

**L'autre révolution**, by Mohamed Kerrou. Tunis: Cérès Editions, 2018. 179 pages. DT 17 (\$5.90).

Reviewed by Clement M. Henry

Inspired by Hannah Arendt, Professor Kerrou defines the “other revolution” as the creation of a new political order following the overthrow of the *ancien régime*. As a participant-observer as well as a political sociologist well-grounded in post Kantian theory, he breathlessly recounts the Revolution of 14 January 2011 and its aftermath of struggles to achieve a framework for the full exercise of free citizenship. Mere constitution making is not enough for Kerrou, unlike Arendt, because he considers that Tunisia’s other revolution also requires a change of mentalities, not just a top-down constitution. The closure during Ramadan of cafés and restaurants, for instance, is opposed to both the spirit and letter of the 2014 constitution. As of late 2018, when Kerrou’s narrative ends, he complains of a “rotten compromise” between two elderly politicians supporting a government staffed by some 15 leftovers from the *ancien régime*. The alliance of elites came at the expense of the people’s many civil liberties, notably those of minorities like atheists, black people, homosexuals, and Amazighs.

Kerrou places the Tunisian revolution in historical perspective. National liberation simply exchanged rulers—the cart changing donkeys, a Tunisian proverb has it-- with Bourguiba “infantilizing” the Tunisian public before giving way to a police state. Kerrou’s “other revolution” appears to this reviewer to be grass roots Bourguibism, his children finally assimilating his calls for dignity and a progressive citizenry, replete with public hygiene and care for the environment. So far, it has not happened: like many of his Tunisian readers, he sees the revolution as a *thawra el hindi* (prickly pear), not sweet smelling jasmine, and observes that the fervor and solidarity of the unleashed citizenry only lasted for “about a week” after Ben Ali’s departure before evaporating into strikes, anarchy, even killing animals in zoos as well as trashing the environment, turning Tunisia into an “open air garbage dump.”

Conventional accounts of the revolution’s “founding myth,” he argues, ignore tribal politics in Sidi Bou Zid that are key to understanding the conflict between Mohamed Bouazizi and the female municipal official, and they usually do not indicate that the video of Bouazizi’s self-immolation was faked, probably picturing an available substitute of a Buddhist monk in flames, promoted by Jazira, a pro Muslim Brotherhood TV channel. Subsequently the woman who had supposedly slapped Bouazizi was acquitted for lack of evidence, while his family was awarded a dwelling in posh La Marsa and then set up in business in Canada, not far from one of Ben Ali’s escaped crooks.

Almost every page in Kerrou’s critical study has new insights or entertains dark hypotheses. For instance, why did authorities crack down so much harder in Thala than elsewhere in the early days of the uprising? He points to its marble industry being in the hands of the former first lady’s family. What actually happened on the day of Ben Ali’s departure remains a mystery despite extensive details of this “mysterious and ambiguous revolution...told from inside as if it were a fable.”

It is quite true that the Tunisian labor union, with its million members out of a total population of 11 million, was the solid core of a civil society that enabled a successful political transition and was awarded a Nobel prize for protecting Tunisia’s political transition. The “plural dynamics” of civil society, however, involve not one but three public spheres, not only the official one of NGOs guaranteed by the state and its institutions but also those of political Islam and of a popular “arena of confrontation between between...secularism and Islamism.” The latter’s social movements project an informal civil society that Kerrou associates with the informal economy, breeding rampant corruption and popular protests far more serious than the traditional bread riots of the 1980s. Corruption may have reached

an apogee with the resignation of the interior minister in 2018 over scandals of migrant trafficking from the Kerkennah islands. Mass protests also erupted there, against a foreign company about to exploit natural gas deposits, much like protests elsewhere blocking phosphate exports. Kerrou further illustrates the “intermediating sphere between the State and the ‘people’,” with several plays and other art forms expressing civil society’s plural dynamics.

As for the crisis he sees of political leadership, there is no end in sight. Bourguiba’s statues were returned to their central locations, and Bourguibism was used to solidify the opposition to political uses of Islam. In return, the Islamists trotted out his defeated rival, Abdelaziz Thaalbi, as if trying to turn Tunisian history backwards. The fragile compromise between Bourguibists and Islamists came at the expense not only of minorities but of civil liberties. In 2017 Moulay Hicham, the democrat who is the Moroccan king’s first cousin, was expelled from Tunisia before he could deliver his invited speech at an academic conference sponsored by Stanford University.

Tunisia may still have to wait awhile longer for the “other revolution,” but Kerrou ends on an optimistic note. Women have been awarded equal rights of inheritance in draft legislation despite the opposition of most clerics and Islamists. As a compromise, people are still permitted to divide up inheritances giving women half shares, but unless they so specify, the default is equal shares, and the people will evolve, Kerrou believes. As for the veil, he sees it as an ambiguous identity marker empowering women in public spaces. And in some cases it was a response to the Gulf War of 1991, “which was experienced as a humiliation for the Arab and Islamic Nation by the imperialist West,” a perception that may surprise (and educate) some readers of this journal.

In sum, this sociological essay is an amazing work of art. It reads like revolutionary graffiti, brimming with the paradoxes and fluid contradictions of a continuing revolution. Unfortunately it lacks both footnotes and an index, and the brief bibliography omits the IMF and World Bank, sources for data mentioned in the text.

Clement M. Henry, Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin