet-based activism and other forms of activism was shaped, which aspects are successful and where it should be improved. But the group that we, Global Voices and Heinrich Böll Foundation, brought together during the two Arab Bloggers Meetings that took place 2009 and 2010 is now at the heart of the struggle in the different Arab countries. There are of course many other bloggers, but the many activists that we gathered in this group are the ones that currently facilitate Internet connectivity, get the information out and network both amongst each other and with the mainstream media. We have all been virtually connected, but the face-to-face experience at the Arab Bloggers Meetings was very important. Now, Ali Abuleemam for example who had been imprisoned in Bahrain and was just freed, is not only a fellow blogger who I defend as an activist, but he has become a friend. We spent time together in Beirut, we had a drink and chatted. There was great diversity in dialects and backgrounds, and yet a common cause. These personal encounters create a very strong sense of solidarity.

PERSPECTIVES: There is now a great deal of international attention on Arab bloggers and Internet activists. Do you feel the pressure increasing?
BEN GHARBIA: Yes, absolutely. Social media is very fashionable at the moment. Every day I receive dozens of mails, asking me for the contacts of bloggers to invite them to international conferences. I could open an agency and live very well from only facilitating such contacts. I receive numerous requests for interviews and appearances on TV. I’m not very keen on that, therefore I’ve started to refuse most of them. There was a time when I opted for publicity because it was only us bloggers and activists in exile who were able to speak out freely and influence public opinion. But now people within Tunisia can express themselves as well. Therefore I try to step back and give others the chance to speak. There are also representatives of all kinds of international organizations and donors, who are now flowing into the country to explore possibilities for funding and training.

PERSPECTIVES: Aren’t there are enough media-savvy Tunisians and Arabs, so that this expertise could be provided within the country or at least within the region? Or are international trainers needed?
BEN GHARBIA: Of course we have this expertise in the region. But let’s not forget that the social

---

1 Posterous (www.posterous.com) is a basic blogging platform which integrates posting to other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. (Editor’s note)
2 The latest news is that Ali Abuleemam has gone missing in Bahrain. See Sami Ben Gharbia’s alert, posted on 18 March 2011: http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/03/18/alert-ali-abuleemam-goes-missing-in-bahrain/ (Editor’s note)
media are a big business. Many international agencies sustain themselves through training and consultation. And some international experts cultivate themselves as social media “gurus”. There are also some Western donors that can be very insistant, especially American organizations such as USAID who seek to promote their agenda. I don’t seek this kind of funding. There are activities that anyhow don’t need financial support, like blogging itself. As for activities that need support, such as training and meetings, I prefer to stay with more independent institutions that don’t impose their political views. The current revolutions have shown that Arabs can do it themselves. It was also a different experience from for example the Green Revolution in Iran, which took place in an international political climate that strongly rejects the Iranian regime. Our revolutions rather took place despite Western support for our dictators. We want to continue this independence from external intervention, be it political tutelage or aggressive “assistance” for democratic transformation.

PERSPECTIVES: Some analysts interpret the social media as being a part of US American “soft power.” Do you agree to this view?
BEN GHARBIA: No. The Tunisian revolution, and as far as I know, the Egyptian one, are homegrown, grassroots and independent movements that don’t even have any kind of centralized leadership. The media are tools, and this is how they should be understood. The Western media tend to mystify the use of new information technologies and exaggerate their role.

PERSPECTIVES: There are several Western companies producing software that are used for online censorship. How, in your view, should they be dealt with?
BEN GHARBIA: It is natural that companies aim mainly to make profit. As long as they are not restricted or criticized, they will not stop producing and exporting such software to repressive regimes. The problem with these programs is that there is hardly any awareness. The Palestinians for example are very aware of the international companies that support the Israeli occupation or settlements, and they initiate campaigns and boycotts. There is nothing similar in the region with regards to software that is used for the suppression of freedom of expression. The information needs to be spread. There should also be criteria for prohibiting the export of such software when it is obvious that they will be used to silence dissent. If it is possible to put constraints in the export of weapons into conflict zones, why can’t there be prohibitions on exporting censorship software to authoritarian regimes?

PERSPECTIVES: Can you give examples of such software?
BEN GHARBIA: There is for example the program SmartFilter, produced by the American company Secure Computing and now acquired by McAfee. SmartFilter is being used to censor online content in many repressive countries such
as the UAE, Sudan, Iran, and Tunisia. Websens is also used to censor the Internet in Yemen.

PERSPECTIVES: Programs such as Facebook themselves can be also used for tracking down on activists, correct?
BEN GHARBIA: Yes, of course. This is why it is very important for Internet users and activists to know how to use these technologies. There are many features in place to protect a user’s privacy and security. The problem is that for example Facebook’s list of regulations and instructions is so long that nobody reads it. This is why we offer security training for Internet activists.

Facebook’s list of regulations and instructions is so long that nobody reads it. This is why we offer security training for Internet activists.

PERSPECTIVES: Tunisian Internet activist Slim Amamou, who had been imprisoned prior to the revolution, has been appointed state secretary for youth and sports. Was the step from blogger to member of government in your view the right one?
BEN GHARBIA: Well, let me tell you what I also told him. I find it problematic that an activist accepts a post in a controversial interim government, where he sits around a table with figures which were part of the former regime. Many ministers resigned from the first and second interim governments because of this reason, but Slim has chosen to stay. The recent clashes and the consequent resignation of Prime Minister Ghanoushi who had served under dictator Ben Ali, indicate that people do not want to see these faces anymore. Amamou has faced severe criticism by Tunisian bloggers for his decision to join and stay in the government. I do not want to paint an entirely negative picture. Of course the appointment of an Internet activist to the political leadership is generally a good sign if this person is not merely used as a fig-leave to create legitimacy. But we haven’t seen any positive results from his presence in government. We don’t even know what his tasks are and what he is doing, and until now no roadmap on media and freedom of expression issues has been publicized. If he uses his position to exert pressure on the government to deal with these issues, it would be a good sign. But this doesn’t seem to be the case yet

Interview by Layla Al-Zubaidi, 28 February 2011.