



# Maghreb malaise

## Two and a half years since the Arab Spring erupted, North Africa remains turbulent

**HOW FARE** the Maghreb states – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya – some two and a half years since the self-immolation of a despairing young man in a dusty southern town in Tunisia triggered the Arab Spring turbulence?

Tunisia and Libya, the two countries that experienced regime change, are as contrasting as any two neighboring states can be. Tunisia, along with Egypt, is the most state-like of all Arab countries, with a long history of a centralized bureaucracy and relatively high social and political cohesion, while Libya is on the opposite end of the scale.

Similarly, monarchical Morocco and republican Algeria have followed very different paths of political development, while being mutually suspicious rivals for regional pre-eminence. And regional economic integration is blocked by the long-running dispute between Rabat and Algiers over the status of Spain's ex-colony, the Western Sahara.

From the outset, Tunisia has been the Arab state deemed to have the best chance for translating its so-called Jasmine Revolution into a durable, pluralist and even democratic order. Indeed, the interim government elected with great fanfare in October 2011 is an unusual coalition between the Islamist Ennahda and two secular parties.

But all is not well. Ennahda suffers from ideological and personal fissures and a shortage of competence to actually run a government, while the parties of the secular camp are divided and lacking in broad appeal, and remaining ancien regime politicians arouse controversy. The sputtering economy has failed to address the deep socioeconomic grievances of the country's poorer interior (where the revolt started); the laborious, still unfinished process of drafting a new constitution has been fraught with contention; and the emergence of militant Salafism in Tunisia has seemingly confirmed the fears of secular modern Tunisians that their way of life, particularly with regard to the status of women, is under threat.

Much of this came to a head with the assassination of Chokri Belaid, a secular leftist opposition leader, in February. In addition, armed Salafists are now operating in the porous, remote border regions, thanks in no small part to the freedom and availability of weapons following the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya. Overall, Tunisia remains perched precariously between the promise of a legitimate, institutionalized pluralist order and the zero-sum political and cultural confrontations so common

elsewhere in the Middle East.

In Libya, the hopes generated by the July 2012 elections for a governing national assembly have dissipated. The numerous armed militias, often organized according to tribal lines, are laws unto themselves. This, together with renewed declarations of an autonomous region in eastern Libya suggests that Libya's prospects for achieving a minimal level of cohesion are dim. The consequences of the Gaddafi regime's collapse also included the flow of heavily armed Touareg fighters from Libya to Mali, where they eventually precipitated French military intervention to beat back the Salafi Jihadists who had gained ascendancy in the northern region.

Morocco, by contrast, largely contained its own protest movement, thanks to some adroit maneuvering by King Mohammed VI, as well as internal divisions within the highly diverse and fragmented opposition.

The king's much ballyhooed constitutional reform process in 2011 helped calm the waters, and even produced an elected coalition government headed by the Islamist PJD, as well as recognition of the Berber language (Tamazight)

as an official language of the state, a historic achievement for the country's Berber identity movement. But real power remains in the hands of the Palace, and socioeconomic problems remain acute.

That leaves Algeria – a rich country (thanks to its natural gas) but not a rich populace, a deeply corrupt and opaque political system lacking in legitimacy, a cynical, alienated and often angry public, high youth unemployment, a low-grade but persistent Islamist insurgency given new life by the collapse of authority in neighboring Libya, and a traditionally militant and alienated Kabyle-Berber minority. The memory of the horrific civil war of the 1990s may be the best tool in the regime's kit, as it seeks to prevent the Arab Spring flames from spreading to Algeria, and manage the transition to a new president to replace the severely ill Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who is convalescing in a French hospital. But one wonders if and when the lid on the Algerian pressure cooker will blow off.

All in all, the overall situation in North Africa isn't particularly encouraging, but at least it's not facing a Syrian-like disaster scenario. ■

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Women wearing traditional hayek veils in downtown Algiers

RAMZI BOUDINA / REUTERS