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Witnesses to Revolution

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Witnesses to Revolution

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Description

My documentary follows two families 4 years after the Tunisian Revolution. All members in the Daly family from Sidi Bouzid participated in the revolution, and the Laroussi family in La Goulette had two brothers martyred on January 14th, 2011. The film explores the effects of the revolution – emotional, economic, and social – on all the various family members. As we get glimpses into the daily life of two main characters, we see that reactions to the revolution are diverse, although the notion of the ‘Tunisian exception’ is held up to scrutiny by the overwhelmingly negative reactions to the consequences of the revolution over the past four years.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to Ghada Daly for her introduction to her wonderful family, her willingness to participate in my film despite her shyness, and for her gracious hospitality in Sidi Bouzid.

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This film would not have been possible without the countless friends and acquaintances I’ve made during my time in Tunisia. Thank you to the Laroussi and Daly families for letting me listen to their stories and entrust them to me. It took courage and vulnerability, and I was honored to hear them.

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Introduction

The international community has dubbed Tunisia the ‘exception,’ the lone success of the Arab Spring, confirmed by its transition to democracy three months ago. I had expected to find an atmosphere of political excitement and enthusiasm when I arrived in Tunis, but found the opposite. The young Tunisians I talked to were disillusioned by the politicians they had elected (if they had even voted) and disenchanted with the political system itself (as their failure to participate in it demonstrated). The graffiti on Avenue Habib Bourguiba that proudly reads, “La Tunisie: Première Démocratie du Monde Arabe” seemed cynical, if technically correct.

I wanted to explore the effects of the revolution on families 4 years later, at a time when it seemed like changes should be happening, or should have happened already. What changes did families really see? How did the revolution affect them? The two families I followed in my documentary gave a lot to the revolution. Practically every member of the Daly family in Sidi Bouzid, the birthplace of the revolution, participated and contributed in some form. In the Laroussi family of La Goulette, two sons and brothers were martyred, leaving the family reeling with the loss and lack of reparations.

My film questions then notion of the ‘Tunisian exception’ by exploring the emotional and concrete consequences of the revolution on families who, for the most part, feel the revolution brought more harm than good. My goal was also to reignite awareness of Tunisia, to put it back in international consciousness (or at least the consciousness of those who watch my film). Tunisia is not a simple success story, and I believe it’s important that the world understand why in order to help and support Tunisia as well as other Arab countries that had revolutions. In many ways, I do believe Tunisia is exceptional in the Arab world, but its revolution had complex and varying effects on people and families throughout the country.

Methodology

I found the Laroussi family in La Goulette through a long series of contacts – the way most things happen in Tunisia. Mounir asked his daughter, who asked a friend, who asked a family she knew if they wanted to participate in my film, and they agreed. Ghada Daly, who the program had met previously in Sidi Bouzid connected me with her own extended family, which became my second subject.

I decided to focus on one particularly interesting member of each family as the link to the rest of the family members' stories. I got to know Al Pacino, the charismatic and oldest brother in the Laroussi family through repeated visits to his *lablabi* shop. He introduced me to his friends and siblings and practically half the town of La Goulette, and I interviewed him about his business, his brothers, his hopes, and his struggles. He took me to meet his mother and three of his sisters, who helped me to understand the emotional and concrete effects of the revolution on their family.

In the Daly family, I decided to focus on Ghada herself because she speaks English and because I had the most access to her. She took me to meet her cousins and aunt and facilitated the interviews. In the Daly family, there were many contradicting opinions about the revolution, and trying to understand the reasons for this and put together a coherent picture of the effects of the revolution on this family was challenging.

With both families, I conducted the interviews in Tunesi and tried to follow along and react as best I could. Afterwards, I got help translating the interviews word for word. This strategy, while time-consuming, worked well because there was little exterior mediation between my subjects and me, and this outweighed the disadvantage of the language barrier. In Sidi Bouzid, Ghada often gave me the main idea of what my interlocutors were saying, which helped me ask appropriate follow-up questions and make the most of my short time there. The biggest difficulty I've had is finding translators who have enough time to help me work

through the many hours of interviews I've accumulated, as well as regular interactions I've caught on camera that outstretched my vocabulary. However, in general, I was very pleased with my ability to spend hours on end with my interlocutors without speaking any English. Even my limited comprehension of Tounsi went a long way in gaining my character's trust and cultivating relaxed, honest, and thorough answers to my questions. Unfortunately, the only time that I felt my inability to connect with my interlocutors, possibly because of the language barrier, was with two very important characters: the children of Nabil Laroussi, the oldest martyr. I had hoped that Montasar and Nisreen would have meaningful and interesting opinions and answers about their father's death and about the revolution, but for some reason we didn't connect and the material I got didn't seem to contribute anything to the film. I think their absence leaves a gap in the film.

Often in documentary filmmaking, the filmmaker faces the challenges of building trust with her interlocutors and convincing them to agree to be filmed. This hesitation is likely a result of the power dynamic between filmmaker and subject. The filmmaker has the power to manipulate, distort, edit a subject's voice and image, and ultimately his story, and the subject knows this. I was anticipating the families to be wary and reluctant, but fortunately, I found the opposite. Both families were eager to tell their stories and appreciated having a chance to do so. The Laroussi family, in particular, has been denied reparations for their brothers' deaths and feels voiceless, so my interest in their story gave them a chance to share their story.

Because, ultimately, the process of editing forces the filmmaker to choose bits and pieces in order to construct a coherent and moving story, I have in fact had to mediate into the families' stories. While I've had to pick and choose what I deem the most meaningful and important pieces of their stories, I've done my best to stay as true as possible to their self-representations and preserve their opinions, feelings, and emotions that were my goal to represent as accurately as possible.

Research Findings

The members of the Laroussi family seemed to collectively feel the same way about the revolution. A recurring statement across interlocutors in interviews was “nothing has changed.” But it was clear that “nothing” referred specifically to their economic situation, which seems to be the way they measure the quality of their life. The mother complained that prices were high and life was expensive. Hinda, a sister, spoke about her unemployment status resignedly. Al Pacino feels lucky that he has a well established and well-known business thanks to his neighborhood fame, but in truth doesn’t get a lot of business during most of the year. All his money goes toward paying the rent to his house, which he doesn’t own. Jimmy, Al Pacino’s good friend, adds a wider point of view of the Tunisian Revolution in the context of the Arab Spring, and he appears more optimistic about the outcome in Tunisia.

The biggest effect of the revolution on the family was the loss of their brothers and sons, Nabil and Belhassan. Their continued pain was evident during interviews. Hinda despaired the loss of “the two best ones of the nine of us,” while Nadira was revengeful toward the killer. Their mother can hardly go out anymore because her body has suffered from the emotional toll of losing her sons. Their pain was compounded by the fact that the mother and siblings of the martyrs didn’t receive any reparations, and their voices of condemnation against the killer, who was in the military, weren’t recognized by the courts or by the media. They all expressed hurt at the fact that Nabil and Belhassan were innocent, were simply guarding their neighborhood, and were killed for no reason. The martyrdom of their sons and brothers for no cause, without any achievement is the overwhelming effect of the revolution in the eyes of the Laroussi family.

The Daly family yielded a more diverse set of opinions about the revolution. Forming them into a coherent conclusion was complicated by the fact that the Daly family seemed to be an exception in Sidi Bouzid, rather than the norm. As one of the poorest and most marginalized

cities in Tunisia, with an overwhelming rate of unemployment, I had expected that the main complaints of the economic failure of the revolution would come from Sidi Bouzid. Indeed, among the older generation – specifically, Ghada’s aunt – this was the case. Their main complaints were the high prices of food and living. But Ghada and Aida were much happier with the revolution - Ghada going so far as to call it the rose of the Arab Spring – because their demands were for freedom of expression, democracy, and human rights. Because they measure the achievements of the revolution in these terms, they call it a success (although they are both unemployed, as Aida’s mother points out as a failure). Aida is the only one who mentioned the need to recognize that Tunisia is still in a transitional period, that in a sense the revolution is not over and cannot yet be judged. The two male cousins, Maher and Thamer, added another dimension to the diverse opinions of the revolution within one family. Like most of the other young men in Sidi Bouzid, they were frustrated with life, feel trapped, and spend much of their time in cafés. Thamer has a job as part of the government funded low-paid regional development schemes aimed at long-term unemployed people, but Maher is unemployed. They both conveyed their extreme disappointment with the revolution, calling it “an April fool’s joke” and “a revolution in name only.” Nothing changed in their lives, they have little trust in the political actors, and feel like the demands of young people are not represented.

Overall, the voices yielded a somewhat depressing picture of the revolution. The few voices of optimism were Ghada and Aida, and perhaps Jimmy, Al Pacino’s friend.

Critical Analysis

The film begins with the town of Sidi Bouzid itself, “a time bomb” waiting to go off and explode in revolution. The characters mention Mohammad Bouazizi because it is almost impossible to tell the story of the Tunisian Revolution without doing so, but they talk about themselves in relation to him and his frustrations and demands, whether they are similar or different to his. Each family member then describes his or her involvement in the revolution, from the neighborhood protection committees to the daytime protests.

I introduce the Laroussi family through the story of their brothers’ martyrdom, remembered by them. Whereas all of Sidi Bouzid suffered and sacrificed for the revolution, it was the Laroussi family that suffered in particular in La Goulette. Nabil and Belhassan were their sacrifice, their contribution to the revolution.

Then the film moves into an exploration of one member of each family – Ghada Daly and Al Pacino Laroussi. We learn more deeply about their daily lives, hopes for the future, and quirky characteristics. This helps us understand their position in their community and family better. The two focus characters are very different from each other. Ghada is a young woman, religious, unemployed, and politically active. Al Pacino is a middle-aged man with his own business, a self-proclaimed non-practicing Muslim, with few strong political opinions. Their difference provides the viewers with a deeper view of Tunisian society, helping them recognize its diversity, nuance, and even at times, contradiction.

The final section of the film brings together all the characters’ varied opinions about the results of the revolution – economically, emotionally, socially, or with regard to freedom. We see how disappointing the revolution was in many ways – to the mother of the martyrs, to the still frustrated young men in Sidi Bouzid. But we also see a glimmer of hope with Ghada and Aida’s optimism. Whatever the audience concludes, the notion of the ‘Tunisian Exception’ is questioned, doubted, and re-evaluated.

Implications

I've felt conflicted about the implications of my film. Usually, I feel a duty to help tell positive stories about the Middle East in order to counter the dominant narrative in media and society that posits the region and its people as a source of chaos and destruction. My film seems to do the opposite of this, though, by questioning the success of the revolution. The world sees Tunisia as a success story, a story that made the news and put Tunisia on the map for a brief while. But then the world seemed to move on and forget. When I told friends and relatives I was going to study in Tunisia, they would reply with something along the lines of, "Oh! Tanzania! You'll love Africa." Most Americans don't have any conception of Tunisia or the identity of its people, or even know that it ignited the Arab Spring. I hope that this film could be productive by reminding its viewers that Tunisia wasn't just a simple success story. It complicates the easy-to-stomach narrative of the 'Tunisian exception' by showing the overwhelmingly negative effects of the revolution for two real families. It reminds the world that Tunisians aren't satisfied.

I made a decision to not include certain viewpoints in the film. One of Al Pacino's friends, for example, told me that they (supposedly, Tunisians) don't care about democracy or freedom of speech, but that they only want to be able to live better. Another of his friends told me that he believed that Tunisia is the exception only in that it proves the rule that Arabs don't care about democracy or human rights. This was very disturbing to me, and not representative of all Tunisians by any stretch of the imagination. I had already included multiple characters saying they want Ben Ali back, and I decided that it would be unethical to tell this even more extreme side of the story. It could have negative repercussions in how the audience might shape or reshape their view of Tunisians or Arabs in general, which I do not want to unintentionally aid.

One other storytelling difficulty I faced was deciding how to explain the origins of the revolution succinctly and clearly for an audience who may not already know. The journalistic, and simplistic, account begins with Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation. We've learned this semester that the real story begins years earlier, with growing frustration manifested especially in Gafsa. It wasn't one man, or one town, that began the revolution, but attempting to explain this misconception would have been almost impossible considering it wasn't the topic of my film. I decided to leave that be and focus as much as possible on the family, their relationship to Bouazizi, their demands compared to his. This, I hope, will suffice.

List of interlocutors

Laroussi, Fathi. 2015. Interview. La Goulette, Tunis, April 13, April 15, April 2015.

Laroussi, Hinda. 2015. Interview. La Goulette, Tunis, April 9, 2015.

Laroussi, Nadira. 2015. Interview. La Goulette, Tunis, April 15, 2015.

Laroussi, Salha. 2015. Interview. La Goulette, Tunis, April 9, 2015.

Mehrezi, Fadil. 2015. Interview. La Goulette, Tunis, April 16, 2015.

Daly, Aida. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid. April 18, 2015.

Daly, Ghada. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid, April 20, 2015.

Daly, Maher. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid. April 20, 2015.

Daly, Thamer. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid. April 20, 2015.

Hamdouni, Fadhila. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid. April 18, 2015.

Hamdouni, Halima. 2015. Interview. Sidi Bouzid. April 20, 2015.

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