

Lebanon and Tunisia: Two Ousted Leaders.

Will social unrest spread and threaten other Mideast autocracies?

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Global Research, January 20, 2011

20 January 2011

Some dubbed it the “Jasmine Revolution” out of an apparent need to romanticize all popular uprisings by tagging a color or symbol to it, as they did with Tunisia’s national flower. Yet it felt decidedly out of place. This was no Western-backed revolt, where an American president issues lively calls for the people’s will to be respected. On the contrary, if the U.S., France or any of the Arab client states could have intervened to preserve the 23-year rule of Tunisian dictator Zain al-Abidine Ben Ali, they would have done so.

Simmering anger at skyrocketing food prices, inflation, unemployment, cronyism and corruption had boiled over and erupted into mass protests. But the Tunisian *intifada* started with one young man’s despair.

Muhammad Bouazizi was a 26-year old ex-student who resorted to street vending in order to support his family. Ben Ali’s thugs showed him no mercy even in that. Police confiscated his fruit and vegetable cart on the pretext he had no license, and beat and humiliated him when he had no money for a bribe.

He pled his case to authorities, to be allowed to push his wheelbarrow and eek out a meager existence, but to no avail. On Dec. 17, Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of municipal government headquarters where his case had been heard and dismissed. It was the literal and figurative speak that mobilized Tunisians into waves of demonstrations that swept Ben Ali all the way to Saudi Arabia .

Acts of self-immolation followed in Algeria and Egypt . Protests in Jordan over soaring prices and unemployment mirrored Tunisian grievances and led to calls for the entire government to resign.

Indeed, the question on everyone’s mind is whether the unrest will spread and threaten other Mideast autocracies and oligarchies, specifically Egypt and Algeria .

This is unlikely in the short-term. Tunisia’s uprising was unique in the way it had mobilized the middle class to join forces with trade unions and the poor to uproot the nepotism and corruption Ben Ali’s reign embodied. While this particular set of social conditions may not be generalizable to other Arab countries, his ouster did reaffirm—as the 1979 Iranian Revolution proved—the security-state’s fragility in comparison to the people’s wrath. It dispelled the myth, however, that all such rebellions are Islamist-inspired.

Just two days prior to Ben Ali's hasty exit to Saudi Arabia , another Mideast leader lost power.

Although "toppled" tends to connote violent overthrow, it was nonetheless used to describe the peaceful resignation of 11 opposition ministers from the cabinet of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, causing his government to [deservedly](#) collapse. Their resignations ostensibly came after Hariri refused to hold an urgent cabinet meeting to address the country's response to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which is expected to indict high-ranking Hezbollah officials in the February 2005 assassination of late premier Rafiq Hariri. The indictments were delivered sealed to the pre-trial judge Monday.

Hopes to resolve the impasse on how to deal with their fallout were placed in the long-touted "Saudi-Syrian initiative." Before the initiative was allowed to bear fruit, it was torpedoed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after she met with Hariri in New York . When he acquiesced and it became clear the deal was dead, the opposition ministers' resignation was a forgone conclusion.

President Michel Suleiman has temporarily delayed parliamentary consultations to name a new prime minister to give Turkish and Qatari mediation efforts a chance to forestall yet another crisis. Hezbollah and Michel Aoun's Change and Reform parliamentary bloc have already said they will not support Hariri's reappointment.

Further undermining the caretaker prime minister's credibility, Lebanon's New TV aired leaked audio tapes of a 2007 meeting between Hariri, pre-STL U.N. Deputy Chief investigator Gerhard Lehmann, Internal Security Forces head Col. Wissam al-Hassan (whose conspicuous absence the day Hariri was assassinated and his [flimsy alibi](#) raises troubling questions) and Muhammad Zuhair al-Siddiq.

Al-Siddiq is a known criminal and one of the "false witnesses" who implicated Syria in Hariri's murder with fabricated, now discredited testimony. The embarrassing tape shoots holes through Hariri's claim he never had personal knowledge of al-Siddiq or anything to do with the false witnesses.

In a remarkable week, two Arab leaders were deposed.

One was a staunchly secular dictator who fled in disgrace to an ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia . He may loathe the religious atmosphere but once envied its security relations with the West. Ben Ali is now relegated to an apolitical life in Jeddah, the same city in which Idi Amin once took refuge.

The other, though not a dictator, sold out a formula for domestic and regional stability at his country's expense. His political and sectarian agenda, at justice's expense, will allow the STL's politicized indictments to foment strife, conflict and enmity between Lebanese.

For making himself a party to that in his capacity as prime minister, the Lebanese should encourage Hariri, who holds Saudi citizenship, to take extended leave in the Kingdom as well.

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