

Quotidian indignities: the struggle for space in the post-revolution city

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Figure 1: The corner of Salwa's house in Ariana, photo by author, July 8, 2021

On July 27, 2021, two days after President Kais Saied dismissed the prime minister and suspended the activities of parliament, western journalists surmised that “Maybe Tunisians never wanted democracy.” More useful than making such a declaration is to question how Tunisians are living the democratic promise as a claim for public services, functioning institutions, and honest politicians. In this essay, I suggest that redirecting our attention away from procedural understandings of democracy towards the quotidian indignities that permeate marginalized citizens’ everyday lives, enables us to question what democracy means in terms of the rearrangement of material and social relations of urban space. I focus on a recent anti-eviction battle in the municipality of Ariana in metropolitan Tunis to show how poor dwellers struggle to carve out livable spaces for themselves and their families in cities that violently exclude them.

The eviction case of khala Meherzia and her family

She stacked the cardboard boxes at the corner of a plastic crate turned upside down to make a seat where she could rest her body and smoke her morning cigarettes in peace (figure 1). The flimsy cardboard structure separated her corner from the bustle of the street – a thin layer of privacy to shield against the indignities of yet another day of homelessness.

Salwa¹ sat in the corner, in front of her house, every morning from 4am until 11pm, retreating from the street corner only to shower and sleep for a few hours at her sister’s house. A few weeks earlier she, her 76-year-old mother khala Meherzia, another one of her sisters, and her two adult sons were evicted from their house in the center of Ariana where the family had been living for the past sixty years.² Activists invested in building a right to the city movement took turns

¹ I use a pseudonym to protect the identity of my interlocutor.

² Unlike evictions in the US, banks are not the institutions evicting people in Tunisia, but rather private persons or investors who purchase usually delapidated property, or estates with complicated underlying claims to ownership, both of which apply in this case. Aida Delpuech, “Reportage | ‘Nous Vivions Ici Depuis plus de 60 Ans’ : À l’Ariana,

joining Salwa and her family every day in June and July 2021 to advocate for their right to housing. I participated in the group's activities for early morning sit-ins (6-10am) in front of Salwa's house.

My morning routine consisted of purchasing coffee and water across the street and joining Salwa behind the cardboard structure. We sat together watching the slowly unfolding activity of Sidi Ammar's street-market where itinerant vendors were claiming their spots and unloading the fruits and vegetables of the day's sale.³ One morning, I asked Salwa about the hardest thing she experienced since being evicted. I had a few answers in mind: police brutality, the lack of neighborly solidarity, or the callousness of local government authorities. Her answer was more straightforward, and more complex. "To be homeless" (*ma 'andeesh dar*) she told me.

The struggle for a space in the city

Salwa's attempt to reconstruct a modicum of privacy on the street corner where she was turned homeless among her neighbors translates a desire to be seen and heard, while also preserving her dignity. In this delicate balance between a struggle for visibility⁴ and the preservation of one's dignity,⁵ marginalized Tunisians negotiate quotidian injustices in cities that violently exclude them. Refusing to vacate the street corner of the house she was evicted from, even when threatened by the police, Salwa's homeless body became "the site that brings together 'the structural and the political violence of the state.'"⁶ She was aware that if she and her family were to be displaced to a distant popular neighborhood in the peripheries, she would lose access to the popular economy that sustains her and her family. So, she held on to her space in the city by camping in front of her house. Her eviction case gestures at the politics of housing, in particular housing destined for lower income groups.

The politicization of the housing question predates the 2011 revolution. Successive regimes have instrumentalized housing for multiple objectives: attaining political legitimacy, pacifying dissidents, and deepening clientelistic networks. As the state disengaged from housing provision in the 1980s, it invested heavily in urban upgrading programs⁷ meant to provide basic infrastructure in already consolidated popular neighborhoods.⁸ Mixing coercion and cooption, in each neighborhood undergoing upgrading, a new party cell, a delegation, and a police station

Une Famille Lutte Pour Son Droit Au Logement," accessed September 22, 2021, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2021/06/08/expulsion-famille-ariana-droit-logement-tunisie/>.

³ Ariana is a middle-class municipality of metropolitan Tunis. For the municipality, the Sidi Ammar popular street-market, located in Ariana's oldest neighborhood, is a nuisance that prevents it from maintaining a 'clean city'.

⁴ Ulrike Lune Riboni, "Filmer et rendre visible les quartiers populaires dans la Tunisie en révolution," *Sciences de la société*, no. 94 (October 1, 2015): 121–36.

⁵ Nadia Marzouki, "The Call for Dignity, or a Particular Universalism," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3, no. 1–2 (March 25, 2011): 148–58.

⁶ Didier Fassin cited Banu Bargu, "Why Did Bouazizi Burn Himself? The Politics of Fate and Fatal Politics," *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (2016): 27–36.

⁷ Hend Ben Othman and Sami Yassine Turki, "L'accès au logement en Tunisie 1970-2020. Évolution des politiques et renouvellement des modalités de régulation," *NAQD* N° 38-39, no. 1 (2020): 121–40.

⁸ Morched Chabbi, "Politiques Urbaines et Réhabilitation En Tunisie. Le Cas Du Grand Tunis (1960-2007)," in *Habitat Social Au Maghreb et Au Sénégal, Gouvernance Urbaine et Participation En Questions*, ed. Aziz Iraki and Julien Le Tellier, Coll. Habitat et Sociétés (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

were also added.⁹ Thus, infrastructure provision in these neighborhoods reinforced the authoritarian state's territorial control over dissident spaces.¹⁰ Rather than a right, housing was mobilized by various governments for political gain.

With its rise to power in 2011, the Islamist party Ennahda recentered the housing question, adding to urban upgrading programs the promise of delivering 30,000 housing units in three years.¹¹ In 2012, the party launched a government program called the Specific Program for Social Housing (PSLS). By 2014, 230,000 applicants submitted requests for housing units. The PSLS implementation was extended from a period of ten years in order to select beneficiaries and organize the modalities of provision. To date, only 8,400 of these units have been completed. Financed by the Qatari government, and the Saudi investment fund,¹² the PSLS shows what regional alliances are mobilized to satisfy housing demand. Housing is thus an instrument of power that operates at multiple scales: from the micropolitics of quotidian indignities, to national policies with geopolitical reach, to the encounters with local governments to which I now turn.

The municipality's response

Elected municipal councils – primed to address such inequalities through sophisticated procedures of participation – peddle instead a humiliating discourse of cultural and political awareness that adds insult to injury. The municipality's response to Salwa's eviction case is an opportunity to examine the traction of participatory procedures in place since 2014.¹³ When Salwa and her niece met with the mayor, he discussed his many accomplishments in Ariana, for example a classic music festival open to all of the city's residents, including people "like them". According to Salwa's niece, his discourse about bringing leisurely activities to the city was meant, in part, to debase the vital aspect of their demands; only unsophisticated beings would be so basic as to demand a roof to shelter them. Refined citizens, on the other hand, appreciated the city's cultural life that he made possible. The municipality's response to collective pressure from the group of activists who mobilized against this eviction case was similarly mediocre. On June 8, 2021, I joined the protest march the group organized. When we arrived in front of the municipality, the large wooden doors were sealed shut. Instead of using participatory mechanisms to create opportunities for dialogue, municipal staff members went into hiding; those who wanted to access to the building were asked to use the back door. This a representative elected body, a democratic authority, who hides from its own constituents.

Behind a discourse about civility, and in the absence of effective participation, the municipality was playing powerless. When pressed for a solution, the mayor offered to pay the family two months' rent, after which they would have to fend for themselves. He could do nothing else for

⁹ Ali Rebhi, "Dynamique urbaine non-réglementaire et gouvernance locale à Kairouan," *Insaniyat / إنسانيات: Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, no. 38 (December 31, 2007): 11–28.

¹⁰ Olivier Legros, "Le gouvernement des quartiers populaires. Production de l'espace et régulation politique dans les quartiers non réglementaires de Dakar (Sénégal) et de Tunis (Tunisie)" (phdthesis, Université François Rabelais - Tours, 2003).

¹¹ Othman and Turki, "L'accès au logement en Tunisie 1970-2020. Évolution des politiques et renouvellement des modalités de régulation »."

¹² Ibid; Ali Bennis and Sami Ben Fguira, "Regards sur les mutations du logement social dans les politiques d'habitat en Tunisie," *NAQD* N° 38-39, no. 1 (2020): 33–50.

¹³ Lana Salman, "Spaces of Expectation: Local Politics in Post-Revolution Tunisia" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2020).

them. As he explained, his responsiveness to their case would open the floodgates for claims about precarious housing situations that the municipality could not possibly handle. The solution then was simply to create the conditions under which marginalized families like Salwa's are forced out of urban cores into distant peripheries where they have no other solution but to build their own shelter. Rather than displacement, this process is one of "banishment [a state project] entangled with processes of regulation, segregation and expropriation,"¹⁴ which become evident when one traces the political connections underlying this eviction case.

The appeal of a different local

Whose territories are popular neighborhoods? Who exerts power in these spaces and who garners political allegiance? The man who purchased the house from which Salwa and her family were evicted is a businessman, former RCDist (member of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally), and currently member of Tahya Tunis, the party of former prime minister Youssef Chahed. Activating his networks in the municipality, he weaponized the law¹⁵ to sway the local government's eviction decision in his favor. Ariana's municipal council is considered progressive; the city's mayor is a former academic.¹⁶ But the political leanings of the municipal council are irrelevant in this case. Instead, powerful party affiliated businessmen lock in the administrative decisions of the bureaucracy (*idara*) who rules against the interests of the poor. Contrary to prevalent opinions about popular neighborhoods as strongholds of Ennahda, I want to suggest that these spaces are not easily monopolized by a single party. Instead, their marginalization is exploited circumstantially by various parties for political gain.

Unsurprisingly, there is among inhabitants of popular neighborhoods a deep disillusion with representative democracy, one that makes President Kais Saied's vision of direct democracy appealing. Permeating my discussions in these spaces is the sense that elections are a joke: politicians show up only around election times with money, food, and some promises only to disappear soon after they win their seats. The emphasis on the lack of familiarity with those representing you, the feeling that you share nothing with them, that their life looks nothing like yours, is a strong dimension of local political legitimacy. I emphasize the local here to connect these feelings about representative democracy with the ways in which supporters of Saied perceive his vision of direct democracy. Those who adhere to this project believe it to be one cure for people's estrangement from and lack of trust in their political representatives. Here is how one activist, asked in 2016 why he does not join a party and run for local elections, explained it:

"I believe in and adhere to a pyramidal structure of power that does not require you to join a party; it asks that you focus on your own neighborhood. The election law that would support such an organization of power would rest on the election of representatives at the smallest possible spatial scale—not on the basis of the electoral lists of political parties. So, you would no longer vote based on partisan politics, but based on

¹⁴ Ananya Roy, "Racial Banishment," in *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2019), 227–30.

¹⁵ Yassine Nabli, "ليس للفقراء حق في المدينة," *Legal Agenda* (blog), June 28, 2021, <https://legal-agenda.com/-ليس-للفقراء-حق-في-المدينة/>.

¹⁶ A list of independent candidates, members of a center-left coalition of parties, garnered 38.18% of the votes in the 2018 municipal elections, followed by 16.5% for the now dissolved party of Nidaa Tounes, and 13.99% for Ennahdha. <http://www.isie.tn/elections/elections-municipales-2018/resultats/>

the integrity of particular people who are your neighbors. Your neighbor can't possibly promise that he will create 500 new jobs. You know him [sic] —he is your neighbor, and you know what he can and can't do.... If you had a new local governments law that prioritized local representation over the national parties, you could prevent all the chicanery, all the false promises.”¹⁷

Conclusion

In post-revolution Tunisia, poor people's struggles for space in cities that exclude them affects local politics. In popular neighborhoods, the perceptions and relations of inhabitants with 'the state' takes shape in the crucible of encounters with municipalities and the police. 'Democratic transitions' evolve in the intimacy of this micropolitics too – in negotiations about shelter and livelihoods, in daily affronts to poor people's personhood, and in embodied encounters with authority. Rather than procedural dimensions of democracy, scholars should turn their attention to the city, to physical and material rearrangements of space and their democratic potential. When scholarly inquiry is anchored in these spatial practices and everyday experiences, the popularity and appeal of Saied's revisionist project of direct democracy become apparent.

¹⁷ Laryssa Chomiak and Lana Salman, "Refusing to Forgive | Middle East Research and Information Project," *Middle East Research and Information Project, Activism*, 46, no. MER281 (Winter 2016).