

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 11
Issue 3 *February Roundtable: The Arab
Revolutions and Human Rights*

Article 3

2-1-2011

Abeyance and Spontaneity in Tunisia

Louis Edgar Esparza
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esparza, Louis Edgar (2011) "Abeyance and Spontaneity in Tunisia," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol11/iss3/3>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Abeyance and Spontaneity in Tunisia

Abstract

On August 16, 1819, tens of thousands of workers gathered in what is now St. Peter's Square in Manchester to demand suffrage. Entire families, parishes, and townships assembled, fueled by increasing commodity prices and political disenfranchisement. They had spread the word from town to town, and from church to church, that this previously banned meeting was indeed to occur. It was the culmination of months of agitation on the part of common people to achieve economic and political reform. The government responded violently to the challenge of its authority, as governments so often do, leading to a score of deaths and hundreds of injuries. Survivors of the Peterloo Massacre, as it was later called, would have to wait another dozen years of intensified government repression before their original demands were ultimately met.

Keywords

Human rights, Tunisia, Social media, Protest, Censorship, Peterloo Massacre

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Abeyance and Spontaneity in Tunisia

by Louis Edgar Esparza

On August 16, 1819, tens of thousands of workers gathered in what is now St. Peter's Square in Manchester to demand suffrage. Entire families, parishes, and townships assembled, fueled by increasing commodity prices and political disenfranchisement. They had spread the word from town to town, and from church to church, that this previously banned meeting was indeed to occur. It was the culmination of months of agitation on the part of common people to achieve economic and political reform. The government responded violently to the challenge of its authority, as governments so often do, leading to a score of deaths and hundreds of injuries. Survivors of the Peterloo Massacre, as it was later called, would have to wait another dozen years of intensified government repression before their original demands were ultimately met.

Also spurred by government recalcitrance, the people of Tunisia set off a fire that is spreading across the Arab world. Diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks illustrate the extent of the corruption in Ben Ali's government, describing the former president as "sclerotic." The documents also claim that "willingness to engage with ordinary citizens" is "an uncommon trait" in Tunisia amongst political leaders.

The media has been euphoric, even giddy, about the role of social networking sites. The Internet has been a strong medium that has helped spread information about developments in real-time. Social media is an additional institution through which activists stay connected. Social media websites have changed the location in which decisions are to be made. Peterloo rebels made their decisions in actual rooms, a physical space, in small and large batches of people. Tunisians did too, but relied heavily on Internet communications.

Nevertheless, the medium is not the message. Explaining political grievances using phenomena that distract from the actual content of the grievances de-legitimizes political actors. Whether it is Twitter in Tunisia or the printing press at the Battle of Peterloo, what is important is the decision to engage in risk and social disruption in order to achieve a political end. Governments and other authorities are already leveraging Internet tools to catch up with activists. Eventually, they will. Governments quickly learned that making it difficult for activists to physically meet, or making the meetings unproductive through spying and the insertion of an agente provocatore, were sometimes effective. Physical space is a worn battleground that both activists and governments have used to their advantage. The rules of battle on the Internet are still being written. Government attempts to "shut off" the Internet or to censor material have been only partially effective and will be less effective over time. As more citizens join the web, attacks against the Internet itself will have the effect of alienating de facto regimes from even more of its citizens.

The events in Tunisia have also been widely interpreted as being spontaneous in origin. Social movements are often thought to be spontaneous occurrences. There is something romantic about the idea that civic uprisings and their subsequent spread are spontaneous expressions of agency—universal expressions of a people yearning to be free. Nevertheless, events such as these always have social structures that undergird them, even if those social structures remain hidden to outside observers. They remain under the surface when the political environ is

unsympathetic, only to be revealed when a precipitating event or other opportunity arises. In this case, Tunisian labor movement organizations, among others, played this role. These types of organizations do not lead, but instead act as a beachhead from which the movement can spread.

Natural disasters, too, reveal already-existing social cleavages by disproportionately affecting society's most vulnerable. Eric Klinenborg's devastating analysis of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave, for instance, shows that ethnic minorities and the poor were the most likely to have perished in the calamity. This supposedly natural event exposed disparities in housing, amenities, and access to resources and information.

Such is the case in environments ripe for social unrest. High commodity prices certainly contributed to the unrest in Tunisia and Egypt, but such stressors reveal already-existing rifts. Societies with lower levels of income inequality that also experienced commodity price increases did not experience such overhauls. Although the precipitating event is rarely predictable, these kinds of events are almost never random. When the political climate is hostile to their message, social movement structures are held in abeyance until, in this case, there is a coming of age of an indomitable youth, economic pressure, and one self-immolation too many. Tunisia and Egypt are not the exceptions, but rather illustrate the rule: step on your people and one day they will step on you.

The Obama administration has been praising these pro-democracy movements. Ever since September 11, 2001, however, it has been difficult for US activists to help support pro-democracy organizations in this region. The US government has made it more difficult to give money to pro-democracy organizations in Northern Africa and the Middle East, even [raiding the homes](#) of Minnesotans and Chicagoans trying to do just that. US authorities would do well to stop persecuting US activists trying to help the region and quit tolerating autocrats for short-term political gain.

Louis Edgar Esparza is Lecturer in Human Rights at the University of Denver, Josef Korbel School of International Studies. His work appears in Societies Without Borders, Qualitative Sociology and Sociological Forum. Dr. Esparza is writing a book on grassroots human rights movements in Colombia, where he completed ethnographic fieldwork in 2008. His research has attracted grants and awards from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Latin American Studies Association and Oxfam America.