



# STATUE OF HABIB BOURGUIBA

## Tunis, Tunisia

36.800190, 10.185666



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### Executive Summary

After 30 years since the statue of Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba was removed, it returned to central Tunis in June 2016. The return of the statue was intended to be a grand gesture of patriotism, around which all Tunisian's could unite. It became clear, however, that the move was a divisive one: whilst serving as a patriotic reminder of Tunisia's trail-blazing modernisation in the mid 20th century, it attracted criticism based on Bourguiba's controversial authoritarian rule and what statement its return made about the future of post-revolutionary Tunisia.

## Introduction

In celebration of the 60th anniversary of Tunisia's independence, the equestrian statue of Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba was returned to Avenue Habib Bourguiba in central Tunis and was inaugurated by President Essebsi on 1 June 2016. This was a significant event as thirty years prior to this unveiling, the statue had been removed by Bourguiba's repressive successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. However, 2016 was a significant year as it marked just five years since the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, which saw Tunisia's repressive president Ben Ali ousted, and ushered in a new politically contentious era of democratisation of the country. Within this post-revolution landscape, the memorialization of Tunisian history became a key focal point.

While Bourguiba is widely remembered and lauded for his modernising rule and Ben Ali condemned for his brutal totalitarianism, the reality of life under their governance was less different than their reputations might suggest. Both left behind their legacies of imprisonment, torture, censorship, and brutal crackdowns on their opponents.<sup>1</sup> As such, his open-ended, authoritarian presidency is seen by many as incompatible with Tunisia's post-revolution values prioritising individual rights and freedoms. This case study explores the commemoration of Bourguiba in the post-revolutionary landscape.

## Background

### *Tunisia Pre-Independence*

Although officially part of the Ottoman empire since the 16th century, Tunisia had become functionally autonomous by the 19th century but faced increasing interference from European powers, most significantly Italy and France (although Italian settlers in Tunisia outnumbered the French fifteen to one.<sup>2</sup> French forces did not officially invade Tunisia until 1881; however, the country's future was determined three years earlier at the Congress of Berlin, where European powers met to decide the future of the failing Ottoman Empire. A weak Italy ceded its claim to Tunisia, and it was generally agreed that France would take control of Tunisia when a suitable opportunity presented itself. This moment soon arrived when a group of Tunisian tribesmen were alleged to have crossed into French Algeria on a raid. This provided a convenient pretext for the entry of French forces from the West, which met with the invasion fleet from the East at Tunis. The Tunisian Bey signed sovereignty over to the French in the Treaty of Bardo on the 12th of May 1881, establishing a French 'protectorate' that would last until 1956.<sup>3</sup>

Life under the French occupation was characterised by inequalities typical of imperial rule, with foreigners privileged to separate law courts and special rights to land and employment intended to attract a greater number of French settlers to the country. The cooperation of Tunisia's ruling classes

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<sup>1</sup> Ibrahim Fraihat, *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, And Tunisia After The Arab Spring* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-78.

was bought with privileges and opportunities for monetary gain. At the same time, the populations of rural areas were subjected to crushing taxation and displacement from fertile lands.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1920s, mounting injustices and the emergence of a Western-educated Tunisian middle-class led to the formation of the Nationalist movement known as the *Destour Party* (Constitutional Party), calling for equal rights for Tunisians, and Tunisian autonomy. It was a reformist party that focused on peaceful methods of protest like editing newspaper articles, or sending delegations to negotiate reforms to the beys – the Tunisian monarchs – and the French generals. By the 1930s, crackdowns on the group, and its lacking support from sections of society other than the Tunisian middle-class rendered the party increasingly ineffective. In 1934, the party split in two after new memes called for new methods of militancy and the *Neo-Destour Party* (New Constitutional Party) was formed, which developed cells among urban workers and rural farmers, gaining national support for independence. One of the leaders of this new party was Habib Bourguiba, a young lawyer who had recently returned from 3 years' study in France, and was married to a Frenchwoman.<sup>5</sup>

### *The 'Cult' of Bourguiba*

Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) was a leading political figure during the twentieth century and emerged as the key negotiator of Tunisia's independence from France in 1954, after having been repeatedly exiled from Tunisia in 1934, 1940, and 1952 for his involvement in the *Neo-Destour Party*. During his years in exile, he developed strong links with sympathetic parties in France, the US, and later with the Arab League and the United Nations, advocating for Tunisia's interests within the wider geopolitical picture.<sup>6</sup>

By agreeing to certain unpopular concessions that included allowing the French military continued presence in Tunisia, Bourguiba was able to hammer out an independence deal in 1955 and signed the Protocol of Independence on March 20, 1956. After that, he returned to Tunis as a national hero. He was subsequently elected as Tunisia's first president in 1957 and remained in that position for the next 30 years.<sup>7</sup> He is remembered to this day as the man who liberated and founded modern Tunisia, introducing values of equality and secularism which arguably laid the foundations for Tunisia's democratic future. His supporters celebrated him with the titles which now mark many of his monuments, (including the subject of this study) such as 'Supreme Combattant,' 'Builder of New Tunisia' and 'Liberator of Women.'<sup>8</sup>

Among Bourguiba's accolades are secularisation, through the reduced political and judicial power of Islamic leaders; education reform, and perhaps most famously, leaps forward in women's rights. He strove for gender equality, putting an end to polygamy, legalising abortion, ending veiling, and establishing equal access to education and the right to marriage approval, divorce, child custody and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 128-132.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Rich, "Bourguiba, Habib," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, September 30, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs : A History* ( London: Penguin, 2010), 394.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

inheritance.<sup>9</sup> These dramatic changes were indicative of his no-nonsense attitude to anything that might stand in the way of modernisation, including religion. Advocating for use of individual reason to determine the place of Islam in a modern world, he openly criticised many Muslim traditions, earning him the abhorrence of the newly powerless *ulama*.<sup>10</sup> Memorably, he called the veil an 'odious rag,' and publicly requested his citizens not to fast during Ramadan in order not to hamper Tunisia's development in 1960, leading to a short but bloody rebellion in Kairouan.<sup>11</sup>

Other barriers to Bourguiba's project were political opposition and the threat of pluralism and democracy, and he dealt with these threats in a similar 'strongman' fashion, typified by his crack-down on Pan-Arabism opposition groups in 1955. His former ally and deputy of *Neo Destour*, Salah Ben Youssef, was, in many ways, a more obvious choice of nationalist leader - his respect for Muslim traditions, inclination towards Pan-Arabism, and distaste for Europe was popular in Tunisia, and he publicly and avidly opposed Bourguiba's conciliatory approach to independence negotiations that made concessions to the French.<sup>12</sup> After Bourguiba ousted Ben Youssef from the party in 1955, tensions between the two nationalist leaders and their supporters intensified, breaking out in violence that threatened to plunge Tunisia into a civil war. Ben Youssef eventually fled to Cairo, where he was assassinated, alleged to have been by Bourguiba's command.<sup>13</sup> His supporters, however, continued to plague Bourguiba, expressing their discontent in rebellions that continued well into 1956, and which were forcibly put down with controversial French military assistance. In the next election, although Bourguiba had ensured there was no viable opposition to vote for, protests against his rule, took the form of abstention, with rates reaching as high as 70% in some areas.<sup>14</sup> As historian Kenneth Perkins concluded, 'Bourguiba's embrace of liberal values did not extend to the tolerance of contrary views.'<sup>15</sup>

When it came to democracy or even pluralism, Bourguiba didn't disguise his aversion. As he explained to the *New York Times* in 1958: 'if they accuse me of dictatorship, I accept. I am creating a nation. Liberty must be suppressed ... until the nation becomes homogeneous.'<sup>16</sup> From his position as head of both state and government (a 'presidential monarch'), Bourguiba renegaded the democratically elected assembly to a purely advisory role. Even then, democratic power was limited by a system of so-called 'list voting', by which a list of assembly members was chosen by the president, and votes had to accept or reject the list in its entirety. Reforms to move towards a multi-party system that was introduced in response to protest later in his presidency were stunted by restrictive conditions, including a base level of support of 5% of the vote (unattainable for all underdeveloped parties), and the outlawing of any criticism of the president. In 1974 the National Assembly consisting entirely of members of his own party voted to make him 'president for life.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014),125-9.

<sup>10</sup> In Islam, the *ulama* are the interpreters and transmitters of religious knowledge including Islamic doctrine and law.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014),135-259.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Rich, "Bourguiba, Habib," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, September 30, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014),132.

<sup>16</sup> *Time*, "Tunisia: No Time For Democracy," *Time*, September 28, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

Although much is said of Bourguiba's immense popularity, towards the end of his presidency economic hardships paired with his increasing absenteeism due to medical conditions, left him unpopular, both among politicians and citizens. In the bread riots of 1984 (against a doubling in the price of basic foods) Bourguiba's car was stoned, and his statue in Gafsa was torn down and the head was reportedly used as a football.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, the Bourguiba era is often remembered by Tunisians as a time of economic prosperity, political security, and social progress, and it was this nostalgia to which the resurgence of 'Bourguibism' in the 2010s sought to appeal.

### *Historic and Modern Significance of Avenue Habib Bourguiba*

Avenue Habib Bourguiba (as it has been named since Tunisian independence) is a grand French-style boulevard, lined with trees and up-market cafés, running from *Place de l'Indépendance* to the vast lake of Tunis. Before the French protectorate, the suburb was home to Christian *fondouk* (inns), and led from the sea gate on the Eastern wall of the Medina to the Port of the city. Under the French protectorate, the road had been named after Jules Ferry, former president of France who had directed the French invasion and occupation of Tunisia in 1881 in his role as then foreign minister.<sup>19</sup> Ferry notoriously set his countrymen about the task of civilising 'the inferior races.'<sup>20</sup> His statue stood in the square now named after the 2011 revolution, with his subjects symbolised by a woman at Ferry's feet, holding up wheat in an offering of fealty.<sup>21</sup> The avenue was renamed, and the statue was replaced with Bourguiba's after independence. This historic exchange of symbols possibly inspired Ben Ali to follow suit with his own exchange of statues for clock towers after his succession.

Already layered with these complex historical associations, Avenue Bourguiba also boasts many vital institutions, including the French Embassy and the Tunisian Interior Ministry, the latter of which came to symbolise Ben Ali's oppressive police state. As such, the 7 November Square outside the interior ministry became the obvious focal point of the 2011 protests, later known as the Jasmine Revolution. On January 14 2011, crowds of protesters overwhelmed police forces and flooded Avenue Bourguiba, shouting 'Game Over,' 'get lost,' and 'water and bread - yes! Ben Ali - no!' With the Interior Ministry surrounded, and the army refusing to shoot on protesters, Ben Ali finally resigned and fled to Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup>

Ever since this historic moment, which sparked protests and campaigns for justice and liberty across the Arab world in what became later termed the 'Arab Spring', Avenue Habib Bourguiba has been emblematic of Tunisian's right to free speech and protest. Major protests in the past ten years have traditionally culminated there, often with protesters being transported across the country for the purpose.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

<sup>19</sup> Layli Foroudi, "Keeping Time in Tunisia," *Apollo Magazine*, November 18, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Jules François Camille Ferry, "Speech Before the French Chamber of Deputies, March 28, 1884," *Discours et Opinions de Jules Ferry*, ed. Paul Robiquet (Paris: Armand Colin & Cie 1897), 199-201.

<sup>21</sup> Kareem Fahim, "Revolution And Its Aftermath Play Out On An Avenue That Defines A City," *New York Times*, March 12, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Roula Khalaf, "Tunisia: After the Revolution," *Financial Times*, May 5, 2011.

## Construction of the Statue

In 1973, on the occasion of Bourguiba's sixty-second birthday, the French sculptor Raymond Martin crafted an equestrian statue in his honour.<sup>23</sup> Made in bronze, the statue memorialises Bourguiba's triumphant return from exile in 1955, having reached an agreement with the French for Tunisia's independence. His right arm is raised to greet his adoring people, and his horse is in mid-step, symbolising his readiness to lead the country towards modernity and reform. Although his European connections are evident in a modern tailored suit and his representation through a traditionally Western iconography of the strong equestrian leader (the statue has been compared to that of Louis XV on the *Place de la Concorde*), the addition of the *Chechia*, the national hat of Tunisia, makes a statement of respect and national pride. Just like his rule and politics, the statue, therefore, treads the fine line between local traditions and Westernised approaches.

In 1982, Bourguiba also commissioned the Tunisian sculptor Zoubeir Turki to make a bronze statue of Ibn Khaldun, the famous medieval historian, philosopher, and researcher in the social sciences.<sup>24</sup> The statue of Ibn Khaldun was placed between the Eastern door of the medina and the statue of Bourguiba on one hand, and in front of the Headquarters of the French General Consulate and the Cathedral on the other hand. According to some Tunisian researchers, it was Bourguiba's plan to place Ibn Khaldun's statue in front of his own to show that this scholar came out of the medina and took a step in the enlightenment of Tunisians and the promotion of science symbolising the resistance against the French cultural invasion, thus, facing Christianity and Imperialism. Furthermore, it is also interpreted as an attempt to create a cultural connection between the social reforms started by Ibn Khaldun and Bourguiba's modernising plan. Evidencing how attentive Bourguiba was to his public image and legacy.

## Removal of Bourguiba's Statues and Construction of Clock Towers under Ben Ali

On the 7th of November 1987, Bourguiba was deposed in a 'medical' coup by his Prime Minister Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, following Bourguiba was subsequently sent to his town of birth, Monastir, and his statue was moved secretly<sup>25</sup> and unceremoniously on Ben Ali's orders from Avenue Bourguiba to the suburban harbour of La Goulette. Due to the secret nature of the removal, the exact date of the statue's removal is contested, with some historians suggesting October the year after<sup>26</sup>, and others claiming it removes as fast as four days after Ben Ali's coup.<sup>27</sup> In its place, Ben Ali commissioned a clock tower to be built in commemoration of his rise to power and had it installed in the space where Bourguiba's statue had stood. The current tower is an updated model, but the original had a number 7 instead of 6 to mark the half-hour, as the square was re-named the '7 November' Square in memory of the date of Ben Ali's ascension to power.<sup>28</sup> This bold move presaged efforts throughout Ben Ali's presidency to leave his mark on Tunisia and step out of his predecessor's

<sup>23</sup> Kees Van Tilburg, "Equestrian Statue of Habib Bourguiba in Tunis," *Equestrian Statues*, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> RT Arabic, "بوريقية" يعود لقلب العاصمة التونسية بعد 29 عاما," *RT Arabic*, May 24, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Mohamed Fawzi Blout, "Bourguiba, une histoire de statue," *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Hafiz Muribh, "نصب تمثال بوريقية مجددا.. رمزية تثير الجدل," *Al-Jazeera*, June 2, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Hamza Marzouk, "Bourguiba: retour d'une statue ou d'une symbolique?" *L'Economiste Maghrebin*, March 2, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

shadow.

It was not only in Tunis that this exchange took place. After Ben Ali's accession, many statues of Bourguiba from cities across Tunisia were moved to less prominent positions, put in storage, or simply disappeared. At the same time, local councils received instructions to erect clock towers in public squares in cities across Tunisia. The significance of the clocktower for Ben Ali is unclear. It has been suggested that they were symbols of modernity and technology or that Ben Ali may have been emulating a similar Roman practice. Architect Guermazi conjectured on its apolitical nature, stating "the number 7 is merely that - a number ... The clock towers are nothing more than that ... All this was to say: I am here, and I am not going anywhere."<sup>29</sup> Given that many of these clocktowers remain standing in post-revolutionary Tunisia, this may be the case, Ben Ali's clocks have remained in place and are even repaired and cared for, while more explicit remains of his rule, such as large number 7s that were erected (again, in celebration of the date of his succession), were removed.<sup>30</sup> After the 2011 revolution, plans were drawn up by Guermazi and other Tunisian architects for the removal of the clocktower on Avenue Habib Bourguiba and the redesign of the square, under the commission of Ben Ali's democratically elected successor and with funding offered by Microsoft and Facebook.<sup>31</sup> For unknown reasons, however, they were never carried out, and so the clock tower (Figure 1) remains, dominating the city centre.



**Figure 1:** 'The Tower Clock' Image by Dennis Jarvis via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 2.0

## History of the Contestation

### *Reinstatement of Bourguiba's Statue*

On 15 March 2016, the spokesman for the Office of the President, Moez Sinaawi, announced that the commemorative statue of the political leader Habib Bourguiba would be moved back to its original place in the centre of Tunis.<sup>32</sup> The Tunisian president took the decision at the time, Beji Caid Essebsi, possibly inspired by the return of a statue of Bourguiba to its original place in Monastir earlier that year.<sup>33</sup> On the night of 23 May 2016, the statue returned to its eponymous avenue and was inaugurated on 1 June, Tunisia's national independence day.

<sup>29</sup> Malek Lakhal, "A Revolution Still Without Monuments," *Arab Reform Initiative*, May 12, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Joachim Ben Yakoub, "The Last Monument Standing the Politics of Time in the Tunisian Revolution," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

After consultations and the consideration by a special committee appointed by the President, it was decided once again not to dismantle Ben Ali's clock tower, and therefore, Bourguiba's equestrian statue was placed along-side the tower, facing away from it and towards the statue of Ibn Khaldoun at the other end of the avenue, just as Bourguiba had intended. However, this executive decision soon proved controversial and created a polarized divide between those in support of the statues reinstatement and those fiercely opposed to it.

### *Support for the Statue's Return*

President Essebsi stressed that the goal of the equestrian statue's return was not to idolise the leader's personality but rather to celebrate an unparalleled date in Tunisian history and unify Tunisian citizens. In his statement to the media, Essebsi emphasised that Tunisians were in urgent need of this unification in light of the economic and political challenges facing them (Tunisian politics had been in turmoil further fueled the assassinations of two prominent leaders of secular, left-wing parties in 2013).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Essebsi added that Bourguiba was 'the father of independence and of this nation. Every country has their great men'<sup>35</sup> and expressed his determination that his legacy should be respected.<sup>36</sup> Further stating that 'those who wanted to demystify Bourguiba's achievements now recognise the role of the *Zaim* (leader). The same people who have long tried to diminish his image in the national memory today recognise his role in building the Tunisian state.'<sup>37</sup> He also emphasised that he understood and accepted the critics against the return of Bourguiba's statue saying that 'the revolution guaranteed freedom of expression for Tunisians and we must respect it.'<sup>38</sup>

Tunisians were very divided on the return of Bourguiba's statue to its original place. Many Bourguiba loyalists, present at the inauguration ceremony, cried as they witnessed the return of Bourguiba's statue to its original location after nearly 30 years of isolation in a suburban area. A crying young woman, referring to herself as a 'Tunisian daughter of Bourguiba,' stated to the Arab Weekly: 'Bourguiba is the father who gave me the freedom to go to school, to live free and divorce the man I do not like. God bless his soul.' Mohamed Jouini, a trader at the Kasbah, the old city of Tunis, stated that 'after they moved away his statue, I felt its absence like a black hole in my mind. All this must teach all of us a lesson: Nothing remains except what is essential to improve human situations.'<sup>39</sup> It is, therefore, evident the significant impact that the statue had on the way Tunisian citizens perceived their public spaces. Another supporter, Mustafa Suisi, stressed to Al Jazeera that reinstating the statue is a positive step, especially considering that Bourguiba symbolically represents Tunisia's strength and it is what the country needs to overcome poverty return to the 'splendour' characterising

<sup>34</sup> Hafiz Muribh, "تمثال بورقيبة مجدداً.. رمزية تثير الجدل," *Al-Jazeera*, June 2, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Jeune Afrique. "Tunisie: la statue équestre de Bourguiba retrouve le centre de Tunis, après 29 ans d'absence" *Jeune Afrique*, May 24, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Translated by the author from « Ceux qui ont voulu démystifier les réalisations de Bourguiba reconnaissent aujourd'hui le rôle du Zaim. Les mêmes qui ont longtemps essayé d'estomper son image de la mémoire nationale reconnaissent aujourd'hui son rôle dans l'édification de l'Etat tunisien »

<sup>38</sup> Lamine Ghanmi, "Bourguiba's statue symbolically reinstalled in Tunis," *Arab Weekly*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Bourguiba's era.<sup>40</sup>

### *Opposition to the Statues Reinstatement*

The reinstatement also faced criticism, not least because of its great expense. The bill for the reinstatement reached around \$250,000; a high cost for a symbolic gesture of national unity at a time of economic crisis, as Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi, president of opposition party Current of Love, expressed, stating that 'the money wasted on the statue should have been spent on the disadvantaged and marginalised areas and on the poor.'<sup>41</sup> During the inauguration, one of the spectators present Mohamed Bejaoui told Arab Weekly, 'the authorities wasted Tunisia's money for a nonsensical move.'<sup>42</sup> Only weeks after the inauguration, two student activists were arrested for graffitiing the base of the statue, protesting alleged nepotism and corruption in President Essebsi's government.<sup>43</sup> Since then, semi-permanent police cordons have barred the public from approaching the statue.<sup>44</sup>

The gesture also attracted accusations of political opportunism by those who saw the move as an attempt by Essebsi to draw on Bourguiba's legacy in order to improve his own popularity. Indeed the deputy of the Popular Front party, Ammar Amroussia commented, 'Essebsi ... endlessly draws inspiration from Bourguiba and exploits his image,'<sup>45</sup> while journalist Hamza Marzouk even accused Essebsi of evoking Bourguiba in his style of discourse and use of hand gestures in an attempt to emulate and exploit his image.<sup>47</sup> The General Secretary of the left-wing party, the Popular Front, Zouhair Hamdi, commented, 'the President [Essebsi] evokes the past to hide his face and make people forget the concrete problems of Tunisians who live in the present.'<sup>48</sup>

Many found the return of the statue to a square now literally synonymous with the revolution (it was dubbed 14 January 2011 Square) ironic and even insulting to Tunisian's revolutionary values of democracy and liberty. Historian and researcher of the history of Tunisian nationalism, Mohamed Dhifallah commented that 'the monument of the statue has nothing to do with the demands of the revolution that the youth raised ... rather it contradicts them.'<sup>49</sup> There was anger on this point, especially in light of the government's apparent reluctance to memorialise the martyrs of the revolution. Hamdi asserted that spending money on the equestrian statue's return whilst "not building a statue commemorating the memory of the martyrs and youth of the revolution is a form of provocation for Tunisians."<sup>50</sup> In an essay entitled *A Revolution Still Without Monuments*, researcher and journalist Malek Lakhal examines the hesitancy of local government to officially memorialise the martyrs of the revolution or even publish a full list of their names (on the basis of administrative

<sup>40</sup> Hafiz Muribh, "نصب تمثال بورقيبة مجددا.. رمزية تثير الجدل," *Al-Jazeera*, June 2, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lamine Ghanmi, "Bourguiba's statue symbolically reinstalled in Tunis," *Arab Weekly*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Business News, "Arrestation des deux jeunes ayant saccagé la statue equestre de Bourguiba," *Business News*, August 2, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Malek Lakhal, "A Revolution Still Without Monuments," *Arab Reform Initiative*, May 12, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Translated by the author: « Béji Caïd Essebsi, [...] ne cesse de s'inspirer de Bourguiba et exploiter son image »

<sup>46</sup> Hamza Marzouk, "Bourguiba: retour d'une statue ou d'une symbolique ?" *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, March 2, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Hafiz Muribh, "نصب تمثال بورقيبة مجددا.. رمزية تثير الجدل," *Al-Jazeera*, June 2, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Hamza Marzouk, "Bourguiba: retour d'une statue ou d'une symbolique ?" *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, March 2, 2016.

difficulty). With the few marble plaques in Tunis having been set up by families of the dead, this is an absence felt keenly by the younger generation who feel as though their history is being glossed over by political elites who would rather view the revolution as a 'small hiccup along the way' than a turning point.<sup>51</sup> In December 2020 and January 2021, families of martyrs and wounded occupied local government headquarters, demanding the publication of the list.

## Decision-Making Processes

The decision regarding the future of January 14 Square was, from the beginning, a political one. The matter was debated by candidates for the 2014 presidential election, with Moncef Marzouki proposing to replace the clock tower with a monument to the martyrs of the revolution, while Beji Caid Essebsi, who went on to win the election, stated his ambition to return the statue of Bourguiba to its 'natural place' (i.e. after the destruction of Ben Ali's clock tower).<sup>52</sup> So the return of the equestrian statue to - nearly - its original place in 2016 was, for Essebsi, the fulfilment of a campaign promise. In his speech at his inauguration, however, Essebsi added as motivation for the decision that it had been requested by a number of activists, including Ali Ben Salem, a respected, prominent activist and opponent of Ben Ali's regime.<sup>53</sup>

That the statue was not returned to its exact place, as initially promised, was not mentioned by Essebsi. It was picked up on by a few reporters but then as a side note. According to a presidential spokesperson, the fate of the clock tower had been decided by a special commission.<sup>54</sup> Other than the commission's evident conclusion to keep the clock tower, its reasoning and process were not made public.

Indeed, for many, the return of Bourguiba's statue and the decision not to remove the November 7 clock tower confirms long-held fears of post-revolutionary stasis or back-sliding. Iheb Guerhazi, one of the architects commissioned after the 2011 revolution to redesign the square (ill-fated plans which would have seen the tower removed, and the square turned into a pedestrianised public space), expressed his frustration at the decision, describing the avenue as 'a cemetery.'<sup>55</sup> Ahmed Bouazizi, a municipal councillor in Tunis affiliated with the opposition 'Democratic Current', stated in an interview, 'Placing a statue of Bourguiba right where the revolution took place is an act of revenge against the revolution, against the youth and the martyrs. It is a way of saying: we are back.'<sup>56</sup> This sentiment had been expressed in 2018 by a prominent figure, Moncef Marzouki, the first democratically elected president of Tunisia (2011-2014), who claimed that 'the revolution isn't over,' and cited the return of Bourguiba's statue, among other issues, as evidence of the 'creeping, latent return of a world we no longer want.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Malek Lakhal, "A Revolution Still Without Monuments," *Arab Reform Initiative*, May 12, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Leaders, "Retour de la statue équestre de Bourguiba à son emplacement initial." *Leaders*, May 20, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> LeFigaro, "Tunisie: une statue de Bourguiba à Tunis," *Le Figaro*, March 1, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Layli Foroudi, "Keeping Time in Tunisia," *Apollo Magazine*, November 18, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Malek Lakhal, "A Revolution Still Without Monuments," *Arab Reform Initiative*, May 12, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Jules Crétois, "Moncef Marzouki 'La révolution n'est pas terminée,'" *Jeune Afrique*, January 16, 2018.

## Summary and Conclusions

The long history of this case clearly depicts the importance that statues and public monuments have in the Arab way of perceiving spaces and providing a politicised public image to the audience. It is evident that Tunisians are divided when it comes to analyse and frame the impact of Bourguiba's leadership on Tunisia's current society and economy. Although many people still agree that Bourguiba is the perfect symbol of modernity and Westernisation Tunisia should be striving for at the moment, others see in this governmental attempt to reutilise Bourguiba's picture the perfect tool to attract votes and general support. Depending on how the Tunisian political arena will change in the near future, the fame of this statue is bound to really change, either bringing more criticism around this controversy or making people fully accept the importance of Bourguiba's leadership

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(Figure 1)

## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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