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Those Pesky Winds of Change...

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Abstract

When a police officer slapped a fruit seller by the name of Mohammed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, nobody could have anticipated that a revolution had commenced. Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old computer science graduate unable to find work, had resorted to selling fruit from a street cart in an attempt to support himself and his seven siblings. Slapped by the police officer and ordered to pack up his goods, Bouazizi himself snapped. He marched to the local governor's office and demanded an appointment, threatening to set himself alight if the governor did not meet with him. In frustration, on December 17 2010 Bouazizi carried out his threat, and eighteen days later died from his injuries. Millions of young, angry, and despondent Tunisians had found their martyr. Two weeks later, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia mafia-style with his extensive family for thirty years, had been toppled.

Keywords

Human rights, Tunisia, Protest, Mohammed Bouazizi, Egypt, Africa

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Those Pesky Winds of Change...

by **Walter Lotze**

When a police officer slapped a fruit seller by the name of Mohammed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, nobody could have anticipated that a revolution had commenced. Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old computer science graduate unable to find work, had resorted to selling fruit from a street cart in an attempt to support himself and his seven siblings. Slapped by the police officer and ordered to pack up his goods, Bouazizi himself snapped. He marched to the local governor's office and demanded an appointment, threatening to set himself alight if the governor did not meet with him. In frustration, on December 17 2010 Bouazizi carried out his threat, and eighteen days later died from his injuries. Millions of young, angry, and despondent Tunisians had found their martyr. Two weeks later, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia mafia-style with his extensive family for thirty years, had been toppled.

While analysts rushed to predict that the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia would spread like wildfire to other parts of the Arab world, most anticipated that the regimes in Yemen, Algeria, or Syria would surely be the next to fall. Protests and demonstrations appeared overnight in Libya, Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen. Regimes across the Arab world rushed head over heels to present cuts in food prices, national labor programs, and infrastructure development initiatives. Yet it was too little, too late. In the end, it was the regime in Egypt that would be the next to fall. During the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at the end of January, the Egyptian Foreign Minister quietly reassured his counterparts in other oppressive regimes that while the unrest in Egypt was proving problematic, he was confident that the government would soon gain the upper hand. Two hours later, he had been fired, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in power in Egypt for thirty years, was clinging to power by the skin of his teeth.

For weeks now, the media and commentators have rushed to argue that recent events in the world were quite inevitable, given what is labeled a general failure of governance in the Arab world as a whole. Indeed, in Syria, the Assad family has been in power for forty years, the current president having inherited the post from his deceased father. In Libya, the self-styled King of Kings Muammar Gaddafi has been in power for forty-one years, displaying no signs of readiness to hand over the reins of power, while both his sons appear to be grooming themselves to succeed him. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh has ruled for thirty-two years, and in Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been in power for twelve years and plans to name his younger brother as his eventual successor. Yet while analysts decry the failure of governance in the Arab world, and while countries such as the United States of America, France, and Great Britain self-confidently reinterpret their foreign policies to reassure observers that in fact they were never acting in support of despotic regimes, in Africa many diplomats and analysts are quietly elated. Indeed, many whisper quietly in the corridors of power that the change which commenced in Southern Africa has finally reached the Northern regions of the continent.

In a telling reversal of fortunes, it is now the Southern parts of the continent that are more politically stable and that display the highest commitment to democratic systems of governance, while the Northern regions of the continent are being shaken at their very foundations. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was Southern Africa that was the most unstable, autocratic, and conflict-prone region on the continent. Conflicts in Angola, Namibia, South Africa,

Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Zaire ensured the region was kept in constant turmoil, and autocratic regimes ruled in many of the countries in the region, where the hosting of free and fair elections with universal participation was quite unheard of. In the Northern regions of the continent however, despite the absence of democratic governance, peace and security were generally assured, and economic growth was rapid. Yet in the space of less than fifteen years, that situation mostly appears to have been reversed.

While Zimbabwe and Madagascar continue to blight the reputation of the Southern African Development Community, and while the development of good governance and democratic systems in Angola and in the Democratic Republic of Congo still have a long way to go, the latter still embroiled in a vicious conflict where atrocious human rights abuses, in particular directed against women and children, appear the order of the day, economic growth in the region has been rapid and generally sustained, and the overall incidence of violent conflict has diminished. Regular elections are held in all countries in the region, even in Zimbabwe, and transitions of power, though mostly from one leader of the ruling party to another, are generally peaceful. While opposition parties generally do not succeed in winning elections, their presence in political life is at least tolerated. In North Africa however, economies are stagnant, inflation is soaring, food prices are rising well above the means of the poor, and masses of youth are unemployed, with little hope of change in the near future. Opposition politics are not tolerated, press freedom is heavily restricted, and human rights are a matter of national reinterpretation as opposed to universal acceptance. With the majority of regimes in the region in power for between twenty and thirty years, angry North Africans have identified clear targets against which to direct their anger. Many leaders in North Africa now surely wish that British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan's winds of change from the south had not blown north across the continent all that quickly.

Walter Lotze (South African) is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) in Oslo, Norway. Prior to joining NUPI, Walter worked in the Peace Support Operations Division of the African Union Commission, prior to which he headed the Peacebuilding Division at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), a non-governmental organization working in conflict situations across the African continent. Walter recently completed his PhD in International Relations with the University of St Andrews in Scotland.