

Emergence of the Black Youth Movement against racism in Tunisia after the Revolution of 14 January 2011

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On their own, legitimate and just issues linked to human beings remain resistant to being buried or effaced. These are the same issues that are difficult to understand by those who have chosen to position themselves on the pedestal of superiority and to blow more and more into their already inflated ego, and have positioned themselves opposite humanitarian values.

Since the first several forms and cases of discrimination between people on the bases of creed, sex, race, colour, lineage, wealth or ethnicity, some tried to limit its damaging effects, while others have rushed to cement the practices conducive to discrimination into the social fabric of society, under the slogan of habit and legacy. Subsequently, they have tried to create a collective, intellectual and psychological climate, which normalizes discriminatory behaviours beyond reproach or critical re-examination. The mere question about the legitimacy of discriminatory behaviours or the underlying logic becomes a form of excess, and the prejudiced societal legacy is favoured so that it is bordering on the sacred.

But, what is striking in the whole matter is that you find that the victims of these behaviours may in turn become ensconced in this complex and contrived reality. We must first move out of necessity to demonstrate the features of this estrangement and separation between the parties to the issue, so that we may later adopt various labels such as social segregation, discrimination and racism.

Racism, as we know, is first and foremost a psychological issue, before being a set of social behaviours.

As a form of moral and human degeneration, some believe it to be a sense of fleeting resentment that triggers behaviours or actions. However, its extent is more than the reality of this verbal expression and this uncontrolled lingual classification. It is much deeper than that; it is perpetuated through upbringing, education, cultural habits and cultural legacies. Despite efforts of societal rehabilitation, media attention, and legal legislation to creates protection. Various expressions, behaviours reveal the real image of blacks in the collective societal Arab sphere.

I feel myself, before all of this, repeating and restating: Leave that small Pavlovian scrambling, its sheikhs of strife and stupidity rushing towards what was mentioned by God in His Book or on the lips of the Prophet that 'an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab except in piety.' It is as if I can see them classifying black Arabs as non-Arabs as they have been made to understand. That's not surprising. And that 'people are equal like the teeth of a comb,' and 'the most honoured of you in God's sight is the most pious.' The debate has been drawn to places that situate the Arab in positions of worse ugliness than racist human beings.

Leaving the hypocritical pulpits with their accompanying pens and certificates that all agree that racism amongst us only resides in the imagination of those blacks of the Arab world that claim and imagine it, especially in the Western part of the Arab world.

Forget those who still utter a few legal words following it up with some shouting and an equal amount of regret. An illusion of a fragile hope in what is left of the remains of a humane citizen's conscience, which may rise up at some time in the supposed future against the stunting,

dimming and flotation mastered by the sons of Yathrub under the labels of pedigree, lineage, rank, surname, family, wealth, fame and prestige - let alone black colour, even if it is the colour of Bilal.

When you turn towards the Arab world to find fragmentation and dispersion as the most striking feature at the present time, you can then lay claim to some understanding of some of our silence. We, the black people, have been silent about a right that is being taken away, a dignity that is being discarded and a citizenship that is being confiscated. We are children of this intractable situation in the Arab mind as well as in the Arab conscience. We are the product of this nation with its problems, features and emissions. This one nation is scattered in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain and Palestine. We are some of the heirs of these Arabian camels, together with their burden of silence, satisfaction, acceptance, complacency and grovelling to the level of subservience.

I can see blacks being content with silence as the ideal method to mutely express and protest against a shameful reality that concerns them. I can see both blacks and whites together being content with the same silence of blacks over the shameful reality and situations enveloping the country. This silence is from that silence. That's why our surrender before our issue is from their surrender, and is our surrender altogether before the major and more important issue of the homeland.

The issue of the homeland is greater than all these issues. Our silence in the face of the issue of the homeland is a response to that huge question that keeps us awake: What is the secret behind all these silences? What are these silences hiding? Why do blacks give the impression that they are absent from becoming involved in the affairs of the land - except for a few? Are we waiting for the homeland to support us when we can hardly be seen or heard when it comes to the affairs of the land? Within me there is a voice repeating loudly in the face of black people: Remain in your silence, for the issue of the homeland is that of others, and our issue also will soon become the issue of others.

So what about racism on Tunisian lands?

The Tunisian Situation

At first glance it appears that racism within the walls of Tunisian society is a hidden behaviour, as determined by itself or by others. Behaviours and practices for which you will barely find any apparent hint or visible manifestations such that the format of the question is twisted to become as follows:

Does racism really exist in Tunisia?

Is the matter not being inflated and exaggerated and are not some isolated behaviours, if any, being overloaded with implications of racism in any manner. In order so that this term can be inferred or referred to, such as forms of degradation and humiliation of the truth in actual fact and attributed to the level of society as well as the right to social, economic, legal and political opportunities on the basis of citizenship and equality with other members of the same society ?

It is well known that racist behaviour in Tunisia is so complex and mixed with so many curveballs that it is difficult to understand for those dealing with the issue who are not part of Tunisian society. I'm not exaggerating when I describe it as a social contract that requires everyone to ensure its continuity generation after generation, despite the emergence of attempts here and there to scale the walls of this reality.

These racist behaviours and excesses are frequent and have occurred for over more than a century, to varying degrees, but with almost the same methods and vocabulary, leading to the same results and consequences. Therefore, in society, they cannot be dealt with through the logic of individual transient temperamental behaviours or isolated behaviours. It does not rise up only to the level of a phenomenon, but goes beyond to rise up to the level of a societal "imprint." This behaviour is not just demonstrated at individual level, but takes place at the societal level. This cannot be really understood except within a sociological study that delves into the depths of the composition of Tunisian society.

These are the complexities of Tunisian society. And thus, they are the realities of blacks in Tunisia! Or so do the advocates of community cohesion and homogeneity portray the seriousness of paying attention to such calls and dedicating to them a great deal of attention and marketing them as being part of the deep and real problems of society.

Have not the mere rise, protest and rejection of these "individual temperamental" behaviours, as determined by some, come to be regarded by others as signs and harbingers that reflect a longing for blacks to live forever without awareness of them, in the cloak and shadow of the "white master." So there is either silence on this matter and acceptance of it, as it does not reflect the collective mentality of a large part of society.

Or, there are accusations of collective psychological turmoil and mass suffering from the complexity of the name, title, the past, the roots, the present and tomorrow, in which blacks flounder in this country.

The complexities of blacks will never be more embarrassing than the reality of their turning away their faces from the reality that they try to obliterate in various ways. I will remain convinced that a part of Tunisian society is racist, cynical and hostile towards this colour, as long as blacks are in subservient silence that lies in the corner of hesitation and submissiveness.

The sting is sometimes more painful than the wound. In my estimation, and in light of the above, there is a huge difference between lamenting and feeling the pain. Lamenting is surrender to a state of weakness and failure and subservience to, satisfaction and acceptance of a status that one rejects within his deep conscious and self. Feeling the pain and expressing it in many ways are all focussed on the rejection of the reality of oppression and the systematic exclusion that blacks were and still are victims to ever since the time of Bourguiba and his societal model. Continuing through the time of societal "equality" under the rule of Ben Ali, until the time of the post-revolution in which we only saw colour.

We, blacks, in our country Tunisia are not the only ones whose rights, aspirations and expectations are marginalized. But we are the only ones in whom the colour factor, in that condition, is added to the other factors that lead to their being made absent from the political, administrative and cultural scene in this country. The journey of self-assertion does not need advice or condemnation of submission to failure, but it needs to be a glimmer of hope and a point of light that leads this voyage to a port that will embrace it on an equal footing with the voyages of others.

Racism in Tunisia is a reality despite denials from certain individuals in both groups, from the whites and also from some blacks who in turn deny the existence of this racism, either in search of livelihood or to avoid social and psychological clashes, the unresolved repercussions of which they may not be able to bear. Racial discrimination in Tunisia is not an illusion. It is a practice affecting both the general blacks and their elite because many successful blacks who excel academically and professionally are "losers" at becoming leaders in political decision-making positions, or economic or social leadership because of such senseless racial discrimination.

The attempt to blur the reality of racism as behaviours that have an impact on a large number of blacks and trying to show it as an illusion and a peg that we blacks cling to are the atrocities of our failure. It is a frequent position that gnawed at our grandfathers and our fathers and still bites us today. The war against racial discrimination is not a war on "whites" but a war on a mental state that has been nurtured over time in the minds of some of these. The others are our brothers in the country, and partners in citizenship, culture, language, society and geographical commonality. In fact, even those with sick souls from them are our brothers once all of them are cured from their misconceptions.

But what if we look at the arguments and proofs of those who say that there is no racism in Tunisia. I have great respect for the triumph of the legal "ideal" expressed by these people at the level of Tunisian legislation in terms of its approval for full equality among all Tunisians in a manner that negates the existence of explicit or implied legal provisions that prevent blacks from study, work, mixed marriages or access to public places. However, these people have deferred the whole matter to temperamental behaviours and individual and isolated emotions without acknowledging racism as a phenomenon with resulting psychological, social and cultural consequences. Perhaps I can say that such explanations take me far away to South Africa during the apartheid years, and the United States during the forties, fifties and sixties. Were we not, for example, waiting for the blacks in Tunisia not to have a right to rise up to the reality of marginalization and systematic exclusion unless there is explicit legal provision that prevents them from studying and working.

Was it necessary for there to be a "legal" prohibition on blacks mixing with whites in their study, profession or 'marriage'? There does not need to be a legal enshrinement of racism, for our action in order to complete our citizenship to be legitimate and understood and not receive any objection or resentment to be necessary. They know very well that issues are not always measured in terms of provisions and legislation, which often remain trapped within notebooks, folders and shelves, especially in countries of the underdeveloped world. Tunisia is not Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, Canada or Britain such that we can resort to the supremacy of the law in the face of all abuses and breaches of whatever nature, source or origin.

They also know that all uprisings and revolutions in various parts of the world and at various times in history occurred as an objection to and rejection of oppression and social, political and economic injustice that was silent at the level of legislation and laws or protected by its authority.

Tell me, how much must the blacks of this country suffer and toil in patience and silence?

How much must we take without rising up or raising our voices? How much must we take some of this and a lot of that until the heads of the decision-makers take notice and bend down to pick up a moan that escaped in a moment of black stillness, that we know, but they do not know what hides within.

It is wonderful, nice and very noble that the politicians, lawyers and intellectuals of our country praise the greatness, uniqueness, symbolism and charisma in a person like Mandela. In his biography and in his career amongst his people, he created a synthesis of worlds and times other than what we live in. A synthesis that is more like a revelation which mixed, and created a brotherhood between the worst enemies of yesterday from amongst the citizens of his country, black and white. All of this is wonderful and nice, but provided that its features and the potential of the occurrence of its details are far away from home; far away from digging into our truth - our truth that may one day need a Mandela from home so that the decision-makers in this country will notice that the blacks in this land have become "a hidden pronoun" that implies they are the unseen in the image of this country, or "a third person pronoun" as in the terminology of grammar. Because, when

those who draft the constitution of any country after the revolution turn the face of disregard and apathy to the mere inclusion of a chapter or point in a chapter that criminalizes discrimination against dark-skinned citizens of this nation; When the country's official decision disdains furnishing its image with black faces of the people of this country on the political scene, the diplomatic scene, the cultural scene, the media scene and the human rights scene; When the finger of pain points to the suffering that has not yet ended as long as a number of our fellow citizens cannot bear—and I do not see them ever bearing—being led by a black person in any field. We stand by all these points, and we have just touched the tip of the iceberg in what we mentioned. The question becomes increasingly larger about the suffering that is not more than the outcome and result of the mechanism of behaviours equivalent to sin in the religious perspective, evil in ethical custom, and frivolity in the custom of integrity.

Banalising and of the reality of racism which is perpetuated by society and the authorities

It is deemed normal in Tunisian society that a black person is subjected to racial harassment which affects his person and his dignity. These racial harassments are frequently made against his colour, whether on the street or in institutions. The severity and manner of these racist attacks vary from one person to another. What is worrying in the matter is the banalising of these practices in our society which are considered normal that sometimes fall under the category of innocent verbal pleasantries and nothing else, but in fact it has consecrated a culture and practice of marginalization of the black person at all levels and styled his image to become a “second-class citizen.”

In the nineties and at the start of the third millennium the black artist Salah Misbah¹ used to touch on the subject of discrimination when it came up on some television and radio programs but his remarks were not always taken seriously. The magazine “jeune Afrique”² in 2004 devoted two of its issues on the theme of racism in North Africa. Mrs. *Effat Misbah* was one of the educated immigrant women in France who spoke about her experience as a black citizen in her home country, which was not a pleasant experience.

In February 2007, the writer was subjected to a racist attack by a citizen on the train coming from the city of Gabes, south of Tunisian capital, Tunis. This attack was verbally violent and insulted her dignity as a citizen. The abuser was a young man, no older than thirty years old: “*Do not forget that you are a slave and do not think that you are in America, that you can get the same rights as me. Do not forget that you are a slave and I am free.*” On that same day Mrs Misbah decided to lodge a complaint. At the police station the officer (station chief) tried by all means to find a diplomatic solution without documenting what happened as he wrote in the report, “*So and so and so appeared before me as result of a misunderstanding that occurred and was resolved.*” Any person who accesses the archive in the future will not know the reason for the complaint was a racist attack.

¹ Salah Misbah is a black Tunisian artist, singer and composer famous for his voice and his brilliant performances. However, despite his successes, he was subject to discrimination in the artistic field and deprived of many titles only because he is black. What distinguishes Salah Misbah from many other artists is the fact that he chose atypical music or as classified by society folklore music for which most black artists such as Alstonbali or Muzawwid are well-known. In fact, he competed with major artists in singing and composing other rhythms closer to the Tunisian non-African heritage. Salah Misbah is regarded as a politicized intellectual and artist. His presence in the front rows on 14 January 2014 in front of the Interior Ministry, his arrest on the night between the 14th and 15th of January in the corridors of the Interior Ministry, and his being subject to beatings and repression did not lift any finger of the press and did not make any ink flow. In fact there was no picture of him with the artists who demonstrated in front of the Interior Ministry on 14 January 2011, bearing in mind that he was raised on the shoulders of his friends, carrying slogans against the regime. (See the picture in the annexure.)

² Jeune Afrique : « être noire en Tunisie », 2004, N° 2270

I have cited this example, which is certainly not the only one of this type in relation to me or my fellow citizens of dark skin, to show that delving into the issue of racism against blacks in the reigns of Bourguiba and Ben Ali was taboo because these were not documented and they have not been mentioned in officially.

We understand from this incident that the authorities refuse to talk about or to document this subject. The authorities do not acknowledge that some black citizens are subjected to racial slurs and insults by Tunisian citizens and that as black citizens they do not enjoy the same access to opportunity regarding work, managerial, academic and political positions. In addition to limited opportunities, there seems to be a general lack of enthusiasm by blacks, or possibly no encouragement by the majority, to raise the racial issues publicly. Three elements can explain the phenomenon.

Firstly, the majority may believe that the phenomenon is rooted in attitudes and mentality, which are hard to get rid of and impossible to find a solution for.

Secondly, the level of awareness by blacks regarding the depth of marginalization and the seriousness of racism against them in Tunisian society has not reached its peak, which is limiting their ability to discuss the issue. Furthermore, there is a lack of a collective black consciousness because of the inability to talk about black Tunisian groups or sects (communauté). Instead, every group has the habits and traditions of from the city or town to which they belong.

Thirdly, the collective tension during the period of the dictators prevented thoughts about class persecution because the concept of unity and Tunisianism. The ideologies of unity were instilled of since the authorities of Bourguiba tried to eliminate the cultural and ethnic mosaic of the Tunisian people. Under the dictatorial regime³ it was necessary for the people, or a part of them, to be submissive and not to condemn the social, administrative, political excesses or political marginalization in order to preserve the ornate image portrayed by Tunisia to the world carrying one meaning: Tunisia is a unified country with a people who are peaceful and against all forms of discrimination.

The Revolution in Tunisia and the Boldness of Blacks to Raise the Problem of Racism Against them on the National Level.

The Historical Course of the Black Youth Movement after the Revolution:

After the revolution of 14 January 2011 some young blacks became more interested in the problem of racism in Tunisia. They became more attentive to the verbal abuses affecting the dignity of black people. Furthermore, the young blacks began to raise the status and image of blacks in Tunisian society from 1846⁴ to present day.

We have to agree on the important idea that it took five generations after the abolition of slavery for the emergence of a of young black intellectuals class who raised the issue of racism. They did this by relying on sociological and historical concepts dating back to the black revolution in America, South Africa and Africa.

³ Abdelhamid Maha «Les noirs en Tunisie, Citoyens de seconde zone ?» in : <http://www.maghrebemergent.info> 11, Juin 2013. Le même article a été publié sur Facebook page de Maha Abdelhamid sous le titre « Bourguiba était-il raciste contre les noirs ? »

⁴ 23 January 1846 is the date of the abolition of slavery through a decree promulgated by Ahmed Bey.

On 6 February 2011, almost 21 days after the revolts in Tunisia, the citizens, especially the blacks, did not tolerate the usage of the racist word "wasfan" to describe blacks by any journalists on private Tunisian television channels⁵. This is a word derives its meaning from the era of slavery and is used today in Tunisian society to describe blacks. The word "wasfan" implies the linguistic meaning of a slave servant.

On 9 February of the same year, an article was published on Facebook to denounce these words that infringe on black people's dignity.

A number of blacks who were aware of the racial discrimination, including: **Sadia Misbah**, a flight attendant, **Huda Maziodat**, a journalist, **Mansour Hamrouni**, an artist and student of philosophy, and **Lutfi Ghiryani**, a photographer, criticized discrimination on their facebook pages. "Enough of people talking about racism on the side-lines. It is time for people to bring the topic forward for discussion"⁶

On 10 April 2011 the first group to denounce and demand an end to racism against blacks in Tunisia was formed on the social network Facebook. This page was called: « Assurance de la citoyenneté sans discrimination de couleurs »⁷

The page was a sort of forum which raised the issue of racism, the abolition of slavery since 1846 and servitude in Tunisia, and the legacy of a societal mentality that classified blacks at the bottom of the social ladder. The language used in this forum on Facebook was mainly French so that non-native Arabic speakers can follow the issue. The people on the group also wanted non-Tunisians to know what is happening in a society that for long obscured the reality of discrimination against blacks in Tunisia. Most of the activists on the Facebook page have university degrees, reside within the Republic and abroad, and most of the participants are black skinned. There are also non-black Tunisians on whom the debate has had an impact and who have been touched by the issue of racism against blacks. Most of their contributions were to testify about racism in the society and to encourage activists in this issue on the need to remove the cover of racism against blacks in Tunisia. Few of participants on the Facebook page tried to refute the idea of Tunisian racism or limit, in their words, the dramatization of the subject.

Most of the activists on the page are from different disciplines:

Amina is an engineer in the Ministry of Environment, **Afaf** is a university professor in Italy, **Ziad** is an English university professor, **Zohour** is a journalist, **Taoufik** is a director of a private institute, **Saadia** is a flight attendant, **Saleh** is a college professor in Lyon, **Faried** specializes in media in Holland⁸, **Lutfi** is a photographer, **Fadia** is a student, **Ezzedine** is a professor at school of architecture.-The forum quickly gathered 300 participants, and now there are 1,100 participants.

⁵ On Hannibal TV, the journalist and owner of the newspaper, News of the Republic, Moncef Ben Murad, used the word 'waseef', which is a word that in its linguistic origin classifies black as slaves and servants. It is a word that is rejected in particular by people in the south of Tunisia.

⁶ Maha Abdelhamid launched this page after discussions with Lutfi Ghiryani and especially Habib Ayib, a researcher in political and social geography with an interest in Tunisian affairs, who said this sentence to me enthusiastically on 9 April 2011.

⁸ Pouessel (Stéphanie), « Les Tunisiens noirs. Entre stéréotypes, racisme et histoire : regards sur l'actualisation d'une identité « marginalement intégrée », in Stéphanie Pouessel (ed.), Noirs au Maghreb. Enjeux identitaires, Paris, Karthala-IRMC, 2012

Pouessel (S) « 'Un ministre noir tunisien, yes we can ? No we don't want !' Questionnement identitaire en Tunisie post-révolutionnaire », Actes du colloque « Frontières identitaires et représentations de l'altérité » (FIRA), HAL-SHS, collection FIRA/CEAF/IRD 2012. En ligne sur Les Cahiers de l'Islam, janvier 2013.

Those younger in age were following the progress of the debate and would usually express their presence by clicking on “Like” “j 'aime”. When we asked them, ‘Why do you not participate,’ they said that the language used is French and they do not know it well. Furthermore, most of the visitors to the page are academics and they do not dare to intervene. Therefore we created another page called: « Témoignages pour dénoncer la discrimination de couleurs » This was managed by Amina Sudani and Najih Salem.⁹

On the Facebook page, the participants were asked to speak as they please, and as a result they gave living testimony of the discrimination they experienced in Tunisian society. Most of the participants were not over twenty-five years old. There were other pages that appeared, that were less popular on the Facebook network, but they played a role in the deployment of a virtual movement carried out by black youth in sensitizing others to the existence of racism in Tunisia and condemning it.¹⁰

In Facebook pages, many pictures and sayings by exemplary models in the struggle and strife for the elimination of racism, slavery, and discrimination were posted. Among these personalities were Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba and Angela Davis. The only Tunisian personality, who delved into the issue of racism since the sixties, under discussion in these pages was Salim Marzouk, the prisoner or victim of Bourguiba. This black intellectual remained hidden behind the walls of the Al-Razi Hospital for Mental Illnesses for more than thirty years. For a long time the story of this black fighter represented an unanswered question. The man's role in contemporary history of Tunisia must be known.¹¹

The discussions that took place on the pages of the social networking site quickly turned into actual meetings with the aim of forming an association¹² to demand equality and the rejection of racism in Tunisia. There were frequent meetings held since the summer of 2011 until early 2012 and numerous discussions towards this aim took place. The number of participants in the meetings to prepare for the association began growing slowly and the ideas sometimes were in agreement and at other times they differed. Eventually Saadia Misbah¹³ withdrew prior to the association's being formed. We passed through a period of thought and then we went back to discussion and as a result “Adam Association for Equality and Development” was formed.

The Adam Association began its work after holding an opening ceremony for the association at the House of Culture Ibn Khaldoun¹⁴ on 12 June 2012, and—the historians **Abdulhameed**

• « Les marges renaissantes : Amazigh, Juif, Noir. Ce que la révolution a changé dans ce ‘petit pays homogène par excellence’ qu’est la Tunisie », L’Année du Maghreb, VIII, 2012.

Du fantasme d’une ‘Tunisie tolérante’ à la transition démocratique : la bombe de l’antiracisme », La Presse de Tunisie, 19.06.2012.

⁹ Amina Sudani is one of those who were active in the emergence of the Youth Movement Against Racism that was formed after the revolution of 14 January and who later took on the task of public writer for the Adam Association, which is the first Tunisian Association formed to push for equality and against racism against blacks. Najih Salem is a university professor in public law and later took on the task of treasurer of Adam Association.

¹⁰ Groupe et pages : Les noirs en Tunisie/ les noirs et métisses sont les plus beaux/anti racisme/je suis fière d’être black... Abdelhamid (M), « Histoires sous ombre: Slim Marzoug ou l’homme noir Bourguiba a enfermé » in article Facebook Maha Abdelhamid 16 juin 2011 ¹¹

¹² The first meeting took place in one of the cafes around the city of Tunis and brought together four members: Saadia Misbah, Tawfiq Al-Shairi, Lutfi Ghiryani and Maha Abdelhamid.

¹³ She is one of the prominent faces in the fight against racism who founded in June 2013 the M’nènty Association, which is an association that fights against all forms of discrimination.

¹⁴ Pouessel (S) : « **ADAM** naît en Avril 2012, dont le sigle entend traiter de « développement » et d’« égalité » plutôt que de « Noir » ou de « racisme » in : Du fantasme d’une ‘Tunisie tolérante’ à la transition démocratique : la bombe de l’antiracisme », La Presse de Tunisie, 19.06.2012

Alarqash¹⁵, **Mohamed Aljuwaili**¹⁶ and **Shauqi Altayeb** were invited. Each one of them spoke to put the problem of racism into context according to his specialization. The Adam Association started to engage on the ground especially the southern part of the country where the majority of the black population is concentrated. It focused its work on some schools with the aim of advancing them and helping their students materially on the Wade Seder School model in the Al Madu village¹⁷ in the province of Gabès. The association had a media presence through its Chairman or some members of the executive office. Through the work of the Adam Association and its contribution together with the various civil society associations in the new societal landscape, some of the media paid attention to the racist phenomenon and dealt with the topic of racism on some programs on private and public broadcasts. For the first time in Tunisia after independence, a national channel broadcasted a talk show¹⁸ about racism against blacks. This is in addition to other programs including an episode about racism in the program “In Depth” that was broadcast on the Tunisian Private Channel¹⁹.

In October 2012 the Adam Association issued a petition directed to the Constituent Assembly to request for the issuance of a constitutional law criminalizing racism. This petition was signed by almost one thousand citizens and submitted to the Assembly, but it appears that the Assembly did not consider it as we did not receive any response to it.

There were frequent cultural and awareness-raising demonstrations in some private spaces. Perhaps the most prominent was the cultural artistic show, which continued for 15 days in the **El Teatro Space** during October 2012. The director of this space, Zeinab Farhat, opened the 2012-2013 cultural season for its space with a demonstration against racism and gave it the title “To be Black in the Greens.” El Teatro also produced a historic play with the theme of slavery in the Tunisian Regency.²⁰

On 23 January 2013, after a meeting was held between the Adam Association, the M'nèmti Association and Zeinab Farhat as an activist in civil society, the intellectual Mohamed Raja Farhat (see annexure) wrote a letter on 23 January 2013 to the Presidency on behalf of some associations active in the field of human rights asking for 23 January to be declared a national day celebrating the abolition of slavery in Tunisia.²¹ There was no response to this letter and the M'nèmti Association at the end of 2014 issued a petition on the site ‘Citizen Go’²² repeating the request for 23 January 2013 to be declared a national day against racism.

¹⁵ Abdelhamid Alarqash was invited due to his being a historian involved with blacks in Tunisia in the recent period i.e. after the abolition of slavery in Tunisia and a researcher with interest in the plurality of the people of Tunisia.

¹⁶ A researcher in sociology who has worked in the black community in the oases community and specifically in the area of Kebili.

¹⁷ The town of Madu is a town located south west of the city of Gabès and is known for the concentration of its black population.

¹⁸ Saadia Misbah from the M'nèmti Association, Ali Hamrouni an activist in civil society, Maha Abdelhamid an activist in civil society and Salim ben Abdullah a researcher in Sociology were invited.

¹⁹ The program ‘In Depth’ broadcast a special episode on racism in Tunisia, which was filmed in south Tunisia in February 2012. The program ‘Our Maghreb in Liberation and Enlightenment’ on the Nasma Channel also dedicated an episode to deal with the same topic. The program ‘Diary of a Citizen’ on the Tunisia Channel dedicated an episode in 2014 on the topic of racism against blacks in Tunisia. This was in addition to several programs on radio stations such as Radio Mosaïque FM, Youth Radio, and CAP FM.

²⁰ The play ‘Search for Saadia’ was a production by the playwright, Naufal Azara. In this play the legendary Bo Saadia appeared through his daughter Saadia. The personality of Bo Saadia in Tunisian folklore became that black man who wears clothes of animal skin moving about between people playing African music and exciting the senses of adults and frightening children.

²¹ Ahmed Bey issued a law on 23 January 1846 to ban slavery in the Tunisian Regency.

²² The M'nèmti Association published the petition on 5 November 2014.

In March 2013 the Adam Association celebrated the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 20 and 21 March with a demonstration called “Blacks in Tunisia: The Visible, The Invisible”. The program was diverse as an academic symposium was organized and included guest, **Rokhaya Diallo**, the icon known for her struggle against racism in France. The Tunisian historian at the University of Lyon, **Salih Trablesi**, and the research anthropologist **Stephanie Bussell** also participated in the symposium. Other guests at the symposium were also the human rights activist and president of the Brazilian association, Conen, **Gilberto Leal**²³, the journalist **Sufian Ben Farhat**²⁴ and the lawyer, **Ghazi Algharairi**²⁵. Both the symposia discussed the issue of slavery, the image of blacks in contemporary societies and the struggles for equality in Tunisia as in all parts of the world.

The cultural aspect was a celebration and the **Gebenten Group**²⁶ was invited, who did a show on Bourguiba Avenue in which there was a strong presence of black Tunisians. During the show there was a discussion between members of the association and some of those present. Some of them held the view that talking about the subject of racism unfounded and that Tunisian society has reconciled with all its colours without any discrimination. Thereafter there was a cultural and entertainment show in the El Teatro Space that was decorated by young blacks Tunisian in the style of the fashion designer **Saleh Baraka**. The show was artistic giving the impression of a market selling slaves. The artist “Slam” **Anis Shushan** also participated in the ceremony and presented poems analysing the position, image and classification of blacks in Tunisian society.

Regardless of the acceptance by Tunisian society of such demonstrations, the black youth movement in Tunisia, which was founded after the January 14 revolution, brought the taboo topic of racism to the public. The general debate caused the conversation to flow and has drawn journalist and researcher attention domestically and internationally.

During the March 2013 World Social Forum in Tunisia, the Adam Association organized an effective symposium on blacks in Tunisia. The Forum caught attention domestically and internationally and even attracted the Brazilian Unegro²⁷ Association, the Conen, the “Voice of Tunisia” Association, “We are all Tunisia” Association, and some representatives from American associations. After the association presented its objectives, the problem of discrimination and the black image in Tunisia, the diverse audience discussed the topic. The work within the association was short lived after a crisis occurred in April 2013 within the office ending the resignation of the majority of the active association members.

On 1 May 2013, which is World Labour Day, which celebrates civil society organizations, the emergence of the M'nemty Association drew attention as activists from the association carried yellow boards characterizing the colour of the association and condemning racial discrimination. The slogan on that day was, “The word *wasif* is not a colour” (see annexure), When we asked the President of the Association, Saadia Misbah, why they had chosen the colour yellow, she said that it is the “colour of the sunrise and the colour of light that illuminates the darkness. It is a bright colour for Tunisians to see us through it, as it seems we are invisible.”

²³ Gilberto Leal is the President of the Brazilian Association, Conen, an association fighting for the rejection of racism in Brazil and based in Salvador.

²⁴ Sufian Farhat is a Tunisian journalist and intellectual engaged in the components of Tunisian society.

²⁵ A lawyer who specializes in Constitutional Law.

²⁶ The Gebenten Group or as they call themselves in Tunisian society The Gebenten “Slaves” are groups that revive the musical and poetical heritage of the people of the Gebenten in the province of Medenine south of the country. It is a legacy that touches African roots of Sub-Saharan Africa with a mixture from North Africa. The musical instrument used indicates the African roots of this music.

²⁷ Edson França, the Chairman of the Unegro Association, intervened during this workshop to show the possibility of boycotting as a means of struggle to reject racism in societies.

The Adam Association resignation of active members and founders did not deter them from continuing to struggle for equality and citizenship without any discrimination. They returned to work and published articles against racism on social networks and formed another nucleus that included the resigned members of the Adam Association and others who joined them. Their work led to the appearance on the social network Facebook of **Eman bin Ismail**, a Tunisian resident in Canada, who together with **Mansour Hamrouni** created the page “Blacks in our Country.” She used to send voice messages on her wall and the wall of the page calling for teamwork and to sensitize blacks about their marginal status. The articles of Mansour Hamrouni, who is a black Tunisian residing in Switzerland, also expressed the position of blacks and their low status on the side-lines of Tunisian society.

This interaction on pages and groups gave birth to the idea of holding a march across Tunisia from south to north.²⁸ Quickly the idea became seriously and a group was identified to organize the march from 18 to 21 March.

The equality and anti-racism march was therefore an independent citizen group initiative of a both male and female²⁹ urged on by awareness of the status of blacks in Tunisia and their aspiration for equality and social justice without any discrimination or segregation on the basis of skin colour. The purpose of this initiative was to resist racism in our country starting with the deterrence of racist speech and attitudes in the public space, and especially in the media and educational space. The group issued a statement which read as follows:

***“With belief in the principle of equality and justice among all segments of Tunisian society and all citizens whether black, white or brown and in consecration of the text of the new constitution, which emphasizes the duty to respect human values and human rights and equality in rights and duties; and based on the historical role played by Tunisia over a succession of eras and periods in support of humanitarian and cultural gain for the construction of a civil state in which everyone is equal on the basis of sovereignty and national dignity. We call on civil society and all factions to renounce the phenomena of discrimination and racial segregation, from which the overwhelming majority of Tunisians with black skin have suffered and continue to suffer. We also demand that officials at the state, governmental and parliamentary levels and all fighters for human rights be enlisted to fight racism and the manifestations of contempt, marginalization and denigration of the black man’s dignity in Tunisia. We demand from the symbols of the state and civil society to combat this social scourge that has been sweeping our country for decades, and we emphasize the need to eliminate this injustice and take all the legal, judicial, administrative and educational measures for the maintenance of human dignity, completeness of the overall circumstances of citizenship and advancement of the rank of blacks in Tunisia, by opening up new areas and providing effective opportunities of contribution at the level of administrative, political and cultural institutions. We also emphasize and firmly confirm a rigid determination to continue our struggle for the total*”**

²⁸ In the various discussions we had with all the participants via the virtual network Facebook we tried to find solutions or mechanisms to make the voices of blacks reach out and sensitize the community to the issue of racism. Thus, Maha Abdelhamid wrote about the possibility of holding a march across Tunis to denounce the marginalization of blacks and the irresponsiveness of their demands such as enacting a law to punish racist behavior. The idea was liked by everyone and Eman bin Ismail, Amina Sudani and Lutfi Ghiryani were recruited to mobilize this network.

²⁹ The drivers of this march in the four cities of Sfax, Gabes Djerba and Tunis were Amina Sudani, Eman bin Ismail, Maha Abdelhamid, Monia Barnawi, Imran Noueiri, Abdelmajid Zitouni, Najih Salem, Munir Hamidi, Moiz Aljamai, Shafiq Altaus. The participants in the organization were Lutfi Ghiryani, Hamrouni Mansour, Mohammed Haitham Madi, Eman Okasha, Salah al-Din Albahhar. Those in charge of media were Najih Salem, Eman bin Ismail and Maha Abdelhamid.

elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and the violation of the dignity of black people in our country.”

The supervisors of the march called on components of civil society in Tunisia to mobilize and participate in this process, but that the latter boycotted the march, and did not register their presence in the four cities. In fact, the regional branch of the Tunisian League for Human Rights in Gabes refused to participate in this march or even support it.

Those in charge of the media for this march received electronic messages of support from Tunisian human rights associations in France. The national media, especially the visual media,³⁰ boycotted this march and did not cover it. It was therefore marginalized. Some written electronic media covered the march before and during its occurrence.³¹

The march for equality and opposition to racism against blacks was launched in Djerba due to the concentration of the black population in this island and in the south because of the presence of racism that was not spoken about. It continued to Gabes on the 19th and then Sfax where the march was welcomed with open arms. In this city, the number of participants was greater as compared to Gabes and Djerba on the 20th. It ended in Tunis on 21 March which is the day corresponding to the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. (See annexure)

The march in Tunis went towards the headquarters of the Constituent Assembly in Bardo and from there to the headquarters of the Human Rights Branch in Bardo under the Ministry of Justice. Some of the organizers of the march of the party were received by some deputies of the Constituent Assembly to discuss the matter, as well as by the Director of the Office of the Ministry of Justice in charge of Human Rights. The director requested the organizers to provide him, through official correspondence, with a detailed file on the case and the injustices suffered by blacks in Tunisian society. This was done by the official spokesman of the march, Najih Salem, who then wrote a letter demanding the need to consider the issue and enact a law to punish the perpetration of racism. However, the group has not received any response from the officials, not through the troika government nor the government of technocrats. Thus the demands were marginalized and were not taken seriously just as black-skinned individuals have been marginalized in Tunisia throughout history.

Why did the black youth movement emerge after the revolution, and why was there no significant interaction from politicians and civil society components?

What happened in Tunisia since 17 December 2010, the first day of the outbreak of the first spark of the revolution until 14 January, the date of the flight of Ben Ali after loud shouts by the protesters of the magical word “Dégage” or leave was that speech suddenly became free. All segments of society at all levels began expressing themselves with an open and clear message focussed on the principles of the revolution and on its foundations of **freedom and dignity**, which is a concept that was reformulated and became the top priority of all letters and demands, whether social or political. The **concept of citizenship**, which had long been emptied of its contents during the dictatorship of Ben Ali, was also reformulated. All members of society took advantage of this revolutionary circumstance which is in the process of reorganizing society to demand a better existence and **blacks**, who have long been made absent from all national scenes (especially the political, media and cultural,) were one of the first groups who called for a better existence by

³⁰ The Tunisie Channel, which broadcasts its program on the internet, invited Najih Salem and had a discussion with him about the march and the issue of racism.

³¹ L'économiste Maghrebin, Tekiano.com, directinfo, webdo.tn, pageshalal.fr,

adopting the principle of dignity and equality in citizenship and freedom. But it is ironic that the components of Tunisian civil society before and after the revolution, and even the leftists among them, held and still hold a conservative discourse. It avoids, and in fact, ignores several problems long suffered by Tunisian society, including the issue of racism and the obscurity of blacks, which it is assumed to be wading in until this day. You find it hesitant whenever it is confronted with the existence of this issue.

This is due to several reasons, among them: **First**, civil society and politicians, whether in the government or from the opposition, still adopt a conservative mentality and discourse and still avoid and, in fact, ignore delving into the issue of 'minorities.' Minorities are the mosaic of Tunisian society (such as the Amazigh and the Jews) and compose a numerical minority, but share with the people the sense of citizenship in a civil state.

The **Second** reason that makes delving into the issue of racism against blacks undesirable is that the components of civil society, ever since independence, were urban and their activists came especially from the North and from the coastal cities. These areas lacked a concentration of a black population, subsequently, the phenomenon of racism is present in the discourses of these activists. None of these activists were also blacks or blacks that have the courage to raise this issue, which has long been classified in the category of taboos.

This does not negate some exceptions of the presence of blacks active in civil society or political parties such as Najiba El Hamrouni³², Khalifa Shoshan³³ and Khamis El Bahri³⁴, but we do not know or at least they did not reveal that they were adopting the case of blacks, with the exception of Ali Hamrouni³⁵ who for long spoke and wrote about racism before and after the revolution. We cannot understand the lack of interaction by the majority of civil society and the elite with the issue of racism as being an opposition to the matter but it is simply neglect and ignorance of the phenomenon and the fear of delving into it believing in the myth of national unity, which had a profound influence among the opposition and the leftists that dominate civil society.

The third reason, and the one that played a major role in the 'fragility' of the Black Youth Movement Against Racism after the revolution is that this movement remains embryonic and lacks the rapid and vast spread and articulation with other movements within civil society. The leaders of this movement are also new and are not gaining enough experience to form broad bases. So despite the partial spread, it remained a small elitist movement isolated from the rest of society. Add to that the division, which may have begun naturally in light of the differing visions and methods of work, but explains the faltering beginnings and the upward and spontaneous growth of the movement. All this coincides with not giving the issue of racism against blacks sufficient time and effort to be spoken out against.

Conclusion

Excess always finds ways and means - which is what we have concluded in our minds in the face of this deafening silence from officials, the legislation, institutions, politics and human rights. What kind of inertia has numbed the mind, heart and conscience of the decision-makers in our country, to make them consider it too much effort to make a change to the law that would give the

³² Association of Journalists from 2011 until 2014

³³ A journalist and union activist who joined the Popular Front when it was being formed.

³⁴ An activist and former political prisoner. He was an Oud player in the Bahth music group and currently is in the group "Oyon El-Kalam" together with the artist, Ama El-Hamrouni.

³⁵ A political activist. He appeared on the television program "Al Nass Hkeya" to analyze the phenomenon of racism against blacks in Tunisian society and the south in particular.

blacks of this country citizenship that is not fragmented, dignity that is not soiled and humanity that is not derogatory?

Those are the features of the issue of racism, which has impacted the freedom of nearly 12% of all the people of Tunisia. Features, whose wrinkles began to clothe some of the landmarks through the accumulation of racist behaviours whose descriptions were tempered in order to preserve supposed social peace, and also through the increasing reality of silence, reluctance and hesitation to rise up in order to eradicate these behaviours once and for all.

Therefore, the necessity of making concerted efforts is one of the priorities on our democratic path after the revolution and it imposes upon us a comprehensive view of each of the components of society and its groups.

As a result, the following has become necessary: **First:** The media must be open to this issue, because reaching out to and communicating with public opinion through the media is important so that the discussion of this issue can take place in the public sphere and thereby raise awareness in all parts of society. **Second:** The culture of resistance to racism must be spread into the educational space at all levels, from kindergarten all the way to tertiary education institutions.³⁶ **Third:** A law must be issued to penalize racist behaviour expressed in words and/or actions. Of course, all of this requires a strong movement against racism, capable of educating the media and public opinion and convincing them that the fight against racism is part of building a democracy. This is the objective we must fervently work towards and defend without hesitation.

³⁶ We have recorded complaints from parents whose children were subjected to racial discrimination, particularly verbal by professors. Usually these infringements end with the student being disbelieved, threatened and scared off by the management of the institute until he withdraws his complaint or testimony.