

Extractivism and political instability in the Tunisian Gafsa mining basin

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IN SHORT

EN

- In the mining region of Gafsa in Tunisia, the phosphate industry has long played a central role.
- Despite its economic significance, the way in which resources were exploited led to social unrest and protests against unequal development.
- The social movements, particularly the uprising of 2008, reflect the conflict over jobs, economic participation, and regional development.
- The impact of this unrest shows that despite short-term measures, the basic development model in the Gafsa mining area remains unchanged and sustainable, balanced development is needed.

DE

- Im Bergbauggebiet von Gafsa in Tunesien spielte die Phosphatindustrie lange eine zentrale Rolle.
- Trotz wirtschaftlicher Bedeutung führte die Art der Ressourcenausbeutung zu sozialen Unruhen und Protesten gegen ungleiche Entwicklung.
- Die sozialen Bewegungen, insbesondere der Aufstand von 2008, spiegeln den Konflikt um Arbeitsplätze, wirtschaftliche Teilhabe und regionale Entwicklung wider.
- Die Auswirkungen dieser Unruhen zeigen, dass trotz kurzfristiger Maßnahmen das grundlegende Entwicklungsmodell im Bergbauggebiet von Gafsa weiterhin unverändert bleibt und eine nachhaltige, ausgewogene Entwicklung notwendig ist.

FR

- Dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie, l'industrie du phosphate a longtemps joué un rôle central.
- Malgré son importance économique, le mode d'exploitation des ressources a provoqué des troubles sociaux et des protestations contre un développement inégal.
- Les mouvements sociaux, notamment le soulèvement de 2008, reflètent le conflit pour l'emploi, la participation économique et le développement régional.
- L'impact de ces troubles montre que, malgré des mesures à court terme, le modèle de développement fondamental dans la région minière de Gafsa reste inchangé et qu'un développement durable et équilibré est nécessaire.

ES

- La industria del fosfato ha desempeñado durante mucho tiempo un papel central en la zona minera de Gafsa, en Túnez.
- A pesar de su importancia económica, la forma en que se explotaban los recursos provocó malestar social y protestas contra un desarrollo desigual.
- Los movimientos sociales, en particular el levantamiento de 2008, reflejan el conflicto en torno al empleo, la participación económica y el desarrollo regional.
- El impacto de este malestar demuestra que, a pesar de las medidas a corto plazo, el modelo básico de desarrollo en la zona minera de Gafsa sigue siendo el mismo y se necesita un desarrollo sostenible y equilibrado.

Introduction

Extractivism is a particular type of high-capacity natural resource extraction, carried out in ways that have significant socio-environmental impacts. The extracted material is intended for export as raw materials in raw state, or having undergone a first transformation. This is a relatively new concept, first introduced in Brazil in 1970 to refer to the intensive exploitation of forests by large landowners in such a way as to endanger biodiversity. Over time, more and more researchers have been studying this concept, which has been applied to a number of sectors, including the mining sector which is the subject of our research. The work of Eduardo Gudynas (2013) stands out among these researchers.

Extractivism has been at the root of several social movements around the world, threatening political stability in several regions. The issue of the Gafsa mining

basin in Tunisia is a case in point. In 2008, Tunisia experienced violent demonstrations in the Gafsa mining basin which monopolized phosphate production. These social movements were the most brutal in contemporary Tunisian history. They lasted over six months and destabilized the rule of Ben Ali (Tunisia's former president). The local population demanded their right to employment, their right to sustainable and equitable development and their share of the phosphate rent. The research aims to examine the scope of these social movements, enabling an exploration of their socio-economic causes, the actors involved and their different strategies. This investigation will also facilitate an assessment of the decisions taken by the political authorities to ease tensions. Finally, the impact of these social movements on the State's economic policy and political stability can be evaluated.

Extractivism and social movements in Gafsa mining basin

Ever since its discovery by Philippe Thomas in 1885, the phosphate resource has been the object of intensive extraction by the French colonial authorities. Raw phosphate was exported to European countries, notably France. After independence, Tunisia pursued the same policy. Indeed, the phosphate sector has become one of the pillars of the Tunisian economy. In 2010, it accounted for 3.3 percent of GDP, i.e., 9 percent of

exports (Ministère de l'Économie des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, 2022). (Extraction revenues are channeled into the national budget). The sector is dominated by two state-owned companies: *La Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa* (CPG), established in 1897, and *Le Groupe Chimique Tunisien* (GCT), created in 1992.

Social movements in Gafsa: socio-economic reasons

The area under study comprises four delegations located in the southern part of the Gafsa governorate, which contains most of the country's phosphate reserves. These are Redeyef, Métlaoui, Moularés and Mdhila. Since the 19th century, phosphate mining has been the dominant activity in the Gafsa mining basin, an arid zone with low rainfall, where agricultural activity is limited to grazing. The area is characterized by a high poverty rate and an unemployment rate that is double the national rate. CPG, a state-owned company, has monopolized phosphate mining in the Gafsa mining

basin. It has also played an important social role in the region, providing many of the social services needed by

the local population, not to mention the number of jobs it has created. However, in 1986, with the implementation of the structural adjustment plan, the company mechanized its mining operations, converting them to open-pit mining. As a result, more than half of the workforce was freed up for reasons of profitability and competitiveness on international markets. It has also abandoned its social role, leading thus to a mood of animosity. Indeed, while its sales continued to rise, CPG continued to disengage itself from the local population. This explains the protests against this capitalist trading system, which concentrates on wealth accumulation for the benefit of the centralized state, marginalizes the

local population and takes little interest in regional development (Allal, 2010).

Social movements in Gafsa: diversity of actors and unity of claims

These movements began spontaneously following the announcement of the results of the CPG recruitment contest. Unemployed young people considered that the recruitment results had been falsified, and union officials were accused by the population of having appointed their relatives. These movements were ill-organized at first, but gradually a number of leading figures emerged. They started in Redayef, then soon spread to the rest of the region. Although the protests were peaceful, they eventually turned riotous when the police intervened. Initially, it was young unemployed graduates who went on hunger strike at the local UGTT headquarters in Redayef to protest against the contest results and demand their right to employment.

Gradually, other actors joined these protesters: workers, young graduates, widows of workers who lost

their lives in the mines, women whose children were arrested during the riots, students expelled from their high schools which had closed their doors, the unemployed, trade unionists, associations and civil society structures and even representatives of opposing political parties, since it was an election year.

The Gafsa mining basin was in a state of agitation, with all actors protesting against nepotism, clientelism, marginalization, social injustice and the management of phosphate resources, which instead of bringing wealth to the region, has been the cause of its marginalization. The protesters claimed their right to employment with the CPG as well as their right to a share of the company's income (Chouikha and Geisser, 2010).

The relative impact of social unrest in the Gafsa mining basin

On July 16, 2008, President Ben Ali put an end to these movements by convening the members of the Gafsa regional council for an extraordinary session at the presidential palace in Carthage, with the aim of resolving

the region's problems. However, the decisions that were taken failed to meet the expectations of the local population, which explains the persistence of the same demands after the 2011 revolution.

An unchanging development model

This unaltered development model also seemed unchangeable. Firstly, because the Gafsa mining basin is totally dedicated to the mining industry. In fact, agricultural land is extremely degraded and rainfall is very limited. Secondly, the tourism sector is underdeveloped. Indeed, the region does not seem to attract promoters, and even those who have had the courage to settle in there have not helped solve the problem of unemployment, because the population prefers to work for the CPG, which pays its workers well and grants them substantial social benefits. Secondly, the government succeeded in setting up a national political economy based on control and clientelism. In fact, it created tools that enabled it not only to "redistribute wealth", but also to establish a dependency attitude towards the State. These tools

include the 21-21 fund, aimed at integrating jobseekers of all ages and levels, the 26-26 solidarity fund, which intervened in marginalized regions to reduce poverty, and the *Banque Tunisienne de Solidarité*, intended to finance young graduates and help them set up their own businesses. On a regional level, we would mention the mining center's reorientation and development fund, whose aim was to assist and support promoters in carrying out their projects. It should also be noted that another "redistribution" mechanism specific to the Gafsa coalfield region has been developed. At the time, as part of the modernization of the CPG, the regional branch of *L'Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) participated alongside the CPG in the amicable selection of people to be hired. Initially, certain social criteria had

to be met.¹ But little by little, this prerogative, in the hands of a few multi-positioned executives of the national trade union center,² gave rise to another form of politico-economic clientelism. In fact, these regional UGTT officials recruited their relatives without regard

for previously agreed criteria. In this way, a social class was created that benefited from the existing system and development model, and would defend this system and ensure its continuity even after the fall of the political regime in 2011.

A disastrous socio-economic situation

Several factors are behind the economic and social decline in the Gafsa mining basin. Firstly, the international financial crisis, which had repercussions at national level and left the State unable to keep its promises to the local population of the mining basin. Secondly, the persistence of a corrupt development system based on clientelism and nepotism. Finally, the failure of several projects that were created in the Gafsa mining basin.³ Therefore, the situation continued to be regressive and triggered the 2010 protests. Sit-ins, strikes and endless demonstrations have led to a decline in phosphate production and even paralyzed this key sector of the national economy. However, successive governments have resorted to the short-term solution of recruiting job-seekers to ease the tension. This solution was very costly for the CPG, which was threatened with collapse. Indeed, a surplus wage bill can only reduce productivity.

A change in the situation is deemed necessary, because the current social peace is only temporary. Carrying on recruiting jobseekers in return for this peace will only delay the outbreak of protests and increase the burden on the CPG, which is already in difficulty. The arrival of the new government, now equipped with the necessary means under the new constitution, is considered opportune for a reevaluation of both the development model and the governance of phosphate resources in

the region. Indeed, the incident in the Gafsa mining basin highlighted the economic, social and political interdependence between the local and national scales. A sustainable⁴ and equitable development model must be put in place, one that takes into account the needs of the local population and the specific characteristics of the region, a development model that is capable of creating wealth and allowing the region to benefit from the advantages of the phosphate resource. Otherwise, this wealth would become a disaster for the region, and the local population would jeopardize it instead of safeguarding and promoting it.

Moreover, the culture of good governance within CPG needs to be strengthened by training company staff in good governance practices. It is also necessary to create a climate of trust among the local population. To achieve this, CPG is called upon not only to strengthen the role of the Board of Directors by appointing independent directors and representatives of local communities and civil society to its Board of Directors, but also to promote transparency and fight corruption, by strengthening accountability and the public reporting system. The local population must be recognized as partners in regional development. They can no longer be sidelined or forced to abide by strategic choices and decisions taken without their prior consent.

Conclusion

The development model based on phosphate extraction in the Gafsa mining basin has led to the marginalization of the region and the exclusion of the local population. This model may have created jobs in the region, but it did not create wealth. The population felt neglected and

saw its local wealth expropriated by a company, or even by a state that had "neglected" it. This led to a feeling of frustration that gave rise to the 2008 uprising. Despite the decisions taken to develop the coalfield region and the promises made by those in power, the situation did

¹ Priority was given to the children of the company's workers, victims of an industrial accident.

² Such is the case of the regional secretary of the UGTT, who was at the same time a deputy of the RCD and CEO of the CPG.

³ 70 projects were given up for multiple reasons. radio.tn/archives/41695.

⁴ Taking into consideration the economic, environmental and social dimensions.

not improve, providing the fertile ground for the outbreak of the revolution on December 17, 2010. After 12 years, the situation is no better, with phosphate mining constantly paralyzed by protests from the local

population, who are still claiming their share of the rent. Even though an equitable and integrated development model is needed, its implementation is still stumbling.

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EXTRACTIVISM

| The Project

The collaborative research project ***extractivism.de*** links the Universities of Kassel and Marburg. The project scrutinizes the extractivist development model and proposes new economic, political, and sociological conceptions of extractivism. It preliminarily focuses on Latin America and the Maghreb patterns. The project researches the conditions under which these patterns affect the persistence and transformative capacity of extractivism and its respective institutional settings. Finally, it explores how extractivism affects cultural processes and habitual routines and questions under what conditions and how far the development model extends into institution-building and social practice, i.e., everyday life.

The project aims to understand extractive societies not as deviants from the Western trajectory of development but in their own logic and their own particularities. The project, therefore, combines a strong empirical focus with theoretical work. It links both broad field research and data gathering of primary data and the qualitative and quantitative analysis of available secondary sources with a stringent transregional comparison. It develops methods in cross-area studies and investigates whether and why similar patterns of social change emerge in different areas and world regions despite significant cultural, social, or religious differences. Finally, the project intends to translate the findings for politics, society, and development cooperation.

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