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Slap to a Man's Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia

By **KAREEM FAHIM**

SIDI BOUZID, Tunisia — Mohamed Bouazizi spent his whole life on a dusty, narrow street here, in a tiny, three-room house with a concrete patio where his mother hung the laundry and the red chilis to dry. By the time Mr. Bouazizi was 26, his work as a fruit vendor had earned him just enough money to feed his mother, uncle and five brothers and sisters at home. He dreamed about owning a van.

Faida Hamdy, a 45-year-old municipal inspector in Sidi Bouzid, a police officer's daughter, was single, had a "strong personality" and an unblemished record, her supervisor said. She inspected buildings, investigated noise complaints and fined vendors like Mr. Bouazizi, whose itinerant trade may or may not have been legal; no one seems to know.

On the morning of Dec. 17, when other vendors say Ms. Hamdy tried to confiscate Mr. Bouazizi's fruit, and then slapped him in the face for trying to yank back his apples, he became the hero — now the martyred hero — and she became the villain in a remarkable swirl of events in which Tunisians have risen up to topple a 23-year dictatorship and march on, demanding radical change in their government.

The revolution has rippled beyond Tunisia, shaking other authoritarian Arab states, whose frustrated young people are often written off as complacent when faced with stifling bureaucracy and an impenetrable and intimidating security apparatus. That assumption was badly shaken with Mr. Bouazizi's reaction to his slap, and now a picture of him, in a black jacket with a wry smile, has become the revolution's icon.

In a series of interviews, the other fruit vendors, officials and family members described the seemingly routine confrontation that had set off a revolution. They said that Mr. Bouazizi, embarrassed and angry, had wrestled with Ms. Hamdy and was beaten by two of her colleagues, who also took his electronic scale. He walked a few blocks to the municipal building, demanded his property, and was beaten again, they said. Then he walked to the governor's office, demanded an audience and was refused.

"She humiliated him," said his sister, Samia Bouazizi. "Everyone was watching."

Sometime around noon, in the two-lane street in front of the governor's high gate, the vendor drenched himself in paint thinner then lit himself on fire. A doctor at the hospital where he was treated said the burns covered 90 percent of his body. By the time he died on Jan. 4, [protests that started over Mr. Bouazizi's treatment](#) in Sidi Bouzid had spread to cities throughout the country.

On Jan. 14, the president, [Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali](#), fled the country.

People in Sidi Bouzid use the words "impossible" or "miracle" to describe the events of the last month. But they also say that what transpired was much more likely here, in this impoverished, agrarian central Tunisian city, with a history of resistance to colonial rule and nothing to lose.

The country's official unemployment rate is 14 percent, concentrated among young people, but the rate is much higher in Sidi Bouzid, say local union leaders, who put it at higher than 30 percent. Neglected by successive central governments, bereft of factories, seized with corruption and rife with nepotism, Sidi Bouzid and the small towns surrounding it are filled with idle young men, jobless, underemployed or just plain poor.

Some of them pass the time at cafes playing a card game called rami. Others get drunk on the moonshine they buy at cigarette stands and stumble around Sidi Bouzid's town center, near the mosque where Mr. Bouazizi sometimes parked his fruit cart.

The nearest movie theater is 80 miles away.

There are jobs at a toy factory, one of the two biggest plants in town, but they pay only about \$50 a month. People with college degrees head for the more affluent coastal cities or settle for less.

Wassim Lassoued, who has a master's degree in physics, works part time in an Internet cafe. "Five years ago, lots of money was sent here to establish new businesses," he said. "That money disappeared."

Mr. Ben Ali rarely visited Sidi Bouzid, and when he did, local politicians paved roads and arranged for the planting of fully-grown trees to hide their neglect. On the edge of town, there is a gleaming youth center with fenced-off skateboard ramps that appear untouched. Residents said no one uses the center, which is reserved for people with connections.

Amin Beyaoui, an English teacher who was able to find work in a town 20 miles away, said: "There are Ping-Pong tables. But they only let a few people use them, like teachers. Young people can't use them. I know this from personal experience.

"People are accustomed to seeing injustice and staying silent," he said. "It was like we were colonized."

Everyone in Sidi Bouzid has a story about a bribe: to get a loan, to start a business or to land a job.

In the world of the fruit and vegetable vendors, the bribes were small — 10 dinars, about \$7, to appease the inspectors, or sometimes just a bag of fruit, the vendors said. When the municipal inspectors would arrive, the vendors had three options: to run and leave the fruit that some of them had bought on credit, to offer a bribe or to pay a fine of 20 dinars, the equivalent of about \$14, or several day's wages.

Mr. Bouazizi had received two fines in the last two years, according to officials with the municipality, though other vendors and his family say he was frequently harassed.

His first name was actually Tarek, but he went by Mohamed. He was not a college graduate, as earlier reports had said. He had been a vendor since he was a teenager, and had worked odd jobs since he was 10, his relatives said. His father, a construction worker in Libya, died of a heart attack when he was 3, said his mother, Mannoubia Bouazizi. She later married Mohamed's uncle.

Mr. Bouazizi made it to high school, but it was unclear whether he graduated: a cousin said he devoured literature and especially poetry, but his mother said he preferred math. He had a girlfriend, but they had broken up recently. He was a soccer fan and spent much of his spare time at the Fustat cafe downtown, engaged in the local diversions of smoking and playing cards.

Despite his struggles to work, he was easygoing and liked to laugh. His relatives saw no hint of depression, and though they said Mr. Bouazizi refused to pay bribes, they could not recall any time where he had made such an unyielding stand.

The protests in Sidi Bouzid were small at first, starting soon after the fire seared Mr. Bouazizi's clothes to his body and burned off his lips.

Bilal Zaydi, 20, saw the vendor's relatives and friends outside the governor's office that afternoon, throwing coins at the gate. "Here is your bribe," they yelled. Over the next day and half the protests grew and the police "started beating protesters, and firing gas," he said. Mr. Zaydi, a high school student, slept during the day, and then he and his friends would take on the police at night.

At the same time, news of the unrest was spread on the Internet by people like Shamseddine Abidi, a 29-year old interior designer who posted videos and updates to his [Facebook](#) page. A journalist from [Al Jazeera](#) was one of Mr. Abidi's Facebook friends, and quickly the Arabic channel, almost alone, carried the news abroad.

"I did my best," Mr. Abidi said. "It's a miracle."

Labor leaders said their members quickly joined the demonstrations, which grew violent in the face of increasingly brutal police retaliation. Dr. Ali Ghanmi, who works at the hospital in Sidi Bouzid, said the number of patients doubled during the unrest, injured from beatings or bullets. Two men who had been shot died of their wounds.

Today, the city is transformed. The main avenue now bears the name Mohamed Bouazizi in spray paint. A sculpture that carries his now-famous picture is the site of frequent demonstrations and freewheeling political arguments, the things that Tunisians say Mr. Bouazizi made possible.

The inspectors in Sidi Bouzid now wear street clothes, too frightened to wear the blue overcoats with the epaulets and the stripes. The vendors no longer run.

Ms. Hamdy, arrested on orders from the now-deposed president himself, is in jail in another town. Her colleagues maintain that she is honest and did not take bribes. Her supervisor, who requested anonymity for fear of being beaten in the streets, said an investigation found that Ms. Hamdy had never slapped Mr. Bouazizi.

“Do you really believe a woman can slap a man in front of 40 other people and no one would react?” he said. He also drew attention to the fact that the news media erroneously reported that Mr. Bouazizi was a college graduate. “Anyway, we respect him as a human being,” he said.

Ms. Hamdy’s brother, Fawzy Hamdy, was more conflicted. He said he was among the first to join the protests in Sidi Bouzid and was thrilled by the revolution. But he also said he did not believe his sister had mistreated Mr. Bouazizi.

“It’s the lie that toppled a dictator,” he said.

Those closest to his rebellion — his sisters, the other vendors — seemed to focus on the slap and Mr. Bouazizi’s wounded male pride. The other young men in town, armed with their own tales of injustice, marveled at his example. And as the story has traveled past the olive groves and cactus that surround Sidi Bouzid, others saw a tale of oppression, despair and recovered dignity. In the last few weeks, people in other impoverished countries have started mimicking Mr. Bouazizi’s act.

“I’m sad for their families,” said Samia Bouazizi, his sister, as she hurried from interview to interview, sharing a family’s personal tragedy with the world. “I know what they go through.”

Hichem Marouani contributed reporting.