

Tunisian revolution

Friday 21 January 2011, by [ELTAHAWY Mona](#) (Date first published: 21 January 2011).

For 23 years, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali presided over the most tightly run ship in the Arab world. So perfect a police state was his Tunisia, with its ubiquitous informers and portraits of the president, that no one predicted Ben Ali's ship could capsize.

But capsize it did Friday, after a 29-day popular uprising against unemployment, police brutality and the regime's corruption. It was the worst unrest since Ben Ali took over.

Not once in my 43 years have I thought that I'd see an Arab leader toppled by his people. It is nothing short of poetic justice that it was neither Islamists nor invasion-in-the-name-of-democracy that sent the waters rushing onto Ben Ali's ship but, rather, the youth of his country.

Their rage at political and economic disenfranchisement spilled over last month with the desperate act of an unemployed man. Mohammed Bouazizi, 26, distraught when police confiscated his unlicensed produce stand, set himself on fire on Dec. 17 and died on Jan. 3. Soon, several other unemployed youth tried to commit suicide, and at least one of them did. Is there a more poignant portrayal of what ails the Arab world than images of its young people killing themselves as their leaders get older and richer?

Human rights groups say more than 60 people have died in clashes with Ben Ali's security forces since Dec. 17, but Bouazizi's self-immolation has come to symbolize what many are calling the Jasmine Revolution.

Tunisia is a typical Middle East country in that its population is composed largely of young people. Half the population is under 25 years of age and so have known no leader other than Ben Ali, who was only Tunisia's second president since it gained independence from France in 1956.

For decades, a host of Arab dictators have justified their endless terms in office by pointing to Islamists waiting in the wings. Having both inflated the egos and power of Islamists and scared Western allies into accepting stability over democracy, those leaders were left to comfortably sweep "elections." Ben Ali was elected to a fifth term with 89.62 percent of the vote in 2009.

All around him is a depressingly familiar pattern. Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi (68 years old) has been in power since 1969; Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh (64) has ruled since 1978 and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (82) since 1981. Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika (73) is a relative newcomer, having been in power only since 1999. Not so much fathers as grandfathers of their nations, these autocrats cling to office - and are increasingly out of touch with their young populaces.

No doubt, every Arab leader has watched Tunisia's revolt in fear while citizens across the Arab world watch in solidarity, elated at that rarity: open revolution.

"Goosebumps all over. I can't believe I lived through an Arab revolution!! Thank you, Tunisia!" tweeted Gigi Ibrahim, a young Egyptian woman whose handle is Gsquare86. "The power of the masses is capable of toppling any dictatorship. Today was Tunisia. Tomorrow is Egypt, Jordan. LONG LIVE REVOLUTION!"

Social media, where young Arabs organize and speak out against their respective regimes, have given the world a clear view of the thoughts, hopes and videos of Tunisians. For days, I have been glued to Twitter, on which events in Tunisia are discussed much faster than mainstream media could report them.

"Tunis now: the chants continue 'No to Ben Ali even if we die,'" tweeted a Tunisian who joined the 6,000 to 7,000 protesting outside the Interior Ministry hours before Ben Ali fled.

Tunisia is not a major U.S. ally. On Jan. 7, the State Department said it was concerned about the regime's online and real-life crackdown. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Jan. 12 that Washington would not take sides, infuriating those who saw a double standard in the vocal U.S. position on Iran.

But others saw encouragement from Washington's reticence. U.S. leaders are "supporting us with their silence," a Tunisian told me on Twitter. "If they say anything, we will lose."

As Arabs everywhere marvel, those in Tunis still seem grounded. Even as Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi announced on state television Friday that he had taken over, people noted online that the acting president was part of Ben Ali's despised inner circle. Surely Ghannouchi is aware that Tunisians who have faced down live ammunition, curfews and tanks on the street the past month have little appetite for more of the same leadership.

Indeed, one Tunisian tweeted me: "What is unfolding is another dictatorship, we must continue the battle!"

Tunisians were fed up with not just Ben Ali but the "quasi mafia" surrounding him, as the family and cronies were described in a WikiLeaks cable, because of their "organized corruption." President Obama issued a statement on Friday in support of the Tunisian people and calling for free and fair elections.

Ben Ali imprisoned or chased into exile viable alternatives to his rule, so what comes next politically is not clear. But the world is watching this small Arab country and wondering if this is the first step in ridding the region of its granddaddies.

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P.S.

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