Ahead of the Curve?
Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

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Since January 2011, after successfully overthrowing its autocratic president Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali, Tunisia has become, rather atypically, a source of inspiration for other Middle Eastern and North African societies. Historically, Tunisia was not a center of ideological and intellectual ferment that motivated revolutionary movements, alternative leaders seeking to take control of political life, or new political, social, and economic structures. This relatively small North African country remained largely immune to such upheavals, displaying a remarkable degree of stability that has underpinned Tunisia's public life since it regained its independence from France in 1956. But the events of early 2011 have shifted the spotlight to Tunisia. Protestors and commentators from Cairo to Sana'a to Damascus have repeatedly invoked the Tunisian example of overthrowing a detested leader by popular protest. These protestors and observers, along with many in the West, now frequently refer to Tunisia as a model for an emerging political order in which democracy and civil liberties will prevail. This unusual interest and hype surrounding Tunisia warrant a more in-depth look at recent events there. What exactly happened in Tunisia? Does Ben 'Ali's removal reflect a genuine shift in the country's politics, or will it merely redesign and endow with new legitimacy, reproducing a similar system of government? And to what extent can the Tunisian example, with its unique socio-economic characteristics, be emulated by other countries in the region?

At the outset of this discussion, an acknowledgement of the extraordinary nature of the recent events in Tunisia is very much in order. The developments in Tunisia have been dramatic by any standard and, as already mentioned, have created a cascading effect throughout the region. Even if the final outcome of Tunisia's current turmoil is not "good" in the sense of creating a new, pluralist political order, Tunisia will stand as the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to remove an autocratic dictator from his position in a relatively peaceful manner. This precedent is even more remarkable considering the fact that such a development was viewed by most observers in Tunisia and abroad as highly unlikely—if not impossible—just days before its occurrence. But despite such accolades, there are many looming questions concerning what has become known as Tunisia's "Jasmine

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Revolution," which makes the aromatic jasmine flower, common throughout Tunisia, the symbol of recent events there.

Tunisia, geographically smaller in size than its North African neighbors, boasts several distinguishing features. Its population stands at 10.6 million people (Morocco and Algeria both have populations of well over 30 million each). Moreover, its population growth is less than one percent annually, the result of an ambitious family planning program initiated by the Tunisian government in the 1960s. Women in Tunisia play a unique social role. They are well integrated into society and the economy, as well into the country's political life. This, too, distinguishes Tunisia from other Arab countries, where women remain marginal and suffer from diverse forms of legal and social discrimination. Tunisia's social composition is rather homogenous. It is almost completely Sunni Muslim and does not have religious or ethnic minorities that could potentially weaken the country's national unity. Although Tunisia lacks natural resources, it has been successful in developing its economy. Tourism is a key sector that contributes significantly to the country's GDP (up to one-sixth according to some estimates). Tunisia is one of the few Arab countries with an identifiable middle class, which occupies a prominent position in Tunisian society. Although this group may differ in income from their Western counterparts, it has traditionally oriented Tunisia towards more moderate political and social positions. Unlike neighboring Algeria, Tunisia's recent political history has been relatively stable. Since 1956, only two individuals have held power: Habib Bourguiba, the country's "founding father," ruled until his failing health led to his removal in 1987 by Ben 'Ali, who governed Tunisia until early this year.

The road to the "Jasmine Revolution" effectively began on the morning of 7 November 1987, when Tunisians awoke to the news that Bourguiba had been removed from power in a bloodless coup and replaced by his prime minister Ben 'Ali. Speaking to the nation that day, Ben 'Ali pledged to remain loyal to his predecessor's policies. As he set out to consolidate his rule, the new president indicated that he intended to increase political freedom in Tunisia and restrict the president's political power by limiting his terms in office. Most Tunisians were initially supportive of the new president and were eager to see whether Ben 'Ali would live up to their expectations. Negotiations between Ben 'Ali and various political parties, including the leading Islamist al-Nahda Movement, led to a "national pact" that was expected to usher in a new era in Tunisia's public life.

However, this was not to be. Over time, the Ben 'Ali regime became increasingly repressive and authoritarian, abandoning its early pledges that it would install a more open political system. Efforts to clamp down on Islamist

activity (which was effectively silenced by Ben 'Ali after 1991) were initially tacitly accepted by many people in Tunisia's middle class. They tolerated the regime's measures in exchange for political stability and economic development, and were grateful for Tunisia's improved conditions, especially in contrast to the raging domestic strife in neighboring Algeria in the 1990s. Observers often referred to this silent contract between civil society and the regime as the "devil's compact." But as time went on, Ben 'Ali's regime seemed to reject any form of political dissent and increased repression of any political alternative to the ruling party.[2] These political measures were exacerbated by an economic downturn. The Tunisian government was less successful in attracting foreign investment after 2000 as the country's economy suffered from the effects of various world financial crises. Although Tunisia's economy served as a model for other Arab countries—the result of its liberal economic policy, reduced budget deficits, low inflation rates, and high volume of foreign trade—problems became apparent. Above all, persistent unemployment, reflecting a weakened private sector, was a grievance of many young Tunisians.[3] Many suffered from rising economic hardship, which embittered their view of the ruling regime. Allegations of corruption among the country's highest political echelons, and specifically among Ben 'Ali's family members, further tarnished the regime's image.

All these developments, however, do not necessarily lead to political upheaval. For all of its deficiencies, Ben 'Ali's regime was not "evil" as was, say, Saddam Husayn's rule in Iraq. Ben 'Ali was well aware of the need to provide an effective social welfare system, which could quell anti-government ferment and reduce the possibility of a strong political opposition. For most Tunisians, such policies were very much appreciated. So long as Tunisians steered away from politics and refrained from becoming involved in opposition groups, they could confidently go about their daily lives with little concern. How then, did the public end up rising against the government?

As in similar cases, it was a symbolic event that led to the outbreak of widespread anti-government protests. In the Tunisian case, it was the self-immolation of a young, unemployed Tunisian man from the peripheral town of Sidi Bouzid (about 200 kilometers southeast of the capital Tunis), Mohamed Bouazizi, that triggered the public outrage. On 17 December 2010, Bouazizi set himself on fire in a desperate protest against local authorities who reportedly harassed him for selling fruits and vegetables from an

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2 Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 185-212.

3 Paul Rivlin, *Arab Economies in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 266-286.

unlicensed pushcart. Bouazizi, who succumbed to his wounds and died several weeks later, was embraced by Tunisian protestors as a martyr who took his own life in order to pave the way for a better society. Though Bouazizi did not complete his high school studies, he was described on various web-based social networks as an unemployed university graduate—a social profile that many young Tunisians could easily identify with, even if Bouazizi's life did not precisely resemble their own.[4] Despite these inconsistencies between myth and reality, Bouazizi's act unleashed unprecedented anti-government protests which swept across the Tunisian countryside and made their way within a fortnight to the capital.

Although the protests were a first in Ben 'Ali's Tunisia, in which any form of anti-regime activity was met with an iron fist, they did not inherently suggest that the country was on the eve of a political transformation. Security forces actively pursued the demonstrators and did not initially hesitate to open fire. Over 200 people were killed in the clashes. News of the protests, along with photos and video footage transmitted over the internet and satellite television stations, increased the resolve of the many Tunisians who joined the grassroots protest movement. Indeed, one of the leading features of the Tunisian protests was that they were not organized by established political parties or social movements. In hindsight, this may have led Ben 'Ali and his close advisers to dismiss the protestors and to feel confident about their ability to ride out the storm.

Early calls for political reform and an end to governmental corruption quickly gave way to a slogan that has since become the mantra of protestors throughout the Middle East: "The People Want/Demand the Regime's Removal." Without any planning, Tunisia effectively found itself in early January moving towards what Charles Tilly and other theorists have deemed a "revolutionary situation," in which a government under the control of a single polity becomes the target of effective, competing claims of distinct polities. In such cases, the polity becomes fragmented into two or more blocks.[5] Although one can argue that Tunisia was on the verge of a revolutionary situation, events on the ground do not necessarily support the notion of a brewing revolution. As noted, the protests lacked a recognized leadership and organizational structure. Moreover, although the level of violence intensified as the protests continued, the country was not on the verge of a total breakdown. Tourists continued to frequent Tunisia's resorts, and there were no reports in early January of foreigners trying to flee the country. These contradictions, weighed against the backdrop of unfolding

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4 See Frida Dahmani, "Sidi Bouazizi," *Jeune Afrique*, 26 February 2011.

5 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 190-204.

domestic unrest in Tunisia, underscore the "Jasmine Revolution's" complexity and the difficulty of labeling a fluid political situation.

By 13 January the protests reached the capital and calls for a massive demonstration in the city center on the following day were circulating. Seeking to avert further unrest, Ben 'Ali delivered a televised address to the nation, one of several made during the crisis. Unlike his earlier appearances, the embattled president this time seemed rattled. "I understand you," he told his citizens, and promised to inaugurate widespread reforms and expand civil liberties. He also announced that he would not run in the upcoming presidential elections. Notwithstanding his shaky appearance, there was no indication that Ben 'Ali or his close associates felt they were losing control of the situation. But by then the regime had lost any remaining credibility among the public, which continued with its planned protest the next day. Less than twenty-four hours after his televised speech, Ben 'Ali boarded a plane for Saudi Arabia, effectively ending his rule.[6]

Ben 'Ali's departure shocked Tunisians. Although the anti-regime protests had intensified, few at home or abroad envisioned such an outcome. The circumstances behind Ben 'Ali's abrupt flight remain unclear. Some speculated that Ben 'Ali was effectively overthrown in some form of an internal coup by his close advisers. Others opined that it was the Tunisian military, which reportedly refused to clamp down on the protestors, that forced Ben 'Ali out of office. This seems rather unlikely, given the military's small size and the fact that the army has traditionally kept its distance from politics, unlike in Egypt, for example. Another explanation for Ben 'Ali's sudden departure held that he and his family were more concerned about preserving their personal wealth than clinging to political power, which they felt was slipping away. Accordingly, they opted to flee the country rather than face the prospect of being overthrown by force. All these explanations remain highly speculative. Clearly, researchers will need more time and information in order to understand what transpired among Tunisia's top political echelons on 14 January 2011.

In the weeks that followed Ben 'Ali's departure, Tunisia embarked on what will be a long process of political reconstruction. While international attention on Tunisia waned as the spotlight moved to events in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, Tunisia has attempted to return to its much vaunted internal stability. Protests in the country have continued, as some Tunisians have demanded a complete dismantling of the former regime. After some

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6 See Marwane Ben Yahmed, "Ben Ali: fuite et fin," and Abdelaziz Barrouhi, "Suicide en direct," *Jeune Afrique*, 16 January 2011.

hesitation, the country's interim government, which consisted largely of Ben 'Ali's former ministers, was dissolved in early March. Political parties have been busy preparing for the upcoming elections for a new assembly which will draft a new constitution, scheduled for 2 July, but since delayed (at the time of writing).

Many questions concerning Tunisia's future identity (in particular, the role of the now legalized Islamists) remain unclear and will undoubtedly require some time to be sorted out. While many obstacles could potentially hinder the country's progress, the prospects for a more open, pluralistic political system seem promising. Much of the country's middle class is intent on establishing such a system, and even Islamist groups have voiced their support. In that sense, Tunisia's unique features could once again set it apart from other Arab countries, where the prospects for such developments seem less likely.

Another question is whether former officials of the Ben 'Ali regime will continue to wield influence and power by reinventing themselves within the new political framework. If that happens, it will be difficult to consider the "Jasmine Revolution" a genuine transformation of public life in Tunisia, at least according to the prevailing theoretical definitions of revolution. How all this will play out is yet to be determined. If there is a definitive conclusion from the events in Tunisia so far, it is that even small, less central countries warrant close watching and analysis, even if they may not become leaders in the unfolding political events sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa.

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