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A Little Respect, Please

Christina Cerna
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A Little Respect, Please

Abstract

Simon Tisdall suggests that last month, when Mohammed Bouazizi (twenty-six years old), “an unemployed graduate, set himself on fire outside a government building in protest at police harassment,” his act became the “rallying cause for Tunisia’s disaffected legions of unemployed students, impoverished workers, trade unionists, lawyers and human rights activists.” The reaction to his act of self-immolation and death on January 4th led to the flight of President Ben Ali ten days later to Saudi Arabia and to the end of Ali’s twenty-three-year rule of Tunisia. Time reported the event as follows: “When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight on Dec. 17, 2010, he sparked flames far greater than the ones that would ultimately kill him.” Others seeking to change the world have imitated Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Egypt, Algeria, Mauritania, and Yemen. With the intoxication of revolution at hand, what kind of desperation motivates someone to end his own life in a suicidal act of protest?

Keywords

Human rights, Tunisia, Protest, Mohammed Bouazizi, Dignity, Poverty

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A Little Respect, Please

by Christina Cerna

Simon Tisdall suggests that last month, when Mohammed Bouazizi (twenty-six years old), “an unemployed graduate, set himself on fire outside a government building in protest at police harassment,” his act became the “rallying cause for Tunisia’s disaffected legions of unemployed students, impoverished workers, trade unionists, lawyers and human rights activists.” The reaction to his act of self-immolation and death on January 4th led to the flight of President Ben Ali ten days later to Saudi Arabia and to the end of Ali's twenty-three-year rule of Tunisia. Time reported the event as follows: “When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight on Dec. 17, 2010, he sparked flames far greater than the ones that would ultimately kill him.” Others seeking to change the world have imitated Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Egypt, Algeria, Mauritania, and Yemen. With the intoxication of revolution at hand, what kind of desperation motivates someone to end his own life in a suicidal act of protest?

The international press has discovered Mohamed’s home town of Sidi Bouzid and journalists have gone to interview his family. We learned that his father died when he was three years old, that his mother remarried, and that her second husband suffers from poor health and does not work, probably because he cannot. Mohamed completed his baccalaureate exam in high school and “didn’t expect to study, because we didn’t have the money,” according to his mother. Although he wasn’t a “college graduate” as originally reported, he completed his high school diploma; and with so many unemployed college graduates in Tunisia, perhaps the media's error was intentional.

The press informs us that Mohamed was ten years old when he became the main provider for the family, selling fresh produce in the local market. He worked full-time in order to help his five younger siblings stay in school (an older brother moved away). He would take his wooden cart to the market and load it with fruit and vegetables, and then he would walk it more than two kilometers to the local souk. Another version of the facts says that he would sell the food on the roadside to earn five dollars a day.

At the souk he was harassed on almost a daily basis by the police, who would confiscate his scales and produce for running a stall without a permit. Six months ago the police fined him US\$280, the equivalent of two months' earnings. On December 17th, a policewoman confronted him on the way to the market and tried to take his scales from him, but he refused to hand them over. The woman slapped him and, with the help of her colleagues, forced him to the ground. The officers took away his fruit and vegetables and his scale.

Publicly humiliated, he went to the local municipality building and demanded to meet with an official. He was told that it would not be possible; the official was in a meeting. Another version says that it was a female worker who slapped him at the town’s municipal offices when he went to complain about not being allowed to work. The only constant is that a woman slapped him. With no one willing to hear his grievances, he doused himself with fuel, returned to the street outside the building, and set himself on fire. For Mohamed’s mother, her son’s suicide was motivated not by poverty, but by humiliation. His mother reportedly said: “We are poor people

in Sidi Bouzid. We don't have money but we have our dignity, and his dignity was taken away with that slap and those wrong words.”

It was not just the humiliation of that one slap that made her son commit suicide. The slap was the culmination, symbolic of all the humiliations and indignities Mohamed and so many others have experienced daily. The humiliation of not being able to provide for themselves and their families and of not having basic human rights gave way to anger and frustration. As Mohamed's mother knew, the attack on his dignity—the slap—was the spark that ignited his personal rage.

Tunisia under President Ben Ali officially took pride in its rising middle class, but failed to provide a mechanism whereby those in extreme poverty could find employment or benefit from some kind of social insurance. In addition, the non-responsiveness of a corrupt administration to the grievances of its people fueled the violent challenge to its authority.

What gave momentum to the uprising was the fact that Mohamed was well-known and popular because he would give free fruit and vegetables to very poor families. Why is it that the poor always have something to give away, whereas the Ben Ali clan, now accused of massive theft of Tunisian wealth, tried to flee the country with gold ingots?

Amr Moussa, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, warned of more Tunisia-style revolutions should their policies remained unchanged: “The Arab soul is broken by poverty, unemployment and general recession.” The Arab citizen has been driven to “a state of unprecedented anger and frustration” In response, Arab leaders committed to a proposed \$2 billion program to boost the economies in the region. With thousands demonstrating over the economic situation in Egypt (not to mention Jordan, Oman, Libya, and Yemen) and calling for the ouster of their government, only time will tell whether reform programs will pacify the protesters.

The author of this Roundtable article, Ms. Christina M. Cerna, is a staff member in the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States' Secretariat for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The opinions expressed in this note are the sole responsibility of the author in the author's personal capacity and are not to be interpreted as official positions of, and are not to be attributed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, or the Organization of American States.

Christina Cerna - B.A., New York University; M.A., Fulbright Scholar, Ludwig-Maximilian Universitat; J.D., Dean's Fellow, American University; LL.M., Columbia University. Ms. Cerna is Principal Human Rights Specialist at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C.. She has been with the OAS since January 1979 and is currently in charge of certain special cases and systematizing the IACHR's jurisprudence. She taught international human rights law as an Adjunct for the law schools at George Washington University, Penn State University and, since 2005, at Georgetown University.