

From the Visibility of Action to the Visibility of Actors Shifts in Modes of Appearance in the Tunisian Revolution



KAOUTHER DOUZI
Université de Liège



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3361-6007>

Abstract: This article examines the Tunisian revolution through modes of appearance in protest practices, drawing on interviews with participants involved between December 7, 2010 and January 14, 2011. Modes of appearance are understood as the different forms through which protest becomes publicly visible. It argues that January 14 marks not only the collapse of the regime, but also a turning point in protest appearance. Under the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, protest tended to produce visibility through collective action, such as confrontations, gatherings, and hit-and-run dynamics, while the public visibility of identifiable individuals remained limited. Appearance was thus tied less to self-representation than to the capacity of action to render power and violence perceptible, in line with what Butler describes as a politically conditioned process. January 14 signals a shift. As repression receded, possibilities of appearance expanded, bringing faces, names, and trajectories to the fore. Appearance was no longer mediated through action, but increasingly linked to actors' capacity to represent themselves. This transformation remained uneven. Interviews show that some participants struggled to position themselves within this emerging regime, where individual visibility became more central. The revolution can thus be read as a shift from a visibility grounded in actions to one that foregrounds actors. The article concludes that the revolution not only reconfigured the political field, but also reorganized the conditions of appearance, producing uneven forms of visibility, raising questions about how actors recognize themselves within them.

Keywords: Modes of Appearance; Protest Practices; Visibility; Tunisian Revolution; Political Embodiment

Résumé : Cet article analyse la révolution tunisienne à travers les formes de visibilité produites par les pratiques protestataires, à partir d'entretiens réalisés avec des participants ayant pris part au mouvement entre le 17 décembre 2010 et le 14 janvier 2011. Les « modes d'apparition » sont ici entendus comme les différentes manières dont la contestation accède à l'espace public et devient visible. L'article soutient que le 14 janvier ne marque pas seulement la chute du régime, mais constitue également un moment charnière dans la manière dont les acteurs de la protestation apparaissent publiquement. Sous le régime autoritaire de Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, la visibilité de la contestation reposait essentiellement sur l'action collective, qu'il s'agisse d'affrontements avec les forces de l'ordre, de rassemblements ou de mobilisations éclairs. Dans ce contexte, la mise en visibilité d'individus clairement identifiables demeurait limitée. L'apparition publique relevant ainsi moins de l'auto-représentation que de la capacité des actions collectives à rendre perceptibles les rapports de pouvoir et les violences du régime, conformément à ce que Judith Butler décrit comme un processus politiquement conditionné. Le 14 janvier marque une rupture. À mesure que la répression s'atténue, les possibilités d'apparaître dans l'espace public se multiplient, faisant émerger au premier plan des visages, des noms et des trajectoires individuelles. L'accès à la visibilité n'est alors plus principalement médiatisé par l'action protestataire elle-même, mais de plus en plus lié à la capacité des acteurs à se présenter et à se représenter publiquement. Cette transformation ne s'opère toutefois pas de manière uniforme. Les entretiens montrent que certains participants ont éprouvé des difficultés à trouver leur place dans ce nouveau régime de visibilité, au sein duquel l'exposition individuelle acquiert une importance croissante. La révolution peut ainsi être comprise comme le passage d'une visibilité fondée avant tout sur les actions collectives à une visibilité davantage centrée sur les acteurs eux-mêmes. L'article conclut que la révolution tunisienne n'a pas seulement reconfiguré le champ politique : elle a également transformé les conditions mêmes de l'apparition publique et de la reconnaissance sociale. Ce processus a produit des formes de visibilité inégale, soulevant la question de la manière dont les acteurs se reconnaissent, ou non, dans les nouveaux cadres de visibilité issus de la révolution.

Mots clés : modes d'apparition ; pratiques de protestation ; visibilité ; révolution tunisienne ; incarnation politique

Introduction

During the Kasbah 2 sit-in,¹ a young man filming the protest with his phone approached a journalist preparing a report on the protest and challenged the coverage of “official” media, accusing them of failing to represent the real demands of protesters (Souabni, 2011). In contrast, he presented himself as someone active on social media who is closer to what is happening on the ground (Souabni, 2011). This moment may appear

1. The Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2 sit-ins were protest movements organized by various political actors and civil society organizations following the fall of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime in January 2011.

anecdotal, yet it raises a central question: who has the right to make the revolution visible, to narrate it, and to speak on its behalf? It also shows that appearance in public space cannot be reduced to mere presence, but is shaped by complex conditions of legitimacy, representation, and the capacity to be seen and heard.

Starting from these questions, this article approaches the Tunisian revolution through modes of appearance within protest action, which can be viewed as a moment that reshaped the ways in which bodies, actions, and actors make an appearance in the public space. It argues that January 14, 2011, should not be seen only as the moment of the regime's fall, but also as a turning point in the conditions of protest appearance.

Interviews show that, under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, protest practices tended to produce visibility grounded primarily in collective action—such as clashes, gatherings, and dynamics of advance and retreat—while the public visibility of identifiable individuals remained limited. This was not due to their reluctance to appear in public, but to the fact that appearing through action was preferable, as the action itself becomes the bearer of visibility and renders relations of power and violence perceptible.

The article therefore draws on Judith Butler's work (2016), which understands protest as linked to forms of appearance, where bodies are not merely present but act through their presence. Yet this appearance is not limited to immediate visual presence. Butler (2016: 213) shows that certain acts—such as hunger strikes—can produce visibility, so that the body becomes perceptible through what it does rather than through its visual display. In this sense, she does not oppose presence to absence but expands the notion of appearance to include silent acts or acts that are not directly visible yet are prominent in the public sphere through political claims. This allows bodies to “appear” through their actions and their effects (Butler, 2016: 205). As Juris (2014) likewise argues, protest performances treat the body as the medium through which political meanings are embodied and communicated in public. At the same time, the meanings attached to these embodied forms of appearance are not inherent in the acts themselves but emerge through framing processes, as movements, media, and other actors actively organize and interpret events in particular ways (Snow, 2004: 384).

Taken together, these perspectives allow the article to distinguish between two levels of visibility: the “visibility of actors,” where bodies appear as identifiable subjects, and the “visibility of actions,” where the act itself becomes the bearer of appearance even in the absence of clearly defined actors. This distinction does not separate two discrete modes but

highlights a tension between overlapping forms of appearance whose relative prominence varies across contexts.

This framework helps make sense of the Tunisian case prior to January 14, when individual visibility was risky, leading protest practices to privilege action-based visibility. January 14 marks a shift in these terms: as repression receded, the possibilities of appearance expanded, allowing faces, names, and individual identities to emerge, while reconfiguring the conditions of representation and legitimacy in the post-revolutionary public space.

Accordingly, the analysis focuses on protest practices as spaces of appearance. It examines how visibility is produced within protest itself—through gatherings, clashes, bodily actions, and other forms of collective action—and how these modes of appearance shape the ways protest becomes publicly visible. While these dynamics may illuminate broader questions of political appearance, the article's analytical focus will be appearance generated through protest practices.

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork based on in-depth interviews with several protestors conducted between 2020 and 2022, as part of a broader research project on protest, the body, and the revolution in Tunisia (2010–2013). These narratives are used both to reconstruct lived experiences and to understand how they are later reinterpreted. Participants were given the option to be identified or remain anonymous, and most waived anonymity.

While the temporal distance between the events and the interviews raises methodological challenges, especially regarding retrospective reinterpretation, it is treated here as an analytical resource. Some actors' critiques of modes of appearance are tied to processes of rethinking the event and its trajectories.

From this perspective, the article examines the Tunisian revolution as a reconfiguration of the conditions through which protest became publicly visible. The Tunisian case is particularly significant because it allows us to follow, within a single sequence of mobilization—from the street protests of 17 December 2010 to the demonstration of 14 January 2011—a rapid transformation in the forms that protest took in the public sphere. As Debouzy (2003) argues, the meanings and functions of protest repertoires vary across historical and political contexts, while Snow (2004: 385) similarly shows that interpretive frames are historically contingent and become open to reinterpretation during periods of contention.

This transformation also acquired a particular significance in Tunisia because, in retrospect, many activists came to blame the limited resonance of the 2008 Gafsa mining basin mobilizations on the scarcity of circulating images under media censorship (Riboni, 2015). Rather than confirming this explanation, the article treats it as evidence of the political significance retrospectively attributed to visual documentation during the 2010–2011 uprising. Building on this insight, it follows the transformation of protest from the uprising of 17 December to the demonstration of 14 January to examine how changing conditions of visibility reshaped the forms through which protest was represented and recognized, and how they redefined which actors, practices, and images gained public recognition while others remained less visible within the revolutionary narrative.

Bouazizi: When the Act Appeared and the Individual Receded



In light of the distinction proposed in this article between the “visibility of actions” and the “visibility of actors,” Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation stands as a pivotal moment for understanding how political appearance can be constituted through actions rather than persons. Although the act was motivated by individual reasons, it quickly turned into a public event that shook the image of a regime presenting itself as a sponsor of stability and security (El-Jorshi, 2010), and opened up new horizons for protest, where denouncing the regime no longer operated primarily through discourse, but through acts that challenge dominant discourses. This marked a shift from protest grounded in speech to one that produces its visibility through the act itself.

What is striking in Bouazizi’s case is that the act was more visible than the person that carried it. His biography was largely constructed through narratives produced about him, rather than through his own voice or self-representation. His visual presence also remained limited: only a single image of him circulates in the media, along with another showing Ben Ali visiting him in hospital, where his body and face are almost entirely obscured by bandages and displaced from the center of the frame (Tantawi, 2010). The event thus does not emerge from a clearly identifiable individual presence, but from an act—self-immolation—as a foundational moment of visibility upon which multiple narratives are later built.

Field material shows how these narratives are constructed in contexts marked by economic precarity and marginalization, where the event

is reshaped to carry broader mobilizing meanings. In the testimony of Mohamed², this process appears clearly:

On December 17, 2010, in Menzel Bouzaiane, I received the news that Bouazizi had set himself on fire. At that moment, I decided to lie and make up the story that he had a university degree [...]. Why did I do that? It goes back to April 2010, when my brother was expelled from home by my father and asked to rely on himself and find work after leaving school. He came to me asking for help. Back then, I was involved in union movements and organizing sit-ins in Sidi Bouzid, a governorate that faces major [economic and development] difficulties. I remember telling him: 'stage a sit-in and demand a job. What is the point of the state if it leaves you with nothing?' I thought this might improve our situation, especially since I was the sole provider for a family of five. My brother then began a hunger strike in the main street, and because of that I was contacted by media outlets such as Kalima, Al-Mawkif, as well as Al Jazeera to report on what was happening (Fadhel, 2020).

Fadhel's reference to his brother is significant because it situates the "lie" within an earlier experience of protest around unemployment, linking Bouazizi's story to forms of mobilization in which narratives were strategically shaped to generate public support. Its effectiveness lay less in its factual accuracy than in its capacity to resonate with a widely shared social experience. Presenting Bouazizi as a university graduate linked his self-immolation to widely shared experiences of unemployment, blocked social mobility, and economic precarity among young Tunisians. In this sense, the story functioned as a collective action frame as Benford and Snow (2000) argue, gaining momentum by connecting with widely shared lived experience while simultaneously transforming the meaning of a personal act into a broader collective grievance (Snow, 2004: 384).

This "lie" does not reflect a deviation from truth so much as a mechanism of mobilization, through which the event is reshaped to generate sympathy, especially among educated unemployed youths. What circulates, then, is not "Bouazizi as a person," but "Bouazizi as a cause"—a protest act invested with collective meanings. Media platforms play a decisive role in expanding these narratives and transforming them into public visibility (Touati, 2012).

2. Mohamed Fadhel, a teacher in Menzel Bouzaiane during the 2010-2011 Tunisian Revolution, a leftist revolutionary activist, and currently a refugee in France for the past six years, was interviewed on Zoom on December 17, 2020. Fadhel describes himself as "a bit radical" and was involved in union actions before the revolution.

Bouazizi's self-immolation can thus be understood as an act that produced collective visibility through its effects rather than through the presence of the body itself. Joseph Pugliese reads it as an "ethical scream" resulting from accumulated violence and humiliation, where the body becomes a site of public accusation against the regime, turning the act into a tool that exposes that which power seeks to conceal (Pugliese, 2014). The act thus exceeds individual expression, becoming a collective outcry through which social anger is reformulated in a shareable form.

Field testimonies confirm this collective dimension, where self-immolation is not understood as an isolated case but as part of a broader atmosphere in which the boundaries of fear recede and the body is redefined as a medium of protest. As Béchir (Al-Hamdi, 2020) puts it: "We lived for a long time under Ben Ali's regime. And as you study the body, fear disappears. People burned their bodies. It was that simple."³ He adds elsewhere:

People were willing to sacrifice even their bodies. In 2010, there were 40 cases of suicide. Suicide was a protest against the situation in the country, not the result of psychological or individual crises (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

A symbolic dimension also emerges: "We moved beyond a philosophy of propriety [...]. We embraced a philosophy of sacrifice, with a religious resonance to this act" (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

These testimonies show that the body does not appear as an individual identity, but as a medium of protest situated within a collective horizon, where practice becomes a shared language for expressing anger, resonating with the role of emotions—particularly anger—in shaping collective action (Goodwin & Jasper, 2006: 617).

Thus, the importance of this event lies not only in its shocking character, but in the way it establishes a specific mode of visibility: one grounded in the act rather than the actor. Protesters appear less as individuals than through their actions and their collective effects, in the near absence of stable individual images or identifiable faces. This mode of visibility finds its most intense extension in forms of protest where direct action is foregrounded, particularly in nighttime protests.

3. Interview with Béchir al-Hamdi, 62 years old, teacher, trade union and political activist since 1981. Al-Hamdi is a former activist of the 1980s and 1990s in the Tunisian organization *Al-Shuyu'iyun al-Thawriyyun* (Revolutionary Communists), composed of Trotskyist members. After leaving the organization, he continued his activism independently. He then became part of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), although he later encountered difficulties, including exclusion from the union. Al-Hamdi resides in Kabarià, in the Greater Tunis region. The interview was conducted via Zoom on November 8, 2020. This is the first in a series of six interviews conducted with him.

Nighttime Protests: Stone-Throwing, Shouting, and Going Faceless



If Bouazizi's act revealed the possibility of producing collective visibility through action, nighttime protests represent its most intensified form, where appearance is enacted through direct acts alongside the near disappearance of faces and individual identities. Protesters did not deploy their bodies as carriers of these identities, but as channels through which visibility is produced by using performative confrontation to expose violence. The issue was no longer simply expressing a position, but producing situations—confrontations, injuries, fires, gatherings—that render the regime's violence visible in public space, in order to reach a wider audience under media blackout and exert pressure on power. What was at stake was not the visibility of individuals, but that of the regime itself through its practices.

Field data confirm that protesters' actions did not rest on their individual capacities, but on collective presence and the ability to occupy the public space despite repression. Bodies in congregation appear not as separate subjects, but as a collective density deriving its force from numbers, continuity, and shared exposure to danger. This density becomes a protest resource: a means of appearing, a tool of resistance, and a way of forcing a response from the authorities.

This dynamic unfolds through continuous movements of advance and retreat, attack and withdrawal, where public space is temporarily occupied before being abandoned. Alleys and street corners become strategic sites between the visible and the invisible, enabling appearance through action while avoiding identification, which Michel de Certeau identifies as "tactics" (1990). Within this framework, nighttime protests differ markedly from daytime protests. As one protestor, Khaled⁴, explains:

Nighttime protests, even in cities like Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine, are very different from daytime gatherings. During the day, unionists gather, march, and chant slogans, whereas at night, physical confrontations, violence, and stone-throwing become the norm. There are no political slogans or banners, only physical clashes. The so-called elite uses slogans, but this does not apply to nighttime protests, where people use stones (Haddeji, 2020).

4. Interview with Khaled Haddeji, a 42-year-old professor of cultural animation at the Ministry of Culture, trade unionist, and former activist of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party. Before the revolution, he was an unemployed university graduate. The interview was conducted via Zoom on October 18, 2020.

This testimony shows that nighttime visibility is not constructed through discourse, but through direct bodily action, where stone-throwing, confrontation, and sound become primary means through which protest appears in public. Confrontation thus operates not simply as physical force but also as a mode of political communication. In this sense, Juris's (2005) notion of "performative violence" helps explain how such acts function as symbolic performances through which protesters communicate political claims rather than merely inflicting damage. As Choukri Hmed notes, these confrontations occur mainly in working-class neighborhoods, where young people's knowledge of the terrain gives them a tactical advantage (Hmed, 2012: 802).

These actions reflect a direct link between repression and protest, emerging as immediate reactions while drawing on accumulated experience that blurs "spontaneity" and "tactics." This visibility takes dense sensory and sonic forms, as Khaled notes:

We only go out at night [...]. We go out around seven or eight, we gather, burn tires, block the road, then the confrontation with stones begins [...]. This goes on every night until two or three in the morning [...] and in the morning, there is nothing left (Haddeji, 2020).
Here, confrontation itself becomes the measure of success: "What is the indicator of a successful protest? Not filming oneself [...] but intensifying confrontations with the police [...]. If tear gas is not used, the protest is considered a failure"⁵ (Badrawi: 2020).

These testimonies show that visibility is not measured by the appearance of individuals, but by the capacity of action to provoke a response from the authorities, that is, to render violence visible. Some actions take more radical forms, such as setting police stations on fire: "In Mornag [...] they said: we have to go burn the police station [...]. It wasn't political [...]. Like in any working-class neighborhood, we burn the police station" (Anonymous 5, 2021).⁶ Despite later reservations, these actions were part of a broader protest dynamic (Badrawi, 2020) reflecting the gap between lived experience and later reinterpretation. At the same time, protesters' refusal of individual visibility reveals a sharp awareness of the

5. Maher Badrawi, interview by the author via Zoom on October 31, 2020. Born in 1978, Badrawi is a graduate of the University of Manar (Tunis). Unemployed at the time of the revolution, he described himself as "an unemployed graduate before the revolution and up to the present." A political activist, he was active in the General Union of Tunisian Students and the al-Watad party, and was working as a freelancer at the time of the interview.
6. Anonymous 5, 30 years old, computer engineer residing in France, born in Zaghuan (Tunisia). He lived in Tunisia until 2019. A university graduate in 2011, he was in his final year of studies during the revolution and an active student union activist. Growing up in a Marxist family, he was sanctioned for his activism and temporarily expelled from the university before 2011. After the revolution, he joined the Ennahdha party and resumed his studies, beginning a master's degree. The interview was conducted via Zoom on February 19, 2021.

risks of exposure: “These young people are very cautious [...]; they don’t like photos or videos [...], they cover their faces [...] and if someone’s face is recognized, they abort the protest” (Badrawi, 2020).

Here, the absence of faces does not signal a lack of visibility, but one of its conditions. Protest is grounded in making actions rather than individuals visible, and concealing identity becomes a form of resistance to surveillance. Nighttime protests thus produce a visibility in which the act is present while the actor remains indeterminate. Yet these practices, despite their non-discursive form, are not reducible to eruptions of violence; they constitute forms of political action mobilized through the body itself. As Moira Lloyd suggests, the body becomes a means of re-inscribing actors within the political community through its vulnerability and exposure to risk (Lloyd, 2024).

From this perspective, nighttime protests do not signal an absence of political language, but its reconfiguration in a bodily and sensory form, where exposure to danger, confrontation, and sound produces political presence regardless of individual identity. The absence of individual visibility is thus not a lack, but a reorganization of presence: appearing through actions rather than faces. Building on Juris’s (2005) notion of performative violence, this gives rise to what may be termed the visibility of performative violence, whereby confrontation itself becomes the medium through which protest appears publicly. This mode of visibility, despite its intensity, does not exclude other forms, but intersects with them—as evidenced by daytime protests within more regulated spaces.

Daytime inside the “Parloir”: Collective Bodies Under Surveillance

If nighttime protests highlighted a mode of appearance grounded in direct action and the erasure of faces, daytime protests reveal another form of the visibility of actions, but within more regulated and closely monitored spaces. Before January 14, avoiding individual visibility was not situational, but a structural condition of protest, especially in daytime settings more exposed to surveillance. Individual visibility posed a direct risk: revealing one’s name or face could lead to tracking and punishment, even though protesters’ identities were often known to security forces. This tension between state knowledge and absence from public visibility does not simply reflect a paradox; it defines the conditions of appearance itself. Appearance was possible, but not as individual exposure, rather within collective and constrained forms.

Within this framework, this mode of appearance can be understood through Butler's conception—reworked by Lilja—of the embodied character of protest, where appearance is not tied to discourse or self-definition, but to the capacity of bodies to “speak” politically through their presence, especially when they occupy public space without protection and expose themselves to violence (Lilja, 2017). Yet this capacity remains conditioned by the material structure of space and the mechanisms that regulate it: bodies move within spatial and security arrangements that enable or constrain action itself (Lilja, 2017). The absence of faces and names thus does not signal withdrawal from appearance, but its reconfiguration under specific conditions, where the body—through collective presence and exposure to risk—becomes the primary medium of visibility.

These protests often took place in semi-controlled spaces, such as the headquarters of the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), the country's main trade union federation, or in universities, where security forces sought to contain gatherings and restrict movement. In this context, Béchir al-Hamdi's description of the square as a “parloir” is particularly noteworthy. Although the French term commonly refers to a prison visiting room, Béchir explains that he uses it to refer to a corridor-like space inside a prison where inmates are allowed to walk briefly within a confined area. In this sense, the metaphor captures not only physical closure, but also a mode of organizing appearance: “We were moving within an almost closed space [...] like a ‘parloir’ [...]; we could gather, but we could not leave.” (Al-Hamdi, 2020)

The metaphor thus turns the protest space into a political “parloir”: a space where presence is accessible but tightly controlled, where bodies are contained rather than allowed to move. Here, the appearance of actions does not result from openness, but from tactical engagement within constraint—echoing Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics as practices operating within imposed conditions. The “parloir” can also be understood through what Xavier Marquez calls the intersection of “spaces of appearance” and “spaces of surveillance”: bodies that appear to one another, enabling collective action, while remaining subject to unequal power relations that regulate movement and prevent expansion (Marquez, 2012). It is therefore not the opposite of appearance, but a form of regulated appearance.

Testimonies show that this restriction did not prevent, but reshaped action. Protesters, especially trade unionists, did not treat their bodies as carriers of individual identities, but as part of a collective capable of endurance and resistance. As Béchir explains:

I don't like speaking in the first person. We were a group of unionists used to protesting together, and we knew each other well. That day, we decided to go to the Ministry of Interior. It was a collective decision made without negotiation, despite the risks and the ongoing killings. At that moment, we didn't really know what was happening, or whether there were other arrangements. We didn't have precise information. We expected severe repression, maybe even gunfire. And I was among those who no longer paid much attention to repression. I believed the regime could not stop or imprison everyone (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This testimony shows that strength was not understood in terms of individual heroism, but of numbers, continuity, and the capacity to push repression to its limits. This logic is also visible in the bodily organization of protest:

In the front row, there were unionists, students, and young people [...]; people you didn't know you, but who would hold your hand [...]. We formed two rows, arms interlocked [...], you may not know the person next to you [...] but there were 'figures' whom we recognized on sight (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Appearance here operates through the collective body, whose meaning lies in cohesion and endurance. Even when certain "figures" emerge, they remain embedded within the mass. The dominance of "we" over "I" thus reflects not only security concerns, but a collective conception of action: "I was not alone [...], there were many people [...]. I hate using 'I'" (Al-Hamdi, 2020). Such embodied practices generated not only collective visibility but also what Juris (2008:66) calls "affective solidarity," whereby shared exposure, physical proximity, and collective movement transformed fear and anger into a sense of common commitment that sustained protest.

Daytime protests were therefore not reducible to slogans; they also exposed the contradictions of the regime's self-image as "safe Tunisia." A system claiming "zero bad images" became the target of practices aimed at producing scandal—making visible what it sought to conceal. By exposing their bodies to danger, protesters destabilized this narrative, echoing Baudrillard's idea of the event that disrupts a system seeking to appear without fracture (Baudrillard, 2007).

In this context, injured bodies, confrontations, and police violence rendered repression visible. The body was not displayed to affirm identity, but to expose the regime in the act of violence. This includes instances where lawyers or activists displayed injuries after demonstrations to

denounce repression (Ben Sedrine, 2011), as well as video footage of shootings or the fall of unarmed civilians that became visual evidence challenging official narratives (Breuer, 2012). Yet this visibility remained subject to containment: “We wanted to leave Mohamed Ali Square⁷ but they blocked the exits [...]. They started beating us with batons, even targeting our faces” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). This reveals not only state violence, but the logic of the “parloir” itself: a space governed to prevent expansion. Even when daytime protests appeared more organized, they remained tied to confrontation: “It wasn’t just demonstrations, it was a fight” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The difference between daytime and nighttime protest, then, lies not in whether actions or individuals are visible, but in the degree of framing and control. If nighttime protests show action in its most dispersed form, daytime protests represent a contained version within a space that allows presence while regulating its limits. This is where January 14 becomes decisive: the moment when bodies are no longer confined within a monitored “parloir,” but begin to break its material and symbolic boundaries.

Jumping over Barbed Wire: January 14 as a Moment of Rupture

If the previous sections argued that, prior to January 14, appearance operated mainly through action performed within regulated and monitored spaces, this date marks a shift in these conditions. From December 17, 2010 onward, protests—despite their expansion—remained largely confined to interior towns or to minor streets in the capital, away from central spaces under strict surveillance. Access to Avenue Habib Bourguiba—the capital’s main avenue, where the Ministry of Interior is located and long a symbolic façade of state authority—was effectively blocked. Security forces prevented protesters from reaching it, redirecting them into side streets and preserving the avenue as a tightly controlled space of official visibility.

In this context, January 14 constitutes a turning point: for the first time, protests reached this central thoroughfare, alongside decisive political and media shifts, particularly following Ben Ali’s speech on the evening of January 13, in which he announced concessions and a partial opening of the media sphere. This enabled the presence of international media and live broadcasting. Protest was no longer confined to marginal spaces, but became visible at the center of a space meant to embody state control, thereby redefining the conditions of appearance. As Snow (2004:

7. A square located in front of the UGTT headquarters in central Tunis and a key gathering point where daytime demonstrations were often contained by security forces.

385) suggests, such moments of contention unsettle established interpretive frames and open new possibilities for understanding collective action.

With this shift, bodies were no longer confined within a monitored “parloir,” but moved to occupy the street directly. This was not only a spatial shift, but a transformation in the conditions of appearance: what had appeared indirectly through action became denser, more visible, and took the form of exposed bodily presence. January 14 can thus be understood as a rupture in “regulated appearance,” where presence was no longer contained within a space managed by the authorities, but began to produce its own space—echoing Butler’s conception of political space as emerging from the gathering of bodies in action (Butler, 2016). Interviews reveal a gap between lived experience and its later representation. Béchir describes the moment of breaching the contained space:

When we entered, we were ten or fifteen people—I don’t know exactly, I wasn’t counting—but I was among those who jumped over the barbed wire. Others did the same. I was among the first to be there, then others started following us. This is the real version of January 14 [...], this is the image that remained. The image of open space does not reflect the forces of repression. Here, everyone could get through, and anyone could be there. I met people I hadn’t seen in years [...]; I met them on January 14 [...]. I didn’t stay at the entrance (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This testimony shows that crossing the barbed wire was not simply a field incident, but a rupture of previously imposed limits of appearance, and a passage from containment to openness. Yet this “open image,” in Béchir’s view, captures only one version of the experience. He adds:

What remains of our history is simply what we kept of it. There were only three real images among the thousands that circulated around the world [...]; there is one real image I cannot forget [...], but in the end, reality is something else, a big lie (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Béchir does not explain what these few “real” images were. Rather, elsewhere in the interview, he repeatedly contrasts them with the scenes that later came to symbolize January 14, such as the young man carrying a birdcage, lawyers at the forefront of the demonstration, a political activist being carried on protesters’ shoulders, and other widely circulated images. For him, these iconic scenes came to dominate public memory, while the earlier moments of confrontation and breaching police barriers remained largely absent from the visual record (Al-Hamdi, 2020). As Snow (2004: 384) suggests, such selective images do not simply survive; they organize

the interpretive frame through which the revolution itself comes to be understood.

The shift in appearance does not amount to full disclosure, but remains shaped by what is later selected and preserved. Images do not simply transmit events; they reorder them. This helps explain why some actors feel that their experience—grounded in action and confrontation—was not fully translated into the visual record that later stabilized. Béchir also notes that the intensity of repression peaked later in the day, making the dominant image of January 14 as a moment of “opening” only partial. At the same time, testimonies show that this day did not erase differences between actors, but reconfigured them. As one participant explains, even political actors were drawn into the logic of the crowd:

After Ben Ali’s speech on the evening of January 13, the political class stepped back. But on January 14, when Avenue Habib Bourguiba filled with protesters, they began chanting ‘Dégage.’ Even those who had been negotiating with him the day before found themselves repeating the same slogan with everyone else, carried along by the logic of the crowd (Haddeji, 2020).

This shows that appearance in public space was no longer tied only to prior trajectories, but could be produced within the event itself. Here begins one of the central shifts traced in this article: whereas visibility had been grounded in collective action, faces, names, and individual trajectories begin to emerge as carriers of political meaning. Yet this does not signal an equal opening, but a redistribution of the conditions of appearance, where the capacity to appear as an individual becomes an uneven resource shaped by media logics and recognition. In his interview, Wassim Bouthouri⁸ (2020) describes this transformation by noting that, whereas the front row of demonstrations had previously been occupied primarily by militants, after the revolution it increasingly became associated with what he calls the ceremonial figures, to refer to famous public figures occupying the forefront of protest. The question thus shifts: who appears in this open space, and how are they required to define themselves within it?

8. Wassim Bouthouri was interviewed by the author via Zoom on December 28, 2020. A 33-year-old from Kasserine, Bouthouri was a student active in the UGTT during the January 14, 2011 revolution, a protestor at the Kasbah sit-in, and a member of the Republican Party (formerly the Progressive Democratic Party). At the time of the interview, he was an administrator at the Ministry of Education, living in Tunis.

“Real History” and “Embellished History”



If January 14 opened new possibilities of appearance, it did not generalize them but reorganized them. Following Ben Ali’s televised speech on the evening of January 13, which announced a series of concessions including the cessation of live ammunition use against protesters and a partial reopening of the media sphere, international journalists were able to report from Tunisia. Although demonstrations that took place on January 14 continued to face police violence, these changes altered the political and media conditions under which protest became publicly visible. As Juris (2014) argues, embodied protest performances are inseparable from the political and cultural contexts in which they unfold. As media coverage expanded, visibility became uneven, producing new hierarchies of who is seen and who is represented. The shift was thus not simply an increase in visibility, but its redistribution—an “economy of visibility” in which the capacity to appear as a legitimate political actor became unevenly distributed.

In this context, the image is no longer merely a trace of events as in earlier phases, when actions (confrontations, burning, advance and retreat) produced visibility without fixing actors—but becomes an active force in shaping it. It does not simply record events; it defines what is seen, what is forgotten, and who comes to represent them. If a “visibility of actions” prevailed before January 14—from Bouazizi to nighttime protests—what follows is a visibility that reconnects action to identifiable actors through images. This tension is sharply expressed in Béchir’s distinction between a “real” and an “embellished” history: “The real image was made two or three hours earlier [...] when people were protesting under repression [...], but that is not what remained” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Here, the “real image” does not refer to a particular photograph, but to unmediated moments of action, such as direct confrontations and jumping over barbed wire, which are extensions of the visibility of actions discussed earlier. Yet these moments do not become the dominant visual reference. What endures as “history” is not what was most intense, but what was most translatable into image. As Juris (2008: 66-67) similarly argues, embodied protest experiences often exceed what later becomes visually recognizable, while different forms of protest generate different forms of visibility and media attention, creating tensions between the experiences valued by participants and the images that ultimately come to represent them publicly.

Béchir’s critique points to more than selection; it reveals a reformatting of the event according to visual logic: “January 14 is now about

cameras [...], about the bird and the cage [...]. That is the power of the image” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). Throughout the interview, Béchir repeatedly returned to the now-iconic image of a young man carrying a bird and a cage. Drawing on his experience of protest under Ben Ali’s regime marked by confrontations, police violence, and breaching barriers, he repeatedly wondered how a bird and a cage had come to symbolize the revolution, and where such an image had come from in the first place. This recurring example reflects his unease with a broader transformation in the conditions of appearance, through which certain images and the actors associated with them came to embody the revolution and to be recognized as its spokespersons. As Riboni (2015) notes, such processes of visual iconization are highly contingent: iconic images rarely emerge through deliberate design but stabilize retrospectively through circulation, repetition, and collective recognition. As Béchir further recalls: “There was a woman they lifted onto shoulders so she could be filmed [...]. I made her go down [...], but she became an activist” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The image no longer captures action; it produces scenes for circulation. Bodies are framed into condensed, symbolic forms, such as figures carried on shoulders and other staged moments that make the event legible and shareable. As actors are called to define themselves, the event itself must also take form as image. This shift extends to how the event is understood: “There is a difference between making a revolution and producing a show” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). This signals a transformation in the logic of visibility: from action marked by risk and confrontation to scenes reorganized for display. The tension between appearance as action and appearance as representation discussed throughout the article becomes explicit here. It is also tied to expanded, yet unequal, possibilities of representation: “Anyone could pretend to be a representative of the revolution” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This reflects not only an opening, but a redistribution of legitimacy, where appearing in the image—rather than acting—becomes a condition of recognition. The struggle is no longer only over appearing, but over who defines and represents that appearance. From this perspective, the distinction between “real” and “embellished” history reveals not a simple gap between experience and image, but a reorganization of the relation between action and visibility. Before January 14, collective appearance emerged without fixed actors; afterward, visibility became recognizable through images and tied to identifiable figures and turned into a resource of representation. The shift to the visibility of actors thus transforms appearance itself into a field of struggle over who can narrate the revolution and define its “real history.” The Tunisian case suggests that the revolution reconfigured rather than democratized visibility. While some actors, images, and voices came to embody the revolution, others remained only partially visible or disappeared from its dominant visual narrative. Politics thus lies

not only in what is visible, but also in the unequal conditions through which appearance is produced, recognized, and incorporated into public memory.

Conclusion

The transformations that resulted from the Tunisian revolution cannot be reduced to political or institutional change; they also involved a reconfiguration of the conditions of appearance in public space. Before January 14, protest operated through a form of “strategic non-appearance,” where collective actions like confrontations, gatherings, and movements of advance and retreat produced visibility without foregrounding identifiable actors. This date marks a shift, as faces, names, and trajectories begin to emerge as carriers of political meaning.

This shift, however, is not a linear expansion but a reorganization of visibility. While the opening of public space enabled new forms of presence, it also restructured them: appearance no longer follows directly from participation, but is mediated by images, media, and regimes of recognition. Images do not simply reflect the revolution; they help produce it by selecting moments and amplifying certain figures. Testimonies reveal a persistent gap between lived experience, particularly moments of confrontation preceding cameras, and what later stabilizes as the visual memory of the “event.” The struggle, then, is not only over appearing, but over defining appearance itself: which images count, and who speaks through them.

These findings also invite broader reflection on forms of visibility that extend beyond the protest gathering itself. Before January 14, the circulation of protest images remained constrained not only by repression but also by the limited reach of digital communication, where politically engaged bloggers and alternative media networks primarily documented censorship and state violence rather than mobilizing broad publics (Kallander, 2013). As Riboni (2015) likewise suggests, the visual practices surrounding the uprising evolved from documentary forms centered on witnessing repression toward increasingly circulated and iconic images capable of organizing wider public recognition. Exploring how these different visual regimes intersected with the transformations analyzed here offers an important avenue for future research.

From this perspective, the revolution can be read as a shift from a visibility grounded in actions to one that foregrounds actors—not as a rupture, but as an ongoing overlap between the two. This points to an

“economy of visibility,” where appearance becomes a scarce and contested resource through which recognition is distributed. Appearance, then, is not a given but a conditioned process shaped by power relations, media dynamics, and the actors’ own practices, which raises a broader question: has the expansion of image production democratized visibility, or reconfigured it through new forms of inequality?

The Tunisian case suggests that while the revolution rendered certain bodies and voices visible, it also exposed the limits that structure this visibility. Politics thus lies not only in what appears, but also in what remains excluded in the ongoing tension between presence and erasure through which political action continues to unfold. These questions become even more pressing in contemporary media environments, where the multiplication of cameras, digital platforms, and forms of circulation expands the possibilities of appearance while simultaneously intensifying struggles over recognition, representation, and the authority to define collective events.

Kaouthar Douzi is a PhD researcher in sociology at the University of Liège. Her research focuses on protest practices, public space, and political anthropology in revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts in the Arab world.

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