

International Security Monthly Briefing – January 2011

TUNISIA AND EGYPT IN CONTEXT

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Introduction

The consequences of a young unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, setting himself on fire, continues to reverberate through Tunisia and North Africa. The actual grievance of Mohamed Bouazizi was that when he had tried to sell vegetables to raise some money, on 17 December, he had been prevented by municipal inspectors. This, however, came on top of a long period of intense frustration.

He was severely burnt and died two weeks later. News of his death spread on the internet, setting off a chain of demonstrations, catching almost everyone outside Tunisia by surprise. The intense public anger peaked in the capital, Tunis, over the weekend of 8-9 January, leading to the collapse of the government of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, an autocratic regime that had been in power for 23 years.

An interim administration took power, supported by the Army, and this has promised elections within six months. The administration initially had many members drawn from the previous regime and while some of these subsequently stood down, opposition to the inclusion of any former government ministers continued. Significant moves by the interim government included the release of many political prisoners, some of whom had been detained for more than a decade, and a willingness to allow the safe return to Tunisia of some key exiled political leaders, most notably Mr Rashid Ghannouchi, the leader of the banned Islamist party, al-Nahda (no relation to the interim Prime Minister, Mr Mohammed Ghannouchi).

Following the extraordinarily rapid pace of change in Tunisia, massive unrest in Egypt, demonstrations and self-immolations in several other countries across North Africa and the Middle East, questions have been raised over the likelihood that Tunisia heralds a transformation across the region, and whether that will involve the ascendancy of Islamist political parties.

Al-Nahda in Tunisia

Many foreign analysts of the changes in Tunisia have emphasised that the opposition to the Ben Ali regime came not from a strong religious base but from a more broad opposition, motivated in part by high levels of unemployment, inflation in general and food price rises in particular. At the same time, there is support across the country for a more Islamic orientation in politics, and this relates to the origins and development of the al-Nahda party. This was founded in 1981 by Rashid Ghannouchi and gained substantial popularity in the 1980s. In 1989, the party took nearly 20% of the vote, but this was in an election that was substantially rigged in favour of President Ben Ali, so it is probable that the real support for al-Nahda was much higher.

From 1990 onwards, the Ben Ali regime started a vigorous programme aimed at destroying the party, imprisoning many thousands of its members. Mr Ghannouchi went into exile and was sentenced in his absence, but some other leaders, including Ali Larayedh, were imprisoned and tortured. Mr Larayedh served 14 years in prison. The Ben Ali regime had some western political support for its actions against al-Nahda, not least because of fears that the party might otherwise take Tunisia in a radical Islamist direction. Mr Ghannouchi had, for example, called for attacks on western forces in 1991 at the time of the first Gulf War in response to what was widely seen as a foreign occupation of Moslem lands, especially Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of the Two Holy Places.

However, statements from Mr Larayedh since the collapse of the Ben Ali regime have confirmed the view that al-Nahda is far from being an extreme Islamist entity, bent on bringing in a deeply puritanical form

of Islamist governance. In a significant interview with the *New York Times* on 21 January, for example, Mr Larayedh was insistent that the party would not be rigid on matters of alcohol, dress codes and symbols of modernity, and that it was able to work as part of a democratic system. The following day on Al Jazeera, Mr Ghannouchi echoed this saying: "We want to establish a society that accepts pluralism, without being under the tutelage of third parties. We want the peaceful transfer of power, and respect for freedom of thought and the press."

Two immediate issues arise from this, one being how to reconcile such statements with opposition to western involvement in the region. From al-Nahda's perspective, there is no ambiguity. A willingness to work in a pluralist international environment is not the same as accepting what is seen across the region as foreign military occupation and excess foreign influence over ruling elites. Such external control is widely opposed with vigour, but that does not equate with opposition to on-going political, economic and cultural contact. This may be the view within many elements of a party such as al-Nahda, but it is not shared in more conservative circles in Washington or some Western European capitals, and certainly not in Israel.

The second issue concerns the acceptance of this more liberal Islamic polity by ordinary people within Tunisia. Put bluntly, does this stance, embraced by al-Nahda, reflect majority opinion among its supporters, or are they, for the most part, seeking a more austere outlook? Much will depend on the approach adopted by Rashid Ghannouchi now he has returned to Tunisia, but the indications are that al-Nahda is, like a number of religious parties in North Africa – willing to work as part of a democratic transformation.

The Impact on the Region

Beyond these issues, is the wider impact of the Tunisian upheavals on other regimes across North Africa and the Middle East. This is of particular concern for many leaders in view of the intensive coverage of events in Tunisia and Egypt on regional 24-hour news channels, especially Al Jazeera. Even so, there is need for a note of caution as there are factors operating in a number of states that make a repeat of the Tunisian changes far from certain. The energy-rich western Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Emirates, do have substantial issues of elite governance, but the economies are for the most part buoyant, aided by the current high prices for oil and natural gas. In the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is the exception with a large and economically marginalised population, declining oil revenues and deep internal divisions.

Almost at the opposite ends of the region are Jordan and Morocco, both of them regarded as states with social environments that could evolve into strong foci of opposition, much like Tunisia. Both, though, are monarchies in which a significant part of the population holds the monarch in high regard. Morocco, in particular, is a state in which the King embraces the values of Islam in a very marked and public manner. In both cases, there is scope for rapid change, but in the context of the restraining influence of monarchist support.

Algeria and Libya both have potential for rapid change, but they do have internal sources of wealth based on energy resources. Conscious of the Tunisian experience, it is probable that both governments will take urgent steps to stem some of the inflationary pressures, especially in food prices, but if this is in the context of the rigorous control of dissent, then opposition could grow very rapidly.

The country with the greatest potential for rapid change is Egypt, where an autocratic elite regime, backed up by rigorous public order control, has been supported by several million comfortable citizens beyond which are around 70 million people who are marginalised – many of them impoverished. With such a large majority of people on the margins, there has been a tendency for more secure citizens to support the regime, not least because of fear of upheaval and violence. The protests starting on 25

January have been the largest for many years. After some hesitation, the authorities began to clamp down, cutting off the internet and making arrests and violent clashes have been widely covered.

For the first time for some years, the Egyptian political class has an opposition figure of some stature in the person of the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Nobel Peace prize winner, Dr Mohamed ElBaradei. He had been reluctant to encourage street protests against the Mubarak regime, not least because of the sheer unpredictability of such a move and the likelihood of a violent reaction from the authorities, but his reluctance diminished, and he returned to Cairo on 27 January to join the protests. Developments in Egypt will depend very largely on whether the current major demonstrations extend to the huge numbers of people on the margins. If they do, and are sustained, then rapid change is likely. If not, then the regime may survive, albeit in a much weaker state.

The Wider Context

For the reasons just discussed, there are two aspects of the current situation that should be emphasised. One is that it is dangerous to jump to the conclusion that events in Tunisia mark the start of a region-wide upheaval, and the second is that opposition to the Tunisian regime, and to other autocratic regimes, does not have a solely religious focus. At the same time, the nature of the opposition, and the speed of its emergence, is highly significant for the future.

Taking the issue of speed of change first, Tunisia is an example of a relatively low-income country with a fairly well-educated population, in which internet and telephone communications are widespread. A spontaneous outburst can translate rapidly into a very substantial movement, and this is aided by extensive and independent television coverage from regional networks outside the control of a government. In some ways Tunisia is more advanced in this respect, whereas Egypt, for example, has a much larger data-poor proportion of its population. This, though, is changing, so that what is the norm for Tunisia is becoming the norm across the region, including Egypt and Yemen.

The second issue is the nature of the opposition, which combines substantial economic marginalisation with a young and often frustrated population. Demographic trends across North Africa and the Middle East lag well behind the decreases in birth rates seen in the past three decades in many parts of the world. This means that there are large cohorts of young people between the ages of 15 and 25, for whom there are few employment opportunities. Their predicament is made worse by low economic growth rates leading to limited job creation, but because of welcome improvements in education provision, they are particularly aware of their own marginalisation. Such a circumstance transcends political parties and even religious beliefs, but may lead to radicalisation rooted in a political ideology or, more commonly, an austere religious outlook.

What this means is that there is an underlying current that may lead to a spontaneous outburst or can develop more slowly into a radical social movement. It is extremely difficult to predict when and how this might happen, as was the case in Tunisia and is now the case in Egypt, but what is safe to conclude is that circumstances strengthen that current. Furthermore, this takes no account of the gathering impact of climate change, especially across North Africa and the Middle East, where there are already many problems of water scarcity, which are predicted to become increasingly severe as climate change has its impact.

Conclusion

The coming weeks and months will determine whether the traumatic political changes in Tunisia and Egypt lead on to stable and more accountable governments, and whether the experience is repeated elsewhere. If Tunisia does make a successful transition, and if Egypt embarks on a similar path, then other elite regimes may possibly recognise the need to promote emancipation and democracy, and there might just be peaceful transitions elsewhere. That is the most optimistic assessment.

If Tunisia does make the transition and Egypt and other states do not follow suit, then it is highly likely that there will be profound upheavals elsewhere, even if that takes some years to develop. What is well-nigh certain is that the combination of the deep socio-economic divisions across the region and the gathering impact of environmental constraints mean that in the absence of human security-orientated political change, there will be severe instability and suffering, even if that is over the next decade, rather than the next year.

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