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## **Land injustices, contestations and community protest in the rural areas of Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia): the roots of the “revolution”?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper shows the links between land inequalities in rural areas and collective actions, through the prism of spatial justice. It is based on the analysis of a social struggle engaged in the region of Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia) in 2009-2010, after the land dispossession of an agricultural producer. The hypothesis is that land issues were implicit in the Ben Ali's regime protests which contributed to his demise in January 2011. Comparing this land dispossession case to the general land access context in the centre of Tunisia helps in underlining the differences between injustice visions, and to understand for what justice the protests took place. These protests alone do not explain the importance of the mobilizations, but they reveal a part of the revolutionnary process' deep roots. They also call to give these rural and agricultural areas and their inhabitants the place they take up regarding wealth production and socio-political voices.

**Key words** : land injustices, rights, community protest, revolution, Tunisia

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the headquarters of the Sidi Bouzid governorate on 17 December 2010,<sup>1</sup> his friends and relations and other inhabitants of the region began a protest that spread to other areas and led, a few weeks later, to the resignation of the Tunisian president Z. Ben Ali. Initially, before widening in scope, the slogans and demands focused on access to work, to income, to dignity. There was almost no direct reference to the Sidi Bouzid region, or to its primary activity as an agricultural area. However, a geographical perspective raises questions about the importance of the place and its specificities in the social dynamics that emerged from that date in Sidi Bouzid and in the country as a whole.

Several studies have sought to explore and analyse the links between what is called the

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<sup>1</sup>Tunisia's administration is divided into governorates, themselves divided into delegations.

“revolution” in Tunisia and (r)evolutions in rural areas, marked by major transformation in agrarian structures, production techniques and social organisation (ELLOUMI 2013, SAIDI 2013). Some explore the ways in which the sociopolitical movements were organised or the links with food issues (GANA 2011 et 2012), others study the process of peasantry marginalisation at different scales (AYEB, 2013). Though less researched, the question of land in rural areas is nevertheless an issue of spatial justice and injustice, and one may wonder whether it underlies the protest movements against the regime in Tunisia. This article seeks to show the links between inequalities in land rights and the protests that led to the toppling of the government in January 2011. In a context of rural transformation marked by the individualisation of land ownership and new appropriations of space, the aim is to show 1) how land reflects the spatial dimension of social inequalities and injustices, and 2) how changes in land rights help to mitigate or reinforce injustices, or even create new ones.

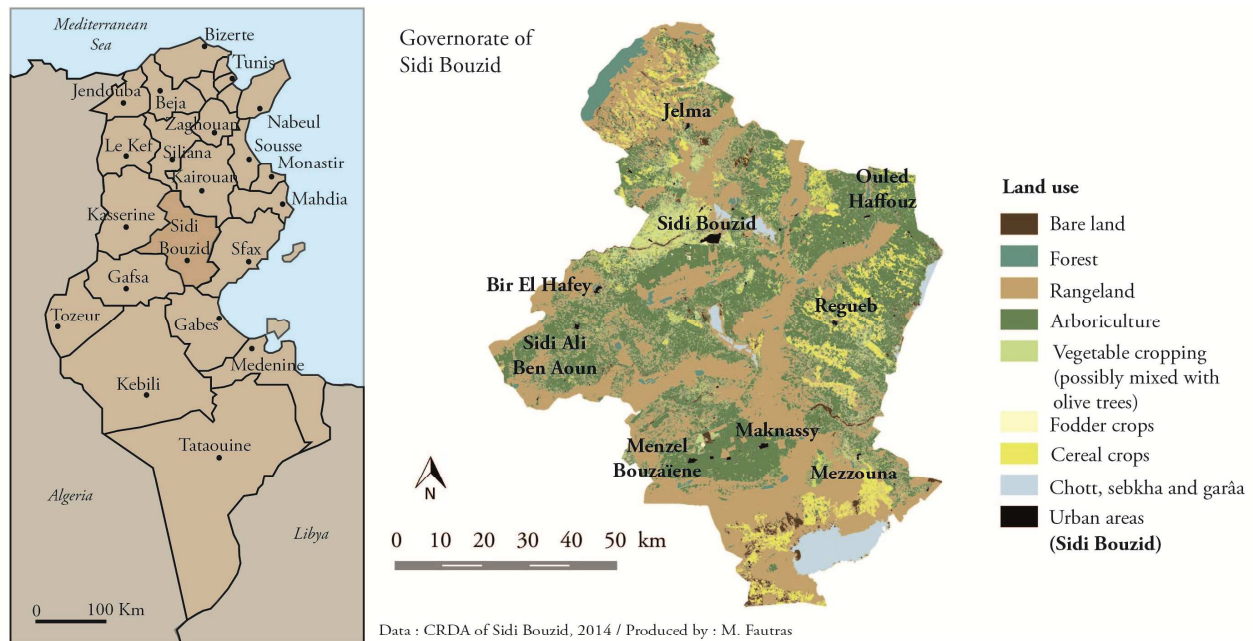
The case of the Sidi Bouzid region, located in central Tunisia, provides a way into these questions. This primarily rural area, characterised by scattered housing and agricultural activity which occupies most of the population, was profoundly transformed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the division of so-called communal land<sup>2</sup>, previously the predominant form of landholding in the region. More recently, land registration and the development of a property market in places where land has essentially been passed down through inheritance, brought in new protagonists, further accentuating disparities in the land structures. In recent years, despite the absence of free speech under Ben Ali, these inequalities in access to land were overtly condemned as injustices, for example in 2009-2010 in the Regueb delegation (south-east of the Sidi Bouzid governorate). My work is based on a series of interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014, as part of my doctoral thesis, with individuals who were involved in this struggle for land or took part in other struggles linked with the rural and agricultural world, with farmers who did not take part but have experienced land dispossession, and with institutional actors. I will begin by considering this local struggle through its connection with the protests that spread to the rest of the country in the subsequent months. From there, I will go on to situate this dispossession within the general context of inequalities in access to land, in order to elucidate the differences in the perception of the injustices. Finally, I will try to explain what kind of

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<sup>2</sup>Communal lands were kept undivided by tribal groups.

justice was at stake in these movements and contestations, by shifting the focus back to the role of the rural world and the rights of its inhabitants.

**Map 1: Location and presentation of the study area (Produced by: M. Fautras)**



## 1 – Land conflict and “revolution”

### Salah’s land

Salah’s story is both common in the Regueb region and singular. In 2002, this pharmacy assistant, a resident of Sidi Bouzid, took out a bank loan of 57,000 DT<sup>3</sup> from the National Agricultural Bank (BNA), to acquire a plot of land in the Regueb delegation, 40 km from his home. This region is known for its fertile land, an abundance of good quality underground water and temperatures conducive to the growing of fruit and vegetables with strong international demand. For this reason, in the early 2000s, many inhabitants of the governorate invested similarly to expand or start a farm project, using subsidies, bank loans and facilities brought in with the structural adjustment plan in 1986. Salah was able to use personal savings and an investment loan to put a borehole and crops on his land: first tomatoes and melons, then young olive trees alongside vegetables. After three years, the bank repayments began, but in 2006 Salah fell behind on the annual payment. The olive trees were not yet in full production, and the market garden was not bringing in the

<sup>3</sup>1 Tunisian Dinar (DT) is worth €2.2.

expected income: parasites had damaged the crops and regional farm produce all came on to the market over the same period, because of a lack of storage infrastructures. Despite his income from the pharmacy, and probably with family spending, his debt grew.

In 2007, BNA offered to take over Salah's land, which was mortgaged to the tune of 30,000 DT. The price was well below the real value of the 18 hectare plot, bought for 63,000 DT in 2002 but worth more with the added infrastructures and crops. A businessman from the coastal city of Sfax also offered to buy Salah's land for 75,000 DT. When he refused both offers, the bank started litigation proceedings and held an auction. Only the Sfaxian businessman took part. The auction starting price, set by a bank appointed expert, was 125,000 DT for the plot in question. The single buyer bid one additional dinar and won the auction. Salah denounced the legal procedure as an injustice, a plot between the bank and the buyer.

In 2009, Salah began a protest against this injustice. He contacted people who had experienced a similar process (auction with a single buyer, false or out-of-date documents in the case file, failure to comply with information requirements and dispute procedures). Four people agreed to follow him to Tunis in December 2009, to present their case to the President. When an interview with the Prime Minister produced no result, Salah, accompanied by several men of his family, decided to try his luck at the Tunisian Embassy in Libya, taking advantage of a summit in January 2010 between the heads of several Arab countries, including Ben Ali. They managed to state their problem, but were referred to the administration in Tunis. On his return to Sidi Bouzid, Salah was questioned several times by the police on the reasons for his trip to Tripoli and on his attitude to the regime. He threatened to occupy his land, now being worked by employees of the new owner, if his case was not settled, a threat he carried out in June 2010: accompanied by several family members, he chased off the labourers, moved in and resumed work on the land, which he continued to consider as his own.

This collective action was reported on social networks and in a few media outlets (France 24, the Arabic language daily *El Shourouq*) thanks to union activists and journalists involved in the movement, some of whom took part in the organisation of rallies at the Sidi Bouzid governorate headquarters, starting on 15 July 2010. Their presence would seem to have had more to do with peer networks, so we cannot say that this action was managed or led by a trade union or political movement. However, it was notably

supported by a human rights organisation. In a way, this action was effective: the new owner eventually offered Salah and Malek<sup>4</sup> – one of the four who had come to Tunis and whose 20 hectares, adjacent to Salah's land, had been bought at auction by the same person – to buy their plots respectively for 155 and 153,000 DT (more than the original price, reflecting the infrastructures in place and the rise in land prices). The contract was due to be signed on 20 December 2010.

### **Land dispossession and interwoven injustices**

Three days before that, however, on 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire at Sidi Bouzid. And as it happened, he was the son of Salah's sister. Very quickly, the same people who had occupied the land at Regueb gathered, in increasing numbers as the days passed, in front of the governorate headquarters to express their anger and protest against the socioeconomic injustices affecting the inhabitants and particularly the youth of the region. Mohamed had worked the land with his uncle before it was repossessed. In Sidi Bouzid, the protests and slogans shouted in the days and weeks following his death made no mention of this land injustice, which only a few days before had been the focus of denunciation. Nevertheless, some people make a clear link between the two protests, like Jalel, a relation of Salah:

*"This land was a living for a whole family, a source of life, and Mohamed did a lot of work here, on this land. In fact, you can see it in the June and July photos [2010]. When the Sfaxian grabbed the land, [Mohamed] started buying fruit at the supermarket and selling it off a cart. So you could say it was the indirect cause of his burning himself. The police asked him not to sell [in the street in Sidi Bouzid] because it affected the look of the medina, etc. And he was revolted, really revolted, because one policewoman may have slapped him, she humiliated him, a woman, what's more... [To Salah:] What's her name? [they try to remember]. Someone called Hamdi, that's right. Some people say she slapped him, others not. In any case, she humiliated him, whatever she did. There are many versions, but the thing to remember is that she humiliated him. So he was humiliated, he was at the [headquarters of] the governorate, they turned him away, he was completely furious, and he set himself on fire. In any case, the reason he did it is because the land was taken away. It's all linked. I want you to understand the link."*

Jalel, in a discussion with him and Salah, September 2013

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<sup>4</sup>This and subsequent names have been changed.

Hindsight, or a genuine convergence of conflicts? In order to understand this conflict over land and the way it may have been connected with the revolutionary process in Tunisia, we need to go back to its beginnings, separating the causes (for what?) from the responsibilities (why, how?) (CALAS 2011). Apart from land dispossession, youth unemployment is another question that emerges clearly from this narrative: in this region, where farming is the main activity, young people are leaving the sector, either by choice or compulsion, as seems to be the case for Mohamed. Jalel complains about the twofold injustice done to him: first land injustice, leading to the loss of a source of income for several families, then an injustice in being forbidden to sell fruit on the public street. He describes how Mohamed, deprived of his farm work, also found himself excluded from trade, having made an effort to find a new source of income. Having no licence for his new business, and also being associated with his uncle's protest (he had taken part in the gathering at the Sidi Bouzid governorate), he found himself both economically and politically marginalised. These inequalities in access to political expression and to employment in the interior areas of the country gave the people a sense of injustice, exacerbated by the crisis that had hit the whole informal sector in Tunisia. While this sector had been developing strongly for several decades, offsetting the inadequacies of the formal employment sector, it was undermined by different political measures, in particular the restriction on the flow of goods in 2009 and on trade with Libya in 2010. These measures had a very powerful impact on much of the rural population of the interior, for whom informal trade (MEDDEB 2012) was a way of diversifying and maintaining family income in circumstances where land was no longer enough.

Injustice in access to employment thus combined with injustice in access to land and in ability to upkeep it. Salah's story, which might be seen as one incident amongst others, raises the question of the link between land dispossession, obstacles to fruit trading, Mohamed's suicide and Ben Ali's resignation. People demanding the land quickly get together again after the suicide, drawing on extended family relations and community networks in the town of Sidi Bouzid, between the residents of neighbourhoods with precarious living conditions. The movement was joined by trade unionists, legal experts, lawyers and local opposition figures (whom Salah partly knew and knew he could rely on for his defence once the Regueb protest began), and gradually grew. It then moved to the outlying districts of the town, where a significant section of the population came from the

surrounding rural areas, before reaching other parts of the governorate and then other regions of Tunisia.

So without underestimating the impact of this struggle, to say that Salah's dispossession was the sole source of the revolutionary process would be a misleading simplification: it would ignore the role of the trade unions and opposition forces in organising resistance, which amplified the movement by mobilising existing networks and extending the actions to other regions of the country (HMED 2012). It would also neglect the socio-economic inequalities in urban areas, the RCD's loss of local influence (BEN JELLOUL 2014),<sup>5</sup> and all the previous resistance and protest in the country – in particular in 2008 in the Gafsa mining area (ALLAL 2010) and in 2010 at Ben Guerdane, on the Libyan border. Apart from the sequence of actions that followed the seizure of Salah's land, this local story can help us to look more deeply into the rural areas of central Tunisia and the factors favouring the challenge to inequalities and established forms of domination.

## 2 – Spatialised injustices: re-situating land dispossessions

### When injustice for some seems justice to others

By looking at how the inhabitants of the Regueb region perceive the opposition organised by Salah, we can measure the subjective and spatialised dimension of injustice: what some people find just, others find completely unjust. Certain online press articles attracted illuminating comments on this issue, in that they reflect what was being said by some farmers in Regueb. Several comments posted by inhabitants of that delegation,<sup>6</sup> following a France 24 article describing the protest march of 15 July 2010 organised by Salah, indicate that not everyone saw the loss of his land in the same way:

*"I have lived in Regueb from father to son [sic] since the place first existed. I don't agree at all with what's happening with these people who claim to be Regueb farmers. I don't recognise any of them in the published photos. Where do they come from? Everyone who has heard about this problem acknowledges that the demonstrators are land speculators*

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<sup>5</sup>RCD: *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*, former president Ben Ali's party, which had established a particularly dense network of local cells in Sidi Bouzid.

<sup>6</sup>This is what is suggested by the information available online. However, because of the medium, it is impossible to check the identity of the people who posted these comments, and it should not be ruled out that they may have been written for other motives.



*who come from all over to make money off our backs. How did they acquire our land? By what right did they claim funds and goods obtained by exploiting moments of weakness and poverty amongst our peasants, who have been on their land for two or three centuries? Is God just?"*

France 24 website, 2010

Salah and the three others who followed him to Tunis in December 2009 mostly had a primary occupation other than farming (notably in the health sector) and/or were not natives of Regueb, although they came from nearby delegations (Sidi Bouzid West, Ouled Haffouz) which are part of the governorate. The idea expressed in the comment above reveals different perceptions of legitimacy: the man who sees himself as a victim of dispossession is perceived by others as having himself dispossessed a family by buying his plot in Regueb, possibly putting that family in a situation more difficult than his own, when he had not inherited land there and already had a salary. This distinction on the basis of the main source of income and region of origin goes beyond the Salah case. It is frequently reiterated by many of the inhabitants of the region, whose socio-spatial organisation is the legacy of membership of tribal groups which settled there centuries ago. Rural space is structured by *douar*, houses grouped on the basis of family and kinship. Many of the places bear the name of a group that refers to a common ancestor, and although this ethnic identity is less vibrant since the semi-nomads became sedentary, it still persists in altered forms.

Thus, the family name is in many cases an indication of a person's spatial origin, and it is common to hear new owners described as "outsiders" by local people, even if they are Tunisian. In Regueb, some small farmers speak negatively of "sahli" (from Sahel, a coastal region around the city of Sousse) and "sfaxi" (from Sfax), to emphasise the binary opposition between "local" and "foreign". These landholders are also sometimes described as "colonists" (*moustawten*, *موستوطن*), a politically loaded term with associations to French colonisation and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. However, this opposition between local and foreign has gradations: the Sfaxian seems more foreign than the Buzidian, who could himself be perceived as an outsider in Regueb. In terms of the criteria of attachment to the land, while a piece of land may have been unjustly acquired, it is difficult to know how indigenous the occupants are, because of previous migrations (KOLERS 2010). In Regueb, the fact that certain big landowners native to the governorate are sometimes

described as “outsiders”, or conversely, that others from outside the region are not rejected, indicates that distance and geographical origin are not the only criteria involved in the definition of the term.

When I asked about the paradox of calling a Tunisian “foreign”, one small farmer replied: “they [the big landowners] are strangers to our suffering, they don’t give a damn about us”, a reference to the socio-economic inequalities between producers. Amongst small farmers, pluriactivity is usually a way of diversifying their sources of income when agriculture is insufficiently remunerative, whereas for the big landowners it is more about reinvesting capital when land provides better returns than the bank. Foreigners seem to be defined in terms of the share of household income obtained from agriculture and in terms of their professional identity. The term *fellah* (peasant), which refers to a person who physically works the land, is used by the farmers to describe themselves, by contrast with the term “investors” (*moustathmar*, مستثمر), which denotes the financial dimension of agriculture. The big landowners who employ farm managers tend to talk about their “farm” or “project”, sometimes not even defining themselves as farmers. Nevertheless, they consider themselves legitimate landowners, having acquired their land under market rules, and as more motivated than the men around the cafe tables, whom they perceive as lazy and responsible for the shortage of labour. For the sons of farmers, by contrast, the problem is that farm wages are not enough, especially as most of the big farms that employ labour bring in high revenues.

The definition of a foreigner also depends on the degree of investment in the region. A big farmer who contributes to local infrastructure development will be seen as a legitimate landowner, even if he comes from another region. It is about maintaining the territoriality that links a social group to “its” territory, what KOLERS (*ibid.*) calls *plenitude*, which relates to the social and identity value of a territory. For most of the inhabitants, therefore, someone from outside the region who helps to preserve and enrich the territory will not necessarily be rejected. We can see how the notion of injustice can depend on point of view, on ideological perspective, and how the legitimacy claimed for the possession of land depends on the interests at stake and the strategies of land management (PAUPERT 2010).

### **Changes in land ownership structures and differential access to agricultural land**

The complexity of this individual situation raises the question of how much it reflects more

general tendencies and the dynamics of access to land in the region (ABAAB 2006, ELLOUMI ET KAHOULI 2013). The difficulty of obtaining an in-depth interview and statistics from the BNA on the subject of agricultural loans, and the discussions with different people who have bought or sold land in Regueb, suggest that abusive procedures around land acquisition are not as isolated as might be imagined. It implies the possibility that some of the personnel of the funding institutions practise clientelist strategies, protected by the indulgence of the courts and connected with a national policy that encourages bank lending. It is difficult to give accurate figures, but it can be stated that several farmers have experienced situations similar to Salah's, without taking action as he did: by choice or because, given the security context and the systematic repression under Ben Ali, they were reduced to silence, unable to mobilise the peer networks needed to overcome the fear of public protest.

Apart from abusive procedures, the land conflict presented here is embedded in a context of growing land inequalities. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sedentarization, the division and registration of communal land, the cultivation of steppes and the spread of irrigation led to social and financial changes in the value of land. Before French colonisation, conflicts over land ownership were rare, centred more around livestock. As family farms became integrated into the capitalist system of production, land replaced livestock as the main factor of production (ATTIA 1977), and its price increased sharply in certain areas. Land has therefore become an economical issue: it is a way to adjust low-income family budget, and a key primary medium of investment for people seeking returns on capital. Whereas land had previously been essentially transmitted by inheritance, the late 1990s saw an upsurge in the land market, attracting more and more buyers from other governorates. The rising prices of inputs, the difficulty in recruiting labour, the shortage of storage and packaging infrastructures, the lack of public regulation of the agricultural produce market and urgent financial needs (accident, illness) explain why several farmers were obliged to sell all or part of their farms. For others, selling a plot was a way of intensifying production on the rest of the property, of investing for the family or in another sector of activity. These plots were bought by relations or buyers capable of investing significant sums and exploiting other commercial channels (processing, export). Recent developments highlight two opposing trends: concentration and fragmentation (Table 1). Whereas on many holdings, the plots have shrunk through generations of inheritance, new owners have managed to

build up estates sometimes as large as 100 hectares – very large holdings in this region where most are smaller than 5 hectares.

**Table 1: Trends in land inequalities in the Sidi Bouzid governorate**

Farm size (ha)	1977 - 1980		2004 - 2005	
	Proportion of farms (%)	Proportion of surface areas (%)	Proportion of farms (%)	Proportion of surface areas (%)
< 5	12	1.9	40.6	7.6
5 to 10	17.5	6.1	23.6	13.1
10 to 20	37	27	19.5	21.4
20 to 50	26	38	13.3	30.9
> 50	7.5	27	3	27

Data from ABAAB (1999) and SIDI BOUZID CRDA (2007)

Apart from land inequalities, it is socio-economic inequalities that further drive the sense of injustice in Regueb, the delegation most affected by this change in the land market in Sidi Bouzid. The fact that a significant proportion of holdings have been acquired through land loans provided by the APIA (Agricultural Investment Promotion Agency) fuels grievances. In Regueb, between 1995 and 2013, 225 loans were made, each for 10 to 20 ha (i.e. between 2.9 and 5.8% of arable land in the delegation). These loans, theoretically set aside for unemployed people with agricultural skills, were partly granted to businessmen working through proxies. Although the surface areas affected remain relatively small, they combine with all the transactions carried out by individuals who already have a principal income outside farming. In addition, these transactions are often based on large bank loans, whereas most small and medium-sized landholders are excluded from such financial support – the banks require significant collateral and favour customers with more resources. Given that, between 2000 and 2005, the Regueb delegation accounted for the largest proportion of national agricultural investment through APIA, it is worth looking more closely at how public policies led to spatial inequalities and injustices in this region. In addition to specialising injustices, the issue is also to understand who has a right to land – and by extension has a right to this rural space – and who is excluded from it.

### 3 – Right *to the rural* or right *of the rural*? Exclusions and revolutions

#### Rights and identities in rural space

Apart from Salah's fight, several factors show that the debate on the legitimacy of access to land generated local resistance. In Regueb, a video film made by a youngster retraces the chronology from the first riot following the burning ("Regueb 24 December 2010. Solidarity with Sidi Bouzid").<sup>7</sup> The film's opening sequence, which coincides with accounts obtained elsewhere, show that the gathering took place in front of the BNA, where a fire was lit before the group moved on to the police station (VEZIEN SAINT-ARAILLE, 2014). The ATM would be burned the next day. Apart from the temptation to get at the money, it would seem that the bank was the target of the initial protests as a symbol of access to land, controversial seizures and clientelist practices, but also of the inequitable system of investment and agricultural subsidy.

At this time, there were many in Regueb who had not heard of Salah's protest in 2010 – a sign of the effectiveness of the social control system. Moreover, even today and in the different delegations in Sidi Bouzid, many of those familiar with this conflict are unaware of the family connection between Mohamed Bouazizi and Salah. Combined with what the farmers say today, this confirms that the protest movement that spread at the end of 2010 was not connected with Salah's land, nor solely with land inequalities, but was more generally a response to the conditions of access to agricultural land and to the possibilities of making it productive. Moreover, the land issues were not exclusively about individual private land. This can be deduced from certain slogans painted on the walls of Maknassy, a delegation in the south of Sidi Bouzid governorate (Photos 1 and 2): the authors – from the locality of Ennasr – call for a change in the land situation (updating of land titles, changes in land use).

These demands, local as they were, related to disputes about land whose ownership or use had remained unclear for several decades: they refer firstly to land allocated in 1974 to militants who had fought the colonial authorities before independence, who had not

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<sup>7</sup>Some say that the gathering was a response to provocation by Sidi Bouzid demonstrators, who reproached them for not taking part in the movement when other regions were already doing so (Maknassy, Menzel Bouzaïene).



obtained title to the land – through lack of information, lack of interest or simply because they trusted President Bourguiba – which had remained officially state-owned. Secondly, they refer to two abortive projects on a plot (Photo 1) which the authors demand to revive (a bilateral almond plantation and processing plant project; a private automobile factory project designed to exploit the nearby railway).

**Photo 1: Ennasr, Maknassy (Fautras, 2013): Slogans: *“Welcome to the industrial zone”, “We demand the regularisation of the situation of the land and its reallocation from agriculture to industry”***



Note: The use of the agricultural estate land in the background has not been officially changed.

**Photo 2: Ennasr, Maknassy (Fautras, 2013)**



“Regularisation of the situation of the farmland + rapid change in its use from agriculture to industry = a bold and wise political decision”

Elsewhere in Maknassy, certain members of the agricultural cooperatives created in the 1960s had signed contracts with the land institutions to become owners of the plots after several years of cultivation. However, the sudden suspension of the socialist policy trend in the late 1960s led to the cancellation of the transfer of this land. The concerned families occupied the land several times to claim ownership (in 1988 and 2004 in Maknassy, and in other regions of the country), which led to the issue of a decree in October 2011 to regularise these situations. The list of land disputes could be a long one: disputes about the legitimacy of tenants of estate land, or occupation of that land – considered illegal by the authorities but legitimate by the demonstrators; challenging of practices of patronage by certain management committees responsible for the division of the remaining

communal land; conflicts about the allocation of parcels, resulting in the blocking of the procedure and, in Kébili and Gafsa, in sometimes fatal confrontations.

These conflicts illustrate the issue around land in Sidi Bouzid and more generally in the centre and south of the country. They reflect the change in local balances of power, in relations between the population and the regional institutions, and in national policies, which have partly contributed to accentuating inequalities and exacerbating tensions by favouring certain social groups over others in some regions (such as the priority placed on land registration in areas with high economic potential), or by leaving in the air the fate of regions where conflicts have taken on a tribal dimension. At the same time, the slogans mentioned above show that the right to land is not always an end in itself, but is characterised by other underlying demands relating to rights in general in the rural world. Indeed, it may be that the demand for the establishment of an industrial zone also came from small town residents in the area, seeking work outside the agricultural sector which, as currently organised, fails to meet the needs of everyone. More than a right to an industrialized or urbanized space, we should perhaps see it as a demand for the reconsideration of rights in rural areas: right to work, even the right to work in a domain other than agriculture. The slogans chanted in Regueb a few days after Bouazizi's suicide, in particular "land has been sold and the people are starving", are a reminder that land remains an economic asset. What is being demanded is the right to be able to earn enough from it, or at least not to be disadvantaged in comparison with producers who draw their income essentially from outside agriculture.

What many farmers are protesting is the trend towards closure (ANDRÉ-LAMAT ET MELLAC 2011, GAGNOL ET AFANE 2010), towards a distinction between two rural spaces, one of dispossession, the other of accumulation. One might wonder to what extent the fact that the people who join forces with Salah Bouazizi (the three who followed him to Tunis) were essentially not native to Regueb is indicative of the network of social relations between investors from elsewhere. This tendency to confrontation between two spaces does not exclude interdependencies, in particular through labour, which often emanates from the first space and works in the second. However, it is transforming the existing rural space through a process of proletarianization and, at times, through the disappearance of the family dimension of the *douars*, as land changes hands and houses are occupied by people working on the new properties. Here, it is the right of residence that is challenged, since



land is not only a place to live or an economic asset, but also a factor of identity. For many, land constitutes a family heritage and the ancestors memory; it contributes to the sense of belonging, to dignity and honour. Indeed, it was in the name of honour that Salah claims to have rebelled against the seizure of his land – which confirms to what extent the distinctions between locals and foreigners are blurred. In this region, as in others historically characterised by tribal organisation (JAMOUS 1981), many people believe that a man without land is a man without dignity. In addition to the economic and political factors, land conflicts in central Tunisia are thus determined by the social and identity value of land. To be excluded from the place where one's ancestors lived is to be deprived of the right to fully exist. To borrow an expression developed by LE BLANC (2009), it is to become socially invisible.

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that all the inhabitants share this symbolic value of the land. At least, it is not necessarily predominant and is sometimes displaced by a commercial and monetised value, which also explains why non-inheritance related land transactions increased sharply over just few years. Without being exclusive, these values and multiple dimensions of belonging (tribe, class, age, activity sector, place of residence) are mobilised alternately depending on the context and the interests at stake. This is what explains how a small farmer who speaks negatively of the "foreigners" who have bought land in Regueb can nevertheless work as a farm manager or labourer for one of them. Similarly, although the law on access to water is theoretically the same for everyone, a civil servant who is a native of Regueb can reproach an investor from another region: "You have three boreholes, and you're not even from around here!" Beyond the often vaunted equity between producers, the sense that one could be more indulgent with locals wins out, making justice itself a question of identity. The legitimacy of access to land and the associated resources is thus embedded in a variety of factors (identity-related, social, political, economic), which are both inclusive and exclusive in allowing the rights of one group to be opposed to those of another (PAUPERT *op. cit.*). The insecurities and inequalities in access to the land are not so much caused by a shortage of land, but defined more in the relations between actors, in political struggles and the processes of inclusion and exclusion expressed at different scales (COTE 2011).

## **The rights of rural space confronting nested spatial injustices at different scales**

The interpretation of land conflicts in terms of territorial integration and exclusion can be pursued at another scale, by considering rural areas and populations as a whole – heterogeneous though they may be – in comparison with urban areas. Of the people who took to the streets in the different delegations of Sidi Bouzid, a large proportion were sons of farmers not in full-time work. While in the first days after 17 December 2010, the gatherings were organised first in solidarity with the demonstrators in the town of Sidi Bouzid, and then to denounce police violence, the demands quickly focused on two issues: employment and corruption. Under the Ben Ali system, corruption spread to every level and area of society, excluding the poorest and those least embedded in patronage networks. As well as corruption, the lack of job diversity and the many problems in the farming sector, changing lifestyles also often discourage young people from taking over the family farm. For some, remaining on the land of their fathers is important, but not enough to provide a social and economic position. Justice is not only linked with access to land; as in the city, it also depends on the right to consumption (buying a car, building a house), the right to education, to health, to social status (in particular marriage).

Sidi Bouzid's economic integration at national level through the farming sector has not stopped local exclusion. Vegetable production in Regueb competes with the northern regions, where substantial market gardening output has a long history, but it does not involve all the farmers: some are obliged to give up farming, whether permanently or temporarily, without necessarily leaving the rural space. The situation of the governorate and its inhabitants, who are 75% rural, remains marked by the division between coastal and inland Tunisia (DAOUD 2011) and by a regionalism that is visible at several levels: be it the "peasant accent" mocked in the cities of the north, employment discrimination, or the persistent high rate of unemployment in these governorates (15% in Sidi Bouzid in 2010, a figure that has been rising in recent years, and 40% of young people). Figures that are sometimes interpreted as a way of guaranteeing a reservoir of cheap labour for the cities of the coast. Investment and public intervention in these regions seem to remain sporadic and partial. The outcome of the land conflict involving the four people who brought the case to Tunis in 2009, in which only two obtained a settlement (Salah and his neighbour in Regueb), is indicative of the temporary management of a profound crisis in the agricultural system: in response to the occupation of the land and the notoriety of the Bouazizi name,

the new owner, the bank and the political authorities preferred to reach an amicable arrangement to avoid further demonstrations.

In addition, the neglect of the rural populations of Sidi Bouzid is apparent in the media arena. Since 2010, the main TV channels and newspapers have essentially reported protests and confrontations affecting urban areas, often failing to mention the many rural dwellers who take part: they talk about the coastal towns, less about those inland; they report on the city of Sidi Bouzid but have little to say about the surrounding rural areas – or only to cast slurs. Paradoxically, despite the scale of the rural and agricultural roots of the movements, those roots are largely “invisible” in the discourses of politicians and urban elites, and the claims of country dwellers tend to go unheard outside the demonstrations (e.g. the Kasbah sit-ins, initiated by residents of Menzel Bouzaïene) (AYEB *op. cit.*, ELLOUMI *op. cit.*). Salah’s protest was covered in a few newspapers in 2010, and was also mentioned in a biography of Mohamed Bouazizi written by a French journalist (CHABERT-DALIX 2012). However, since he burnt himself alive, the media have mostly focused on the details (in practical terms, how did he set himself on fire, was he slapped or not?) and on other issues (electoral timetable, Islamism), which are certainly important but far from the day-to-day realities of most country dwellers. This refusal to recognise and remedy the marginalisation of the countryside at the different scales is probably a sign that the position of the rural relative to the urban remains to be negotiated, despite the resistances and new models emerging there.

The struggles for land described here thus highlight the need to reconsider the rights of rural populations, but also to redefine the nature of the rural, perceived as it is in negative terms relative to urban spaces in Tunisia as elsewhere, and often disadvantaged relative to the cities.<sup>8</sup> Profound inequalities of rights within rural areas and an absence of a serious alternative to agriculture for many of their inhabitants, but also political exclusion in most of these rural spaces compared with urban communities: in such conditions, it would seem that many have the right to nothing more than a marginalised and largely neglected rurality, with little diversity of activities, where even small (and large) towns are urban only in name. It is somewhat as if the rights of rurality and of rural people were rights by default, and have yet to be defined in positive terms.

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<sup>8</sup>In Tunisia, the National Institute of Statistics considers all non-urban spaces as rural, often characterised by scattered housing, by contrast with the generally built-up nature of urban spaces.

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## Conclusion

Ultimately, Salah's case is symptomatic of the changes that have affected the regions of central Tunisia in recent decades and of the inequalities that arise from them, driven both by public policies and by the strategies of the inhabitants of rural areas. Spacialising the injustices felt is a way to highlight the diversity of their forms and perceptions and to show how difficult it is to define what justice is (BRET *ET AL* 2010). It is also a way to show how the right to land can constitute a springboard to access to other rights in rural areas (employment, dignity, consumption). In addition, planning policies contribute to an overlap in the sense of injustice at several levels (social, economic, political, identity-related) and scales: the *fellahs* feel deprived in the face of inequalities in access to resources, accentuated by public policies; the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid disadvantaged compared with those of other governorates and particularly Sfax or Sahel; the inhabitants of the centre of the country marginalised compared with those of the north and of the coast. This overlap contributes to the sense of exclusion shared by many rural people in central Tunisia, and no doubt favoured the spread of resistances from the local to the national scale. In this sense, the different resistances expressed the need to give rural areas and their populations the role they deserve as providers of wealth, goods, labour, culture and socio-political projects.

Thus, the study of the recent protests in Sidi Bouzid is one further example that can be used to deconstruct the image of the rural as amorphous and subordinate to the urban. Without explaining all the current social and political upheavals in Tunisia, the dynamics of resistance associated with land issues provide elements that help clarify how the protest movement gained the momentum in this region of Sidi Bouzid that it did, moving from rural to urban, before spreading elsewhere in the country. It should not be forgotten that the men and women who took part in the movements represent a minority of the region's population: most of the farmers stayed out of these protests, although facing the same problems as those who demonstrated and continuing to do so in different forms (GANA 2011). Likewise, we cannot say that this movement originated solely in agriculture or in the difficulties of rural areas. Apart from the shared anger about the many injustices and the prevalence of corruption, it arose from the conjunction of multiple movements, linked to territorialised struggles against exclusion at several scales, and to demands that varied from one region to another.

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