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Jemna in Tunisia: An inspiring land struggle in North Africa

Jemna resists and fights for its right to own and work its ancestral land

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Jemna is a beacon of hope for a Tunisia where its people have sovereignty over their land and resources. Jemna needs to be supported, celebrated and emulated for the sake of its people and for our sake.

Over the past several years, the people of Jemna, a region in southern Tunisia famous for its excellent quality dates called Deglet Nour (the dates of light), have been engaged in an important and inspiring struggle around land rights. It took around a century for this oasis community to score a victory, albeit precarious for now, through occupying and working their long-confiscated land in an astonishing experience of self-management and voluntarism that emphasised the centrality of the peasant question and the right to land and other natural resources such as water in revolutionary times. Jemna is a challenge and a threat to the power of the neoliberal and counter-revolutionary elite and it represents resistance and an alternative to the kinds of neo-colonial, dispossessing and environmentally damaging forms of managing and exploiting the land.

The peasants of Jemna were dispossessed of their land in 1912 by French colonists who exploited it to export an original product (dates) to France. When Tunisians recovered their

independence in 1956, instead of returning the land to its original and historically legitimate owners as well as (re)distributing it to landless peasants, the ruling elite nationalised the land and pursued a colonial model of intensive, mechanised modern agriculture at the expense of a traditional and subsistence one. Land was rented to some farmers and an attempt was made to create a system of agricultural cooperatives but that failed. In other cases, land was just sold and given away to people close to decision-makers.

This was experienced as a historical injustice by many small scale and subsistence farmers in Tunisia, including in Jemna. Independence did not result in an amelioration of their plight, but rather a new form of dispossession, this time at the hands of the state. Their status as landless peasants has been perpetuated in the post-colonial period.

With the liberalisation of the agricultural sector, especially in the 1980s (with IMF structural adjustment programmes) and the generalised corruption and cronyism in the Tunisian economy, the public company that was managing the oasis of Jemna went bankrupt in 2002. This opened the door to two private investors (close to the nepotistic circles of the ousted dictator Ben Ali) who shamelessly made obscene profits while paying derisory sums to the state as rent costs.

It took a revolution and a popular uprising to reverse this state of affairs. The Tunisian revolution of 2010-2011 emboldened the people of Jemna and enabled their "Revolutionary Committee" to recover the confiscated land and expel the profiteers just two days before Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January 2011. What ensued was a truly inspiring experience of people taking control of their livelihoods and collectively self-managing their lands and resources for the benefit of the community. The people of the oasis showed that sheer robbery and organised corruption are no longer the natural state of things and that it is possible for the people to be the masters of their material existence. They demonstrated that the Tunisian revolution is not uniquely about narrowly defined political rights but rather a broader agenda entailing economic sovereignty (including over land), dignity and justice. Their struggle proved that accumulation of profits through dispossession is not a set-in-stone destiny for the people of Jemna and that alternatives were possible.

The first thing the community did was to set up an organisation called the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases (APJO), which took care of the agricultural management, the investment of revenues and the implementation of developmental projects in the wider community. The results have been inspiring. Production has doubled between 2011 and 2014 and the oasis currently employs around three hundred workers compared to twenty before 2011. In five years, the inhabitants of Jemna under the leadership of the association allocated more than half a million pounds (made in profit) for community projects (compared to £40,000 rental costs collected by the state in nine years from 2002 to 2010). The projects included: construction of a covered market, a sports venue, and classrooms as well as refurbishment of primary and secondary schools and of the community's small health centre. Profits were also used to purchase an ambulance and a scanner in addition to providing financial support for local charities and associations as well as different cultural activities.

Taher Etahri, president of the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases said to me: "The experience is rich in lessons. We are no longer under the tutelage of the state; we act for public

good. Everybody is looking up at Jemna, which makes us stronger and in more solidarity with each other."

It is not a coincidence that the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprising started in an impoverished agricultural region (Sidi Bouzid) where speculative capital and agribusiness flourished. It is also no minor detail that the incident that set the Arab uprisings into motion was the self-immolation of a fruit vendor: Mohamed Bouazizi. In this respect, the Jemna experience is one chapter of the revolutionary process in Tunisia and an edifying example (amongst others) of the persistence of the unresolved agrarian question. As Habib Ayeb, a Tunisian scholar-activist working on environmental and agricultural issues in Tunisia argued: "Jemna is not an isolated case with a specific problem. It is the tip of the iceberg that hides from view a generalised injustice, an outright failure for 70 years of land, agricultural and food policies."

But, this experience is facing a backlash from the elites that are wedded to the free-market ideology. It is being assaulted by the guardians of neoliberal capitalism who have a different vision for agriculture and who do not wish to see any emancipatory experience that threatens their profit-making interests gaining momentum and shaping the imaginaries of people in a radical fashion. Examples of this range from the threats directed at the association if they dare to sell the date harvest, the freezing of the association's bank accounts in October 2016 to the ludicrous demonising of the experience through a subservient media that tried to portray the people of Jemna as criminals engaged in illegal activities.

Attempts by the neoliberal government have been made to isolate Jemna and to shift the debate around issues of land rights towards economic considerations of what is the most cost-effective and efficient way of managing and controlling the production. For example, some of the government's officials were pushing for the creation of a share-holder company where the state has a majority stake. But people in Jemna are steadfast and determined in the face of this push-back because they have an ancestral relationship to the land.

The vision that the Tunisian elites have for agriculture (incarnated in the person of the current Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed, who worked for the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and as Agricultural Specialist at the US Embassy in Tunis) is one of liberalisation and agribusiness.

Agribusiness is an example of a predatory and destructive extractivism. It reinforces land grabbing, further deprives peasants of their land and creates an exploited class of precarious agricultural workers. By focusing on cash crops that need a lot of water, Tunisia is virtually exporting its rare water resources, exacerbating its water crisis. Moreover, agribusiness is not only environmentally unsustainable but it also exploits its working force, especially women who face terrible working conditions, including sexual harassment.

In Kairouan, a region in central Tunisia, a project of agro-fuels (the appropriate term to use instead of the benign and the positive-sounding bio-fuels) is being promoted to export fuel to Europe. The agreement of this project was signed in February 2016 between ICL Italy (the Italian branch of the Israeli company ICL) and the Tunisian government who agreed to plant giant cane (scientific name: *Arundo Donax*) in the region in order to produce agro-ethanol. Most

evidently, this leads to land grabs (around 12,500 hectares in total, not only in Kairouan) and the shift away from staple crops, thus increasing the need for food imports and further undermining Tunisia's food sovereignty. Additionally, by growing monocultures that will be exported (or the fuel extracted) to Europe, in order to increase the part of renewables in the EU energy mix, this project also results in water grabs- and this in a country that already suffers from absolute water poverty. It is worth noting here that the presumed "marginality" of land, used to justify its appropriation, is an old argument that goes back to colonial times when it was advanced to pursue all kinds of confiscations and dispossessions of indigenous people in the name of "restoring" and "improving", inherent in the "mission civilisatrice" (mission of civilising).

This resource grab, labelled as "energy security", and this rapacious extraction and subordination to foreign interests and dictates as well as to capital accumulation are some aspects of neo-colonialism.

This is happening despite the knowledge that industrial agriculture (agribusiness) is one of the drivers of climate change. Nnimmo Bassey puts it strongly when he says:

"As we often hear, agriculture contributes a large chunk of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and thus impacts on the climate. What is not often heard is that the culprit is industrial, chemical-dependent agriculture and not the environmentally sound agro-ecological practices. Nevertheless, even though smallholder farmers are not climate criminals, they are severely impacted by it." [1]

In addition to acknowledging the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of agribusiness, we cannot talk about social justice without recapturing our food systems from the greed of elites and multinationals. Justice won't be achieved without realising food sovereignty. Food sovereignty has been defined by the global peasant movement La Via Campesina as:

"the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations." [2]

Furthermore, food sovereignty is inseparable from questions concerning the reorganisation of trade, and the role of "free trade" in maintaining a profoundly unjust international division of

resources and labour where Global South states are expected to provide, on the one hand, a market for the dominant Western economies, and on the other, a reservoir of cheap labour and natural resources for the dominant powers. The neoliberal doctrine of "free trade" combined with a blind belief in perpetual growth paves the way for corporate take-over and legitimises the ongoing plunder of our resources and our countries. Neocolonialism again posturing as "market democracy".[3]

Despite its limitations, contradictions and the challenges it is facing, the experience of Jemna remains a glimmer of hope in a context of counter-revolution, the deepening of neoliberal/neo-colonial policies and the reinforcing of the free-market orthodoxy. It has been a revolutionary outburst and a significant moment in the history of peasant struggles in Tunisia and the region as a whole. Lessons need to be learnt from this amazing experience, one of them is that sovereignty over land, food and natural resources is an inalienable right; and land is first of all for those who till it!

End notes

[1] Nnimmo Bassey, 2012. Op. cit.

[2] La Via Campesina. Declaration of Nyéléni. 2007. Online: <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/food-sovereignty-and-trade-mainmenu-38/262-declaration-of-nyi>

[3] Nnimmo Bassey, 2012. Op.cit.