



Six years on

North Africa remains a region in flux suffering from the same problems that led to the Arab Spring in the first place

IT'S JUST over six years since the self-immolation of a despairing young fruit and vegetable peddler in the dusty Tunisian provincial town of Sidi Bouzid sparked the misnamed Arab Spring.

North Africa has long since ceased being the epicenter of the regional upheavals, and has been largely reduced to a side show among both Western policy-makers and the Western media. Nonetheless, the region remains in flux, jihadist groups are very much present, and many of the factors that underpinned the uprisings in Tunisia and Libya, and protests in Algeria and Morocco – high youth unemployment and alienation, endemic corruption, dysfunctional state institutions lacking legitimacy, the authorities' high-handedness and contempt (*hogra*) toward ordinary citizens – remain salient.

And as Morocco's King Mohammed VI recently proclaimed, the decades-old dream of regional economic integration and political cooperation in North Africa is dead, for all practical purposes.

Tunisia is the single success story of the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, its democratic experiment remains fragile. The country's leading political party, Nidaa Tounes, is in the process of fracturing, partly due to 89-year old President Beji Caid Essebsi's promotion of his son Hafedh as heir apparent, but also due to dissatisfaction with its cohabitation in government with the Islamist Ennahda party. Conversely, Ennahda's leadership faces criticism from younger, more militant circles.

Taken together, this is a recipe, at best, for political and parliamentary stasis, which will leave the economy limping along at a



Demonstrators confront police during clashes after Friday prayers in Algiers, January 16

growth rate well below what is needed to combat the high rates of youth unemployment. The sixth anniversary of the revolution sparked violent protests in a number of interior Tunisian towns, including Sidi Bouzid, while in the mining town of Gafsa, Essebsi's visit was greeted by rock throwing youths and blocked roads.

Paradoxically, Tunisia has produced both the first sustained cohabitation of Islamist and secular political parties and the highest number of volunteers for jihadi organizations.

Estimates of the number of young Tunisians who have made their way to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State or al-Qaida range up to 7,000, and the prospect of their return to the region is a major cause of concern.

The tourism industry has already been decimated by attacks against tourists, and security forces have been targeted as well. One nefarious response, according to a damning report by Amnesty International, is the employment of torture against detainees suspected of radical Islamist sympathies. Ironically, the report comes just after a Truth and Dignity Commission gathered widely publicized testimony of victims of the old regime's use of torture.

Neighboring Libya's experience has been the polar opposite of Tunisia's. The violent uprising there against Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship ultimately succeeded thanks to Western military intervention. But Libyans were then largely left to their own devices, and have failed to pick up the pieces and fashion a functioning national government.

Instead, Libya became an arena of extended civil strife between

rival factions, and an attractive arena for jihadist groups and arms and refugee smuggling operations. The defeat of an Islamist State faction in Sirte was heralded in the West, but did little to improve the prospects of national reconciliation between rival factions supported by various foreign patrons. All efforts to broker one have failed, and there is no reason to believe that this will change any time soon.

Some analysts suggest that Algeria is now on the verge of instability: President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been almost completely incapacitated, health-wise, for a number of years, and his departure may set off a power struggle; recent large-scale protests, driven by social media, against the enactment of austerity measures indicate the level of dissatisfaction (17 million Algerians under the age of 35 years have Facebook accounts, 4 million are on Twitter and 7.5 million on Instagram); the sharp decline in oil and gas revenues hinders the state's ability to buy social peace; and jihadist groups continue to operate, penetrating across the porous border with Libya.

On the other hand, after the bloody civil strife of the 1990s, Al-

gerians are wary of going down the same path, and the country's notoriously opaque power centers have thus far proven capable of maintaining their hegemonic status.

As for Morocco, the king's cosmetic reforms of 2011 took the wind out of demonstrators' sails, leading to an Islamist-led coalition government, while real power remained in the Palace's hands. The Islamist party registered further gains in last fall's elections, but is being blocked from forming a new government by political maneuvering, which further erodes whatever remains of the public's already limited confidence in the political system. Meanwhile, the traditionally alienated Berber Rif region continues to simmer, while the state's security services try to maintain vigilance against jihadi groups. Overall, King Mohammed VI's standing remains unchallenged, and his regime's grip appears to be firm for now. ■

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