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## **The Rural and Agricultural Roots of the Tunisian Revolution: When Food Security Matters**

ALIA GANA

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**Abstract.** Originating in rural areas, the popular uprising that led to the Tunisian revolution of 14 January 2011 has shed light on the growing social and regional disparities that have characterized development dynamics in Tunisia. While favouring the reallocation of resources to coastal areas to the detriment of interior and agricultural regions, liberalization processes since the late 1980s also fostered export-oriented agricultural development strategies, based on the promotion of large-scale agricultural enterprises and irrigated farming. As a result, imports of grains and animal feed have come to represent a growing source of commercial balance deficit and of financial pressure on public budgets, particularly since the food crisis of 2008. On the other hand, decreasing farm subsidies, higher production costs, growing farmers' indebtedness, have importantly reduced the reproduction capacity of a large fraction of farms, particularly in the rain-fed agriculture sector. As rural outmigration and non-farm employment opportunities have been declining, small farms have become survival spaces for jobless household members, increasing the pressure on family resources and exacerbating social frustrations. While rising food prices were not the only cause of recent uprisings in Tunisia, processes of agricultural restructuring during the past 20 years contributed importantly to fuel the revolutionary dynamics, thus giving a political dimension to food issues. As demonstrated by the rise of farmers' protest movement (land occupations, contestation of farmers unions, refusal to pay for irrigation water), structural change allowing for an increased control of economic resources by local farm producers is needed, but will fundamentally depend on the effectiveness of current process of 'democratic' transition in Tunisia.

### **Introduction**

Driven mostly by aspirations for freedom, social justice and dignity, the popular uprisings in North Africa have shed light on the widespread social and political frustrations in the region, shattering the idyllic image of good students of the IMF and the World Bank that countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt enjoyed internationally (political stability, economic success and social progress, especially for Tunisia). While rising food prices and high unemployment fuelled the initial protests, these took rapidly a political turn, calling for the fall of the authoritarian regimes.

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What is commonly referred to as the 'Arab Spring'<sup>1</sup> has surprised most analysts around the world, including social scientists. However, it is possible to detect the signs of the social and popular explosion of recent months in the strong tensions and social conflicts that several countries of the region have experienced over the past four years. We can mention the riot of the mine-workers in south Tunisia in 2008, the numerous strikes in the manufacturing sector and the occupations of factories both in Tunisia and Egypt, the multiple mobilizations of peasants in Egypt, conflicts over water and land, and finally the food riots in Morocco, Egypt and Jordan after the explosion of food prices in 2007–2008. In addition, although the social actors and the mobilizations that prepared the popular uprisings of the last months are somewhat different according to country (protests started in rural areas in Tunisia and mostly in urban settings in Egypt and Morocco), however, many similarities can be observed in recent trajectories of the countries of the region. In this regard, it appears crucial to have a retrospective look at the deep causes of the 'Arab revolts' and to explore their links with development strategies put in place in these countries and with forms of their integration into the global economy.

In this context, the objectives of this article are threefold: 1. to explore some of the socio-economic dynamics that have contributed to the explosion of the popular revolts in the region, focusing mainly on the Tunisian example; 2. to identify more specifically their links with development strategies, which have undermined the capacity of national economies to secure food self-sufficiency and a continuing and affordable access to food for the population; 3. to assess the ways in which the Tunisian revolution and ongoing protest movements in rural areas are likely to influence future directions of agricultural development policies and to foster new approaches to food security. We argue that the popular uprising in the region, rather being a localized and punctual response against authoritarian regimes, has deep historical roots. The underlying sources of the revolutionary upsurge need in fact to be searched in the detrimental effects of IMF- and World Bank-inspired neo-liberal policies on people's capacity to secure decent work and livelihoods and should be interpreted in relation to the crisis of the globalization project and the world food system (McMichael, 2012). Drawing on a critical globalization studies perspective (Appelbaum and Robinson, 2005) and on food regimes analyses (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; McMichael, 2005), the article suggests that while rising food prices were not the only cause of recent uprisings in Tunisia, processes of agricultural restructuring during the past 20 years contributed importantly to fueling the revolutionary dynamics, thus giving a political dimension to food issues. Following other authors, we argue that this political dimension needs to be reintroduced in approaches to food security (Patel and McMichael, 2009). As the rise of the farmers' protest movement demonstrates, structural change is needed to allow for an increased control of economic resources by local farm producers. However, this will depend fundamentally on the effectiveness of the current process of 'democratic' transition in Tunisia and, more particularly, on the capacity of civil society to exert pressure on the orientations of development policies.

### **Increasing Inequalities and Growing Unemployment**

During the last 20 years, several countries of the region, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, have experienced major socio-economic transformations, linked firmly to their engagement in a process of economic liberalization and their opening up to the

world markets. As in other developing countries, trade liberalization and structural adjustment policies, led under the stewardship of the IMF and the World Bank, were expected to favour better resource allocation, foreign investment and technology transfer, and to have positive effects on growth, poverty alleviation and employment, especially through the promotion of labour-intensive industries (World Bank, 2000).

Initiated in Tunisia in the late 1980s and in Egypt in the early 1990s, structural adjustment policies led to a movement of large-scale privatization, liberalization of prices and trade and to significant cuts in public expenditures (lower consumption subsidies, reduction of public employment, etc.). The overall objective of these policy reforms was the gradual transformation of national economies from state-dominated to more market-driven ones (Guerrero, 2010). While reinforcing the orientation of their national economies towards exports (manufacturing industry, tourism, export-oriented agricultural production), they have exposed them to the fierce competition of the world markets (textile industry) and also have increased their dependency on staple food imports. In both countries, as well as in Morocco, the textile sector has been hard hit by the impact of the dismantling of the Multi-Fiber Agreement and resulted, particularly in Tunisia, in the destruction of thousands of jobs.

As a result of these development strategies based on the promotion of low-productivity economic sectors, which generate weak employment opportunities for qualified workers, both countries have been faced with a major crisis of employment, aggravated, especially in Tunisia, by a massive arrival of young graduates on the labour market. With declining public employment and international outmigration opportunities, unemployment rates have reached record levels in Egypt (30%), and slightly lower in Tunisia (20%), particularly among higher education graduates (Salehi-Isfahani, 2010).

As elsewhere, the contraction of wage-work opportunities resulting from structural adjustment programmes has been associated with the growth of the informal sector (McMichael, 2012). In fact, while public policies failed to integrate large economic segments of the work-force, a growing proportion of the active population, especially in poor areas, have relied increasingly on informal and even on illegal activities,<sup>2</sup> particularly in border regions (Algeria, Libya).<sup>3</sup> However, the informal sector was soon invested by groups connected to the political powers, who did not fail to see in illicit activities new sources of enrichment and who, favoured by widespread corruption involving members of the administration, ended up exercising their control over the sector's most lucrative activities. In doing so, they have deprived large fractions of the popular class of their unique source of income sources (Elbaz, 2009).

One major trend of the recent socio-economic dynamics in North Africa is the growing disparities in the distribution of wealth and the increase of poverty.<sup>4</sup> Processes of liberalization and the development of an offshore economic sector have contributed in fact to the enrichment of a new class of businessmen, which is strongly linked to political power, and which greatly benefited from the privatization of public enterprises and widespread corruption. As a result, social and income disparities have increased considerably,<sup>5</sup> with not only an aggravation of poverty rates, but also a severe decline of the living standards of the middle class, which had developed particularly in Tunisia previously (Ben Romdhane, 2011). And with the explosion of consumption needs, social frustrations have been growing, not only within the middle class, but especially among precarious groups, situated immediately above

the poverty line and which have been affected severely by the rising cost of living, mostly as a result of increasing prices of food staples and of decreasing subsidies for basic consumer products).

### **Growing Regional Disparities**

With unemployment problems and increased social inequalities, growing regional disparities represent another underlying source of the recent popular uprisings in North Africa. As pointed out by several authors, one major trend of globalization processes is the phenomenon of spatial polarization at different scales, and the growing spatial inequalities between centre and periphery (Krugman, 1998; Vandermotten et al., 2010). This process of spatial polarization is even stronger in developing countries. First, the gap between the main urban areas and the rest of the country, particularly in terms of infrastructure and qualified labour remains important and is even widening (Vandermotten et al., 2010). Second, the spillover effects of the modern sector on the rest of the economy are limited, because this one is more integrated with the economies of the centre than with the local economy, and the profits are reinvested in core countries, hindering an accumulation of capital at the local level (Dixon and Boswell, 1996)

In Tunisia and in Morocco, for example, liberalization processes since the late 1980s have favoured the reallocation of resources to coastal areas – where tourist and labour-intensive industrial activities are increasingly concentrated – to the detriment of inland and rural areas. In Egypt spatial differentiations increasingly take the form of a partition between the delta region, which is highly urbanized, and the Nile valley, where rural development has received only secondary attention from public policy as priority has been given to the treatment of urban problems, considered potentially explosive.

Despite major social achievements, human development indicators in Tunisia still indicate important gaps and even growing inequalities between, on the one hand, coastal and inland areas and, on the other, between urban and rural areas (living conditions, health, education and employment). It is precisely in the regions, which haven't benefited from economic development (mostly the Central West and the North-west) that social protests have started and have spread to the whole country later. Also it is worth recalling that in Tunisia, as in all North African countries, poverty remains most importantly rural.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Marginalization of Agriculture: Growing Food Dependency and the Undermining of Land-based Rights**

In fact, although territorial policies geared towards reducing regional disparities and diversifying the rural economy through the promotion of industrial activities in rural areas have been put in place since the 1980s, job creation for rural inhabitants has remained very limited, while the share of rural household income generated from agriculture has been steadily decreasing. Today the agricultural sector accounts only for 11% of GDP and for 15% of total employment (against 20% for industrial activities and 50% for services). This important regression of the agricultural sector in rural employment appears to be closely related to the specific role that has been assigned to agriculture in development strategies. We can distinguish two main pe-

riods that illustrate Tunisia's shifting forms of integration into the global economy (Gana, 1998) and which are also profoundly linked to major transformations in the global food regime (McMichael, 2009; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011).

During a first period, which goes roughly from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, development objectives were focused on the necessity to provide the urban population with cheap food and to reduce labour costs as a way to promote the country's industrialization (this was part of a strategy of import substitution and most importantly a major component of the state-led modernization project). But while food self-sufficiency was proclaimed as the main objective of agricultural development, actually since the 1970s, foreign aid and agreements fostered growing imports of wheat, milk, and beef, originating from American and European food surpluses. This dynamic clearly corresponds to what Friedmann and McMichael (1989) have characterized as the second global food regime.<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, food consumption needs of both the urban and the rural population were to be increasingly satisfied through imports of basic food products at cheap prices from the international markets, thus relegating agricultural development to a secondary place. Shifts in consumption patterns towards diets including more animal proteins was fostered by the implementation of a compensation fund (*Caisse Générale de Compensation*), which subsidized mainly imported staple food. During this first period however, the social role of agriculture in maintaining the rural population in the countryside and its contribution to reducing rural outmigration continued to be recognized.

Starting in the late 1980s, the implementation of structural adjustment policies promoted new forms of integration into the global economy and implied a new role for the agricultural sector, conforming to the requirements of the emerging global food system.<sup>8</sup> This one aimed at reinforcing the contribution of agriculture to the global economic balance of the country, through promoting export-oriented farm production and expanding the irrigated sector. Structural adjustment resulted in major shifts in agricultural policies, with privatization of state farms, cuts in farm subsidies, farm price liberalization, the reorganization of the farm credit system, and the gradual privatization of food marketing networks. These policy changes, which expressed a shift from food self-sufficiency objectives to a food security approach based on an increased integration into the world food markets, fostered the reallocation of economic resources in favour of large-scale and corporate agricultural enterprises to the detriment of the family-farming sector and rain-fed agriculture (Gana, 1998). As a result, and despite the increase in agricultural exports (fruits and vegetables, sea food), imports of grains and animal feed have come to represent a growing source of commercial balance deficit (55% of the country's consumption needs in grains are imported, 100% of food needs in the poultry sector, and more than 40% of cattle feed). This dependency on external markets is now exerting a growing pressure on public budgets, particularly since the food crisis of 2008, undermining state capacity to subsidize food staples.

Cuts in farm subsidies, farm price liberalization and the reorganization of the agricultural credit system have significantly altered the economic environment of farming activities and have been manifest in major transformations in patterns of rural livelihoods. These transformations indicate a major break in the conditions defining household access to land, i.e. a weakening of land-rights based on family survival and a reconstitution of these rights in favour of those who can use farm land as a means of production (Gana, 1998). As a result of changing farm production

conditions and patterns of social reproduction, growing processes of differentiation (including within family farms) were to be observed. First, with decreasing farm subsidies and growing competition for land resources, the reproduction capacity of an important group of family farms has become increasingly dependent on the diversification of both farm and non-farm income sources. Diversification of farming systems involved importantly a shift from grain to horticulture and fruit production, based on irrigation. Second, processes of farm restructuring have been manifest in the increased marginalization (with respect to agricultural production, particularly of grain) of small landholders where farming is part of a livelihood strategy based on pluriactivity. With shifts towards low-input farm activities, survival strategies in this farm group have been increasingly based on off-farm wage labour of household members, indicating a progressive movement out of agriculture. While calling into question the utilization of land as a means of livelihood<sup>9</sup> and as a mechanism of social redistribution, these processes have challenged the role of the state as a mediating factor in processes of liberalization and commoditisation. Furthermore, as rural outmigration and non-farm employment opportunities have been declining, small farms have become survival spaces for jobless household members, increasing the pressure on family resources and exacerbating social frustrations in rural areas, where the movement of social protest has started.

### **Food Issues: A Political Dimension**

It is this conjunction of processes, including growing social inequalities and corruption, that contributed to crystallizing social and political discontent. In fact, the popular uprising of January 2011, which rallied various groups of the population, including the middle class, rapidly made a political turn while calling for the overthrow of the rulers. If the Tunisian revolution is not only the consequence of rising food prices, the wave of revolts started nevertheless against a background of deteriorating social conditions and living standards. According to FAO (2011), global food prices reached a record high in January 2011, surpassing the levels reached during the 2007–2008 food crisis. As several analysts have shown, the extreme vulnerability to rising food prices of most countries of North Africa was undoubtedly a precipitating condition for social unrest (Bellemare, 2011; Breisinger et al., 2011; Lagi et al., 2011; World Bank, 2011). Impacts of the food crisis have been expressed in growing financial pressures on public budgets and cuts in food subsidies.<sup>10</sup> This had major consequences for household budgets, increasing the share of consumption expenditures devoted to food. In most countries of North Africa, the pressure on household budgets has been so important that the share of family expenditure on food is still very high: 35.8% in Tunisia, 38.8% in Egypt, 43.9% in Algeria (USDA, 2007). As mentioned above, the impacts of higher food prices was also felt in rural and farm households, as these rely importantly and increasingly on purchased food. The rapid decline of food auto-consumption practices among farm households and the undermining of local food supply systems, which reinforces the dependency on imported staple food, illustrates the ‘increasingly central role that (global food systems are) playing in human survival and well-being’ (Lagi et al., 2011).

A recent IFPRI report asserts that ‘food security has deteriorated in most Arab countries, which is consistent with observed high food prices inflation’ and that, particularly in Tunisia, ‘more people... lacked money to buy enough food in 2010 [compared to] the previous year’. The diminishing capacity of the largest fraction of

the population to access staple food and, more generally, the increased inability of the state to hamper the erosion of household incomes has been no doubt an important factor in crystallizing social discontent in North Africa (Breisinger et al., 2011).

However, beyond the evidence that declining living standards and food security played a role in triggering social unrest, what is important to underline is that the popular uprising in North Africa has given a political dimension to food issues. In fact, by revealing the shortcomings of agricultural policies and their inability to tackle the social dimensions of development, the food crisis and its consequence has contributed to the disruption of the social contract on which the legitimacy of the Tunisian regime was based. This was reflected in the slogan 'Bread and water without dictatorship', which was chanted during the protest movement of January 2011. With this regard, the assertion that the food issue has taken a political dimension should not be understood in a restrictive way, i.e. that increases in food prices are likely to generate food riots and social unrest, but rather that they can lead, as was the case in Tunisia, to the rejection of the entire socio-political system. Another illustration of how the food issue has taken a political dimension is when former Tunisian President Ben Ali on 13 January decided to reduce the price of staples such as sugar, milk and bread. The offer wasn't enough to prevent the thousands of protesters who had gathered the day after in the capital, Tunis, to demand his ouster (Romm, 2011). The politicization of the protest movement indicates that people were making a direct link between political choices and development orientations and the deterioration of their living conditions. In people's mind a better access to food staples implied the overthrow of the dictator. As Lagi et al. (2011) point out, 'in food importing countries with widespread poverty, political organisations may be perceived to have a critical role in food security. Failure to provide security undermines the very reason for existence of the political system.'

As we will see in the following section, social protests and farmers' demands for structural reforms have amplified during the transition period, illustrating their aspirations for a radical break with the former regime and development policies.

### **Farmers' Protests in the Transition Period: A Reactivation of Class Struggle in the Countryside?**

The profound transformations in the conditions of farmers' access to agricultural resources that have accompanied process of liberalization and state disengagement during the last two decades have favoured the rise of social tensions and conflicts in rural areas, particularly growing claims over land and water. Since the late 1980s, the transfer of farm co-operative to private companies has often been faced with a strong opposition from former co-operative workers, many of whom have lost their jobs and their livelihoods (Gana, 1998).

Similarly, decentralization and transfer of water management from state agencies to local user associations, rather than reinforcing farmer control over the resource, have favoured monopolizing by the most influential economic actors, while enhancing the capacity of local authorities to interfere in the allocation of water to the detriment of small farmers (Gana and Amrani, 2006; Gana, 2011).

The rising discontent in rural areas also originated from farmers' growing indebtedness. Many of them, particularly small farmers are subject to lawsuits for failing to repay bank loans and are under the threat of land expropriation.<sup>11</sup> The transfer of state-owned agricultural land to private investors, including members of families



allied to the regime, has continued to be the source of many tensions between, on the one hand, farm workers and, on the other, managers of large farm holdings and the agricultural administration. Although they had been rarely satisfied, protests over and claims on public farms have remained very much alive among peasants and farm workers in many areas.

Since 14 January, social protests have amplified in rural and agricultural areas, and appear in many ways to reactivate class struggle in the countryside. The following section is based on recent research conducted in the framework of the Tunisian Observatory of the Democratic transition, which existed in the follow-up of farmers' mobilizations during the transition period that led to the elections of the National Constituent Assembly of 23 October (Gana, 2011). Data collected<sup>12</sup> and interviews carried out with various farmers' groups show that multiple forms of collective action have taken place, seeking various objectives according to farming groups: access to resources (land claims, access to water and financial resources), better working conditions and remuneration, contestation of farmers unions and user associations, contestation of marketing conditions and pricing mechanisms, etc.

Right after 14 January, a large number of state farms (more than 100), which had been transferred to private investors, have been the target of attacks by organized groups, causing major damages and destruction. Several of these farms have been occupied by farm workers and landless peasants who are denouncing the privatization of state farms and are now asking the transition government to redistribute these farms in their favour (African Manager, 2011). Claims on state-owned farm land have amplified and a number of political parties have expressed their support to a project of agrarian reform that would improve access to land of small-holders and farm workers. Furthermore these protests are going so far as to call into question state ownership of agricultural land. Indeed, in many areas farmers are now demanding to get back the land of their ancestors, first confiscated by French colonists and nationalized by the state after independence. A number of families have undertaken steps to the recognition of their rights on state land, based on the presentation of old titles. Also punctual occupations of large farms by small-holders and agricultural workers aimed at hindering the performance of plowing tasks at the beginning of the cropping season have been reported. These various forms of actions are part of the will to exert pressure for the recognition of the right of the poor to a better access to land and are thus highly political. Farmers' protests over land have drawn attention to the long-ignored social consequences of privatization of state-owned farm land, which deprived numerous rural families from an important part of their livelihood. In addition to the land protest movement, farm workers, mostly employed on a seasonal basis, have organized numerous strikes and sit-ins, sometimes with the support of trade unions, to ask for better wages and better working conditions. Their actions seek also to consolidate the organization of farm workers within the framework of specific unions.

On the other hand, holders of corporate farms are getting organized into associations to defend their interests and are asking the transition government to protect their enterprises and to be compensated for the damages that a large number of them have had, as a result of several acts of violence and occupation. So far their demands have not been fulfilled. Protests have been staged also to contest the leaders of the farmers union, considered as being compromised with the former regime and not representative of their interests (Mestiri, 2011). Farmers have organized several demonstrations, in front of the government house in the capital, in order to demand

the resignation of the farmers union leaders and in many cases they have obtained satisfaction. This contestation movement has led recently to some farmers creating a new farmers union, seeking more autonomy vis-à-vis the political power.

Mobilizations have also sought to denounce the problem of farmers' indebtedness, which led a number of small-holders to bankruptcy, and to exert pressure on the government to lift debts contracted by this category of farmers. Farmer protests and demonstrations are also related to pricing problems resulting from the privatization of grain collection. Contestation of new pricing mechanisms, based on the evaluation of the quality of grain, have conducted numerous farmers to refuse to sell their grain to private collectors and some farmers' groups are calling for the re-establishment of state monopoly over the commercialization of grains. Also horticulture and milk producers have organized several demonstrations and sit-ins, to protest against selling conditions imposed on them by the agro-industry.

Another form of protest, which has amplified over the past months, is the contestation of water users' association and the refusal of farmers to pay for irrigation water. Farmers, as well as rural households are asking for a free access to water and for the state to reengage in the management of water resources that had been transferred to water user associations, both for potable and irrigation water. Water related conflicts and mobilizations, which challenge state withdrawal from the management of water resources, express the rise of demands for a more equitable sharing of water resources and more generally for better living conditions in rural areas.

What these multiple forms of protests clearly reveal is the rise of social struggles in the countryside and a profound contestation of former state policies, but also a differentiation of farmer demands, according to the different social groups. Actually, there is a consensus among farmers that agricultural development should be given a renewed and increased attention in state policies, policies that farmers consider to have been biased in favour of the industrial and the touristic sectors. But what we also observe are the growing contradictions between, on the one hand, demands seeking structural reforms, particularly in land distribution among the different groups of farmers, as well as demands for the re-engagement of the state in the management of agricultural activities, and, on the other hand, resistance of the big farmers' group and the multiplication of actions aiming at creating the conditions for the reinforcement of private initiative and farmers' organizations in the management of agricultural activities.

It is of course too early to tell what will be the outcome of dynamics and mobilizations taking place in rural areas. In any case, the Tunisian revolution, which is still going on, has fostered a renewed attention on agricultural development, particularly with regard to social and food security issues. These issues not only have an important weight in the current political debate, but have already lead the transition government to engage a large consultation on food security issues and to elaborate a long-term investment programme in the grain production sector.

Also land protests and occupations of corporate farm enterprises have given voice to poor farm workers and small-holders and have contributed to put at the forefront of the political agenda the issue of resource allocation between the different categories of farmers. Evidence of this evolving approach to the land question is the reluctance of the transition government, at least before the 23 October elections, to satisfy the demands of corporate farms and the possible revision of the attribution criteria of state-owned land to take into consideration the needs of poor households.

The explosion of demands for social justice in rural areas have strongly influenced the political debate during the transition period and have been heavily instrumentalised by some political parties who have based their campaign on the idea that the solution to people's problems was conditioned by a radical change with the past. Whether or not these dynamics will translate in major shifts in development orientations for the agriculture sector will depend on the balance of power that can be created, on the one side between the various groups that constitute the farming population, on the other side between these various groups and the new political elite that emerged from recent elections. Preliminary analyses of the result of past elections, which made the Islamist 'Ennahda' the first party of the country, do not to reflect the main 'objective' causes that were at the origins of the popular uprisings in Tunisia.<sup>13</sup>

Future development orientations for the agricultural sector, which provides livelihoods for a large fraction of the population and plays a key in role the country's food security, will mainly depend on the capacity of civil society and farmers' groups to organize as autonomous forces capable of exerting a continuing pressure on the new transition government.

## Conclusion

Several lessons can be drawn from the analysis of the relationship between food issues and the political crisis in Tunisia. First of all, although food issues were not the only cause of the Tunisian revolution, the background impact of soaring food prices and high level of food insecurity no doubt contributed to crystallize the movement of social protest that led to the fall of Ben Ali's regime. Second, policies that submit agricultural development exclusively to the requirements of the global market, without ensuring a certain level of self-sufficiency in basic food products, are unsustainable, as they have the potential not only to fuel protests or riots, but to generate a profound contestation of the ruling elites and the socio-political system. The sustained global trend of high food prices (rather than price volatility), confirmed by most prospect analyses, provides evidence for the declining ability of international food markets to secure the provision of food products at 'competitive' prices. While challenging the idea that food security can be ensured through global trade, this structural change in international food markets fundamentally calls into question the neo-liberal definition of food security, as referring mainly to 'a country's ability to finance imports of food through exports of other goods' (Mendoza, 2002; Lee, 2007).

Current dynamics, which undermine the capacity of national economies to secure access to food at affordable prices and their role in triggering recent uprisings in North Africa, contribute to rehabilitate a conceptualization of food security as depending mainly on local production of food, both at the level of the nation (food sovereignty)<sup>14</sup> and at the level of the household. The farmers' protest movement in Tunisia highlights the need for governments to address the social and food security dimension of agricultural development and call for structural reform in land resource allocation, for major transformations in the social and technical models of agricultural production (IAASTD, 2009), as well as for profound changes in the organisation of farm input and output markets, at various scales.

Finally, the lesson to be learned from the Tunisian case is the profound link between the way out of unsustainable development models and democracy. However, as the results of recent elections show, representative democracy is a necessary, but

not sufficient condition to pave the way for the democratization of the social organization of food production.

## Notes

1. Anderson (2011) suggests that the notion of 'Arab Spring' needs to be demystified: 'the revolutions across these three countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) reflected divergent economic grievances and social dynamics'.
2. A recent World Bank report evaluated the contribution of the informal sector at 38.2% of GDP and other studies estimated its share in the creation of non-agricultural employment to 40% (Gatti et al., 2011).
3. To the extent that informal and illegal activities allowed for the survival of the poor population and the supply of consumer goods at low prices, the state has turned a blind eye on the proliferation of informal sector, as a way to contain social tensions and maintain stability and political order.
4. Forty per cent of Egyptians live on less than \$2 per day, while the richest 20% account for over half the country's wealth.
5. Ten per cent of Tunisians own one third of GDP against 30% of the poorest accessing less than 10% of GNP.
6. Forty per cent of the MENA region's total population is rural and 70% of the people who earn less than \$1.25 a day are rural.
7. According to McMichael (2009, p. 141) 'the second food regime (1950s–70s) re-routed flows of (surplus) food from the United States to its informal empire of postcolonial states on strategic perimeters of the Cold War. Food aid subsidised wages, encouraging selective Third World industrialisation, and securing loyalty against communism and to imperial markets. "Development states" internalised the model of national agro-industrialisation, adopting Green Revolution technologies, and instituting land reform to dampen peasant unrest and extend market relations into the countryside.'
8. For McMichael, the neo-liberal world order gives rise to a third food regime. He uses the notion of 'corporate food regime', which defines 'a set of rules institutionalising corporate power in the world food system' (2009, p. 142).
9. In addition self-provisioning of food among farm households has significantly diminished. As Basis diets rely increasingly on purchased food originating to a large extent from global markets, farm households have become particularly vulnerable to food price increases.
10. According to Trego (2011), the share of public expenditure devoted to food subsidies in Egypt has dropped by half since the 1990s.
11. In June and July 2010, farmers in Regueb and Sidi Bouzid demonstrated outside the headquarters of the governorate against lawsuits brought against them by the BNA and expropriation procedures they were undergoing. Twenty indebted families whose assets were liquidated staged sit-ins on their land to oppose the expropriation. Subsequently, a protest outside the headquarters of the governorate was organized and brutally dispersed by police. These protests have had little media coverage (<<http://observers.france24.com/fr/content/20100716-agriculteurs-tunisiens-manifestent-conserver-leurs-terres>>).
12. The research was based on the review of a journalistic corpus (national and foreign press), individual interviews with farmers in four regions of Tunisia (Tunis, Cap Bon, Zaghuan, Bizerte), interviews with members and representatives of various agricultural and rural organizations (water user groups, producer associations) and with officials of agricultural services and rural development projects.
13. The Islamist party Ennadha (Renaissance) won 39% of the seats of the national constituent assembly elected on 23 October. This vote, which needs to be further analysed, no doubt expresses a deep rejection of former regime, but mainly the successful strategy of a political campaign drawing on a moral and religious discourse. Preliminary analyses of the geographical distribution of Ennadha voters show a North–South divide in the electoral weight of the Renaissance party, which obtains the largest share of votes in the south of the country, but also in the region of Kairouan (religious capital city of the country), and finally in the poor neighbourhoods of the big cities. In contrast, the North-west and the mid-West regions, which were home of the uprising in Tunisia, are those that give the lowest share of votes to the Islamist party.
14. Developed by the Via Campesina movement, the notion of food sovereignty is defined as 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. It is a precondition to genuine food security' (Via Campesina, 2006).

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