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More than 100 days since the president's visit
to the Tunisian coal-mining area

Sit-in at Redeyef: What has changed after July 25?



THE CLOSURE OF PHOSPHATE PRODUCTION AREAS IN REDEYEF

The young people of Redeyef have always been challenging the policy of exclusion adopted by all the successive governments towards the mining areas. The Tunisian uprising started in the mining basin by reaching a political turning point which was marked by the total absence of freedom. Such marginalization in the mining areas results in serious consequences. After the 25th of July, the simultaneous visit of president Kaies Saied to different delegations of mining areas brought hope to thousands of citizens. However, it later caused confusion among them. Things remained as they were before the 25th of July. Jobseekers continue their sit-in at several headquarters of Gafsa Phosphate Company. All production areas, in the city of Redeyef, closed as well. This leads to question about the usefulness of the visit and the real changes, in the region, where the frequency of social demonstrations in its various forms has increased. Freezing mining assets have been one of the most violent acts of demonstrations against discrimination and exclusion exercised by the State.

Has the social inequality isolated the region?

The exclusion expressed by the different participants of the sit-in appeared as one of the major injustices that provoked the continuation of the protest movements for consecutive years. These young people expressed their exclusion in terms such as: social inequality, marginalization, and unemployment. Decades of development policy have further isolated this region, where many young people have witnessed social injustice. They have not found the political leadership capable of dismantling this social crisis by taking the necessary and concrete steps to end the social unrest.



SIT-IN IN "AL-WAZZANA" H.Q À REDEYEF

The sit-ins calling for employment in the city Redeyef began in the years following the revolution. Dozens of unemployed young people set up tents in the phosphate production area. Despite frequent clashes between protesters and employees of this industrial facility demanding the resumption of production, the sit-in has not been lifted. During his visit to Redeyef, the president of Republic examined the social situation, the subsequent change in the political scene, as well as the dismantling of the sit-ins and the resumption of phosphate activity in the rest of the mining region (Om-larayes-Metlaoui-Mdhilla). Despite the continuing demands for employment, nothing has changed for the activists of Redeyef who still hold the same claims. With the same protest tactics, protesters continue expressing their rejection of marginalization.

Who are the protesters? What are their demands?

Friday, December 03, 2021, we moved to the headquarters of "Al-Wezana" in Redeyef, where the phosphate production unit and a group of sit-in. The signs of frustration and despair were clear on the features of protesters, despite their strong adherence to their claims and their categorical rejection of any interim solutions.

Amara Malki, 49, husband and father of a two-year-old child, is unemployed and one of the protesters. He believes that the dismantling of the sit-in will take place only after finding a radical solution. He insists that all the methods of negotiation used by the former officials are no longer effective in the face of the insistence of the protesters to seize their right to work, especially since they do not exceed 60 people. Considering that the methods of procrastination adopted during the four years since the beginning of the sit-in, has, according to him, made them lose confidence in the "false promises". Although the sit-in was interrupted several times and regular reporting concerning meetings with authorities' representatives were revised, they all remained dead letters. They did not lead to any results. They created a total lack of confidence in the officials and the means of dialogues which pushed them to insist on the continuation of the sit-in. Eventually, they ended up rejecting all methods of negotiation with the authority. The political change has not even erased their frustration. The protesters denounce the political class that is bogged down in its internal battles without realizing the social and economic miseries in which thousands of people are still living here.



AMARA MALKI

Despite the changes, the crisis has not abated.

According to the French historian Pierre Fermont, "The absence of new protests may be a miracle." This quote depicts what is truly happening in the city of Redeyef. After decades of marginalization, it is a miracle that there are no more protests in this city and in the governorate of Gafsa in general. Despite the changes that have taken place at different levels, in such well-known hot spot, social protests continue unabated. The sit-ins have not decreased.

What needs to be done to solve the crisis:

The government has been formed, but the spark of the sit-ins and protests has not yet disappeared. A short period has passed since the launch of the government. The latter faced a major challenge to resolve the crisis in the southwest of Tunisia and to restore the phosphate activity to its normal form. The demonstrations have not ceased debunking the economic options in this region. They have kept demanding for development and employment. The government is unable to raise the ceiling of social demands and to adopt comprehensive reforms. No serious consideration towards popular demands is noted. It appears that the government does not search for solutions to ease the social situation. Such steps are important to avoid further economic losses, especially due to the interruption of production areas of the Mining Company of Gafsa. It is considered as a blow to one of the economic pillars of the country. As a result, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, section of the mining basin, advocated in its many meetings of negotiations with the authority, to restore mining activity and to break the cycle of social tensions in the region. In this context, the General Secretary of the Tunisian Forum in the mining basin, Rabeh Ben Othman, stressed that the closure of the Mining Company of Gafsa (CPG) would be unacceptable. Mr. Rabeh Ben Othman added that the mining company is the only economic artery for all the mining regions. Almost all economic activities are related to the activity of the CPG.

Henceforth, Mr. Ben Othman calls for the need to open a serious dialogue with the unemployed protesters and to end the rupture between them and the regional and central authorities that have expanded in recent months. The classic practice of breaking the sit-in without finding solutions will not lead to any concrete result. Moreover, it is imperative that the agreements between the unemployed and the authority take place. Both development and operational policies need to be renewed. To achieve a positive change in the region, a more global vision upon the fragility and diversity of economic structure must be thoroughly studied. Old policies, of many decades ago, keep persisting in the face of socially and economically marginalized areas.

By carrying on with the same developmental attitude towards the mining areas, nothing would change after the 25th of July. Indeed, the protesters in these regions have only witnessed political decisions, after the 25th of July. Such decisions have not led to any change, and sit-in continues to exist. They can only mean that it falls upon the government and its mechanisms to calm public anger and to restore social peace. However, the government fails, once again, to find radical solutions to the reality of unemployment and poverty in the region.