The Tunisian revolution: Initial reflections

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At the moment it is abundantly easy to sense everywhere in the Arab World elation at what appears to be one of greatest events in modern Arab history. A genuine popular revolution, spontaneous and apparently leaderless, yet sustained and remarkably determined, overthrew a system that by all accounts had been the most entrenched and secure in the whole region. The wider implications beyond Tunisia are hard to miss. Just as in the case of the Iranian revolution more than three decades ago, what is now happening in Tunisia is watched by all in the Arab world–as either a likely model of the transformation to come in their respective countries, or at least as a badly needed source of revolutionary inspiration.

The Iranian revolution, too, had unexpectedly toppled what then seemed to be the most entrenched and secure regime in the region. Now the Tunisian revolution appears to be part of a more immediate pattern; mass demonstrations had been taking place in Algeria and Jordan, and virtually all commentators are drawing parallels to their own countries. Since the popular uprising in Sudan that toppled Jafar Numeiry in 1985, there has been no genuine (and equally peaceful) popular revolt against an Arab regime. And the outcome, thus far, of the Tunisian revolution of 2011 seems more promising than that of Sudan in 1985, where the military took over and diffused the revolutionary moment. In the case of Tunisia, the army has remained on the sidelines, and the transition is thus far perfectly constitutional—although more radical voices of the revolution are calling for immediately drafting a completely new constitution. Time and future research will of course tell us more about the exact dynamics of this historic moment, which is continuing to unfold, as well as its regional ramifications. At this point, only some preliminary reflections are possible.

First, Tunisia had seemed for long to be an unlikely candidate for revolution due to its apparent stability, comparatively healthy economy, relatively good educational system, and strength of state apparatus. Stability and longevity were characteristic of the regime. In 44 years of independence, the country had known only two presidents. The idea of "president for life," which now is more or less the rule in the republican parts of the Arab World, was in fact pioneered as an official term by the first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba in 1975. From today's perspective it is hard not to feel somewhat nostalgic to the bygone innocence of that moment: where else would a president now openly acknowledge the pointlessness of the cynicism and formality associated with being repeatedly re-elected, without opposition and always with practical unanimity?

Even amongst Arab governments distinguished in the arts of authoritarianism, the regime that had just been toppled stood out. The regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali allowed no opposition of any kind, no criticism of the president, hardly any civil society, banned much of the foreign and Arab press, and whatever part of the internet it deemed even remotely dangerous—including Facebook and similar social media. In 2009, the Committee to Protect Journalists placed Tunisia third among the most dangerous countries in the world from which to blog. At the same time the OpenNet Initiative, which traces the number of blocked sites and categories, found the former Tunisian regime to be the most hostile Arab regime to internet freedom. During the reign of Ben Ali, the security apparatus had virtually free hand in arresting and torturing suspects everywhere, including in mosques.

In spite of this climate of total control, the revolution found ways to spread images and stories that proved crucial for its further growth and ultimate success. Mobile phones became uniquely valuable for taking images of confrontation and sending them around the country, and whatever communication or internet resources were available captivated the full attention of what appears to have been an enormous number of disaffected people, who without any prior plan staged a revolution. What is significant here is the factor of creativity. The revolution appears to have taken place not because it had resources—a model already familiar from the completely resourceless first Palestinian intifada in 1987. The events in Tunisia suggest that when there is enough reason for it, a revolution invents the resources that are appropriate for it. That was the case in Tunisia in 2011, just as it was in Palestine in 1987 and in Iran in 1979.

In Tunisia, the opposition parties were clearly caught off-guard by the events, and remained unable to direct the revolution that maintained a character of spontaneity to this point, when the revolution appears to have already attained the basic demands on which all participants agreed—the departure of Ben Ali, the promise of free elections, free association, free media, and the release of political prisoners. By contrast, in the case of the first Palestinian intifada and the Iranian revolution, both of which lasted much longer than the Tunisian revolution before they could reach any goals at all, leaderships and coordinating committees emerged after an initial period of spontaneity, and they served to introduce an element of planning into those uprisings. All those revolts were characterized by organizational or networking creativity, necessitated by the fact that the authorities had been highly vigilant in collecting knowledge about then making inaccessible all revolutionary resources, including means of communication as well as potential leadership at all levels.

Second, the Tunisian revolution seems to have been born out of a condition of closed possibilities and not simply out of economic grievances. The revolution began in marginal and neglected parts of the country, and the trigger appears to have to do with economic grievances. Yet if revolutions were to be explained by economics alone, it would be hard to explain this revolution. For by any meaningful comparison (to the Maghreb countries, the southern Mediterranean, or the Arab World more generally), Tunisia did not seem to be doing exceptionally badly.

The worst economic news was unemployment figures, which officially remained high at 14%, and much higher among young people. But such rates are not unusual in the region, and several Arab countries have officially much higher rates of unemployment. Poverty rates remained steady for years at a little over 7%, but that was nearly half of what it had been in 2000, and a vast improvement over the 22% it had been when Ben Ali assumed power in 1987. In other countries nearby, poverty rates remained steady for years at much higher rates: 20% in Egypt, 15% in Morocco, and nearly one quarter of the population in Algeria. In 2009 per capita income in

Tunisia worsened slightly and stood at $7,200, close to the level it has been at 2005. But overall the decline was not drastic, and that amount was still higher than any neighboring country except oil-producing Libya, but higher than neighboring oil producing Algeria ($6,600), as well as Morocco ($3,800) or Egypt ($4,900). Tunisia's life expectancy compared very well to other Arab countries, as did its literacy rates. One may even question the gravity attached to one of the main grievances against Ben Ali's development policies, namely that they exacerbated class differences by benefitting some more than others. As measured by the Gini index (at 40), Tunisia's income distribution appears in fact to be more equal than that of Malaysia or China, for example, as well as most Third World countries. It appears equivalent to that of Turkey and Israel, neither of which expect a revolution (at least from those they regard to be their citizens).

It would therefore appear that, again if economics were to explain things, that we should see a revolution in Egypt, for example, where relevant economic indicators are miserable. But as Amr el-Shobaki suggested, the saving grace of the Egyptian regime is that it has put into use a ventilation safety valve, meaning that grievances and criticisms of the government and even the president are allowed; that civil society is tolerated; that the opposition can publish its newspapers; and so on. At the same time, the ruling party in Egypt exercises complete monopoly on power; openly engineers election fraud; and tolerates no real threat to its political hegemony. More interestingly—as seen in the bizarre parliamentary elections in November 2010, the ruling party even allows, in fact seemed to encourage, competition within itself. Thus for the first time it nominated in that election several candidates who would compete against each other in several districts. In doing so it appeased several new power players as well as a variety of local leaders (traditional or otherwise), who demanded an official certification of their leading role in their communities, in exchange for offering support to the ruling party.

The equation in Egypt, therefore, has diffused revolutionary potentials in spite of the gravity of the situation, by allowing criticism but prohibiting change, and by inviting all ambitious politicians to join the party and compete against each other within it, even in public. This cynical game is still more sophisticated than one sees in most other Arab countries, where authoritarian regimes play a schizophrenic game: on the one hand they see the point of allowing some safety ventilation valve to remain open, while on the other they exhibit paranoia when more than six people meet in a public place to discuss anything resembling politics. Jordan, which is sometimes lauded in the West for its largely bogus democratic experiment, is a good example of this deadly schizophrenia. There is a parliament, the election of which last October was manipulated more than usual to produce a completely pliable body. In comparison to Egypt, no criticism of the king is possible, and in fact every time his name appears in the press, the expected practice is that it should be followed by praise, even if it is mentioned in the context of reporting a fully innocuous event.

Since the Iranian revolution (and some might argue that as of the late 1960s, in gradual response to the Arab disaster of 1967), Arab regimes became completely obsessed with the question of regime survival, the obsession with which seemed to trump all other issues, including development, liberalization, and national liberation—as evidenced in their abandonment of the Palestinians and the Iraqis to their fate. Following the Nasser era, the priority assigned to the task of regime survival was coupled almost everywhere in the Arab World with an incoherent sense of grand mission. The post-Nasser era witnessed the gradual abandonment of important postcolonial claims that had been invested in the new states, thus justifying them and affording them legitimacy for a while. The idea then was that postcolonial governments embodied a

grand liberationist and developmentalist mission. That claim was, gradually since 1970, paved over with more clintelist thinking, so that government was increasingly regarded, by its elites and constituents alike, as simply a source of situational favors. That idea became only more established with the commitment of almost all Arab governments to neoliberal economics, which did not produce the intended results. It failed—for various possible reasons, but a definite factor is the pervasive corruption against which the Tunisians revolted. Throughout the Arab World the ruling elites have lived off and also encouraged corruption, since it corresponded to their understanding of the clientelist character of the state. Here, the Tunisian regime was no exception but in fact a perfectly typical example.

Political culture thus suffered a transformation that reflected the increasing clientelist character of the state and the lost hopes in the grand postcolonial aspirations that had been invested in it earlier. State ideology itself became more personalistic, infinitely magnifying a single element that under Nasser had been only one of the elements of his charisma. For the past three or four decades, the Arab region saw an unusual investment in the personality cult of the leader. However, unlike the case of Nasser, who in spite of all his faults and subsequent critiques of his regime remained genuinely popular, all subsequent attempts at personality cults were purely state-engineered. The displays seemed only intended to impress by having the images, statues and banal statements of largely ineloquent leaders occupy so much public space. This was most evidently the case in republican environments as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia, but lesser pompous attempts at personality cults were evident everywhere in the Arab world, and they indicate nothing other than the ideological emptiness of government on the one hand, and its (so far evidently unpersuasive) attempt to substitute symbolic populism for genuine democratization.

Here then we have states that lacked a sense of themselves as anything other than being sources of situational favor; that, furthermore, lacked and resisted democratic accountability; that had therefore no mechanisms (other than accident) by which they might produce visionary leaders; and that substituted for all these shortcoming by an attempt at aggrandizing the personality cult of the leader, whose cult became the only ideology of the government. And personality cults entailed, as a consequence, the gradual transformation of all Arab republics into quasi-kingdoms, with sons following fathers as presidents. A dynastic transition has already happened in Syria, is apparently planned in Yemen, Egypt, and Libya, and was the plan in Iraq and, until now, Tunisia. The termination of the Iraqi experiment could not very well really be inspiring, since the agent of change there was illegitimate and external, viewed by most Iraqis and Arabs as a manifestation of arrogant imperialism. That lesson has now been corrected in Tunisia, from which the feeling disseminates to all Arabs that the personality cult of the leader, of which they were never persuaded anyway, could be undone by their own efforts.

The revolution in Tunisia was a response to a sense of closed possibilities. Nowhere do we see any identifiable "structure of opportunities" that could have made it possible. Everywhere we see the opposite—absence of any opportunities whatsoever. The pre-revolutionary climate displays a scene of extreme desperation and exasperation. And it is precisely that scene that was so poignantly allegorized in the protest-suicide of a young man after the police took away from him the last meager resource he had for leading a decent life.

Revolution here is triggered in a closed political cosmos. Obviously, regime's insistence on substituting the leader cult (or official populism) for democracy or civil society can at the end of the road only produce a revolution, regardless of how strong the regime's repressive apparatus might be. The weaknesses of this model of governing may now be apparent to Arab leaders, but

their demonstrated short-sightedness, pervasive corruption, and entrenched ethic of self-service, make it questionable as to whether they may be shaken into learning the right lesson, even though it might be in their own interest. But regime leaders could be just as suicidal as their opposition could be, especially if the political scene they had spent decades creating and honing cannot accommodate any reform without crumbling completely. This is perhaps the conundrum that we are facing now, and there are two likely reasons for it.

First, the fanatic priority attached to regime survival has entailed the elimination of all sustained voices of reform within existing regimes. This was manifested in the removal of all possible competition to the leader, although competition for prestige, positions and resources at lower rungs of the system was not prohibited and in fact was to be expected. But what became increasingly apparent in republican, and in some cases even royal, Arab state politics over the last few decades, is the absence of a clear successor to the leader of the state. Over the years, such early collective leadership structures as the oft- called "revolution's leadership council," usually characteristic of regimes formed through military coups, were dismantled or weakened. In many countries the office of the vice president was eliminated or replaced by a number of vice-presidents so as to dilute the ability of a single person to act as a magnet for an inner-regime reform movement. At the same time, we saw an investment in personality cults, which was meant to elevate the leader far above all other possible competitors; the investment in sons or other family members as likely successors; the frequent removal of all potential contenders within ruling parties; and the toleration, if not encouragement, of corruption among state elites, which had the effect of producing in them an attachment and loyalty to a system that worked so well for them. Often those tended to be new elites, meaning that they had no traditional power or wealth base in society to upon were they to lose their state connection.

Thus over time it became less and less expected that reform would come from within existing regimes. No "free officers" were to be produced, and even military coups that had been so frequent and that served as channels of reform as well as for expressing popular resentments in the 1950s and 1960s, became unusual as of 1970. Within a decade thereafter, even power struggles over policy directions within existing regimes became rare, and especially the top leaders tended to rule more or less for life. One of their tools of longevity consisted of producing uncertainty about likely succession and fear about the consequences of *any* succession while they were alive.

That meant, essentially, that the end of regimes became associated with the end of their leaders. And it also meant that all public frustration and resentment would converge on the leader as a person. That reality rigidified the political scene. Any show of weakness meant the end. Thus when Ben Ali, having already ruled for 23 years and is now 74, sought to calm the revolutionary crowds by promising not to run for office again (in 2014!), he found himself forced to flee the country the following day. Following his speech, but before his departure, all commentators noted the single most exceptional fact about what he said: it was his first expression of weakness. The logic of the regime he had built meant that any first expression of weakness will be your last.

The revolution, by contrast, represents exactly the opposite qualities—weakness and martyrdom are its ideological fuel, absence of leadership is what keeps it together, weak organization is what makes it hard to capture. One of the most striking facts about this revolution is that even after a month of constant activism, it has remained leaderless and has seemed to be capable of going on as such. Further, its relatively peaceful quality has been absolutely impressive—all deaths and injuries have been result of state violence. Surprisingly, these two qualities—sustained leaderless movement and sustained absence of violence—seem related. For the revolution would

have been easily defeated by the state had it turned to violence, given the state's vastly superior repressive apparatus and the likely withdrawal from the streets of all those segments that had been drawn to the movement out of a sense of moral outrage but who were not prepared to be part of a violent crowd. In fact, it seems that the unusual longevity and sustained energy of the revolution has been dependent on a collective moral outrage alone, but not organization, leadership, or a detailed political program. And the absence of revolutionary violence in the face of state violence only deepened that sense of moral outrage, giving it the quality of messianic commitment.

This messianic commitment, another striking quality of this revolution, bears no resemblance to religion, and it may indeed appear as a mystery as to why religion did not play a greater part in this revolt, even though organized religious forces had been part of the Tunisian opposition for three decades. But religious opposition, which since 1979 has been the main internal obsession of Arab regimes, appears in the context of the Tunisian revolution, so far largely secular, to have all along been part of a larger social consensus that transcends religiosity. The common demands to this point seem to be more basic, even intuitive: the right to be respected as a citizen, to enjoy a decent life and to participate in the creation of the system which rules over the person. These very old demands are not uniquely religious, nor uniquely communist, nor uniquely nationalist, even though these discourses have served as different vehicles for expressing them. Instead of addressing them, Arab governments have always preferred to fixate on the identity of what they regarded to be their internal enemy, assuming that the trouble (and the demand) would go away with the repression of a particular enemy. For the last three decades this enemy has been called "Islamists," before that it was known as "communists."

But what makes any resourceless revolution into a relentless machine is not its name, nor its ideology. It is the persistence of very old, basic expectation of citizenship and participation, an expectation whose intuitive nature and pure form is discovered again after having been mystified in the idiom of one discourse or another. Thus when Mohamad Bu'azizi set himself and subsequently the whole country on fire, he certainly did not realize what he was about to symbolize, which was grievances coming back to earth and expressed in the most earthly manner possible. Not as mystification, not as reenacting an ancient struggle between good and evil, not as an expression of a party ideology. He gave a human expression to suffering and protest that negated all need to engage in controversies about ideas, ideologies, political systems, proper course of action, and so on. He rejected his fate, and ended his life in public and in the most horrible manner. But before doing so he had followed all the usual recipes for survival—got an education and a university degree, lived by the rules, belonged to no parties, bothered no one, was diligent, and was still content with the bare minimum existence, until that was taken away from him. Bu'azizi's story was narrated time and again, and its ethic was very simply: resistance was not his first choice, he had sought all other options first. All doors and possibilities then appeared closed, just as the system itself in which he had languished all his life. That he expressed a high tragic form of a collective feeling is evident in the immense emotional energy that quickly engulfed the entire country and made it impossible for anyone to feel that life could continue as it was before. The revolution begins at the point when an act of someone burning himself appears as an act that anyone can identify with, rather than as an expression of personal pathology or insanity. Bu'azizi may not have intended to stir up a revolution, and clearly he was unaware of any opportunities or resources for such a revolution. Neither was apparently anyone who initially rose up

to protest his fate, and against a system that had long believed that it had left no room for error and no opportunity for a revolution.

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