Tunisia:

Protests and Prospects for Change

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The wages of Arab decay

Posted By Marc Lynch, Wednesday, January 5, 2011 - 2:06 PM

For the last few weeks, a massive wave of protests has been rocking Tunisia over the Ben Ali regime's alleged corruption, authoritarianism, and economic failings. A grisly suicide attack on a Coptic Christian Church in Alexandria on New Year's Day has sparked escalating worries about the state of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt. Over the last few days, Jordanian security forces have struggled to put down riots in the southern town of Maan, the latest in an increasingly worrisome trend towards local violence and clashes. Kuwaiti politics continue to be roiled by the fallout from the Dec. 8 attack by security forces against law professor Obaid al-Wasimi and a group of academics and parliamentarians. What do these have in common?

These four seemingly unrelated incidents over the last month all draw attention to the accelerating decay of the institutional foundations and fraying of the social fabric across many of the so-called "moderate," pro-Western Arab regimes. What seems to link these four ongoing episodes, despite the obvious differences, is a combination of authoritarian retrenchment, unfulfilled economic promises, rising sectarianism at the popular level, and deep frustration among an increasingly tech-savvy rising generation. The internal security forces in these states remain powerful, of course, and it's unlikely that any of the regimes will fall any time soon (though some analysts seem more enthusiastic about the prospects for change in Tunisia). But even if these upgraded authoritarians can keep hold of power, there's a palpable sense that these incidents represent the leading edge of rising economic, social and political challenges which their degraded institutions are manifestly unable to handle.

Stalled politics and authoritarian retrenchment certainly plays a role in this institutional decay, as entrenched elites have proven skilled at manipulating elections to maintain their hold on power and opposition movements have largely failed to figure out effective ways to organize and maintain serious challenges. Jordan and Egypt have both recently completed disappointing parliamentary elections, which drew boycotts from crucial political sectors in each case and attracted little enthusiasm from even those who took part. The impressive protest wave in Tunisia comes despite the near complete absence of democratic institutions and fierce government repression of public freedoms. Kuwait has evolved probably the most interestingly contentious democratic institutions in the Gulf — indeed, the efforts of its Parliament to hold the government accountable for the attack on its MPs bucks the regional trend by strengthening rather than weakening the role of the elected Parliament and formal political institutions.

These four events hitting at roughly the same time, for all their differences, seem to crystallize a long-developing sense that these regimes have failed to meaningfully address this relentlessly building wave of troubles. For years, both Arab and Western analysts and many political activists have warned of the urgent need for reform as such problems built and spread. Most of the Arab governments have learned to talk a good game about the need for such reform, while ruthlessly stripping democratic forms of any actual ability to challenge their grip on power. Economic reforms, no matter how impressive on paper, have increased inequality, undermined social protections, enabled corruption, and failed to create anything near the needed numbers of jobs. Western governments have tried through a wide variety of means to help promote reform, but not really democracy since that would risk having their allied regimes voted out of power — the core hypocrisy at the heart of American democracy promotion efforts of which every Arab is keenly aware. Obama talking more about democracy in public, which seems to be the main concern of many of his critics, isn't really going to help.

It would be good if these incidents served as a wake-up call to Arab regimes, but they probably won't. The tactical

demands of holding on to power will likely continue to stand in the way of their engaging in the kinds of strategic reforms needed for long-term stability. Meanwhile, the energy and desperation across disenfranchised but wired youth populations will likely become increasingly potent. It's likely to manifest not in organized politics and elections, but in the kind of outburst of social protest we're seeing now in Tunisia.... and, alarmingly, in the kinds of outburst of social violence which we can see in Jordan and Egypt. Whether that energy is channeled into productive political engagement or into anomic violence would seem to be one of the crucial variables shaping the coming period in Arab politics. Right now, the trends aren't in the right direction.

Obama's 'Arab Spring'?

Posted By Marc Lynch, Thursday, January 6, 2011 - 1:44 PM

Yesterday I noted the spread of seemingly unrelated protests and clashes through a diverse array of Arab states — Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt. Last night, protests spread to Algeria, partly in response to rising prices on basic food items but more deeply by the same combination of economic desperation, fury over perceived corruption, and a blocked political order. There's some evidence that Algerians have been carefully watching what is happening in Tunisia, on al-Jazeera and on the internet. Are we seeing the beginnings of the Obama administration equivalent of the 2005 "Arab Spring", when the protests in Beirut captured popular attention and driven in part by newly powerful satellite television images inspired popular mobilization across the region that some hoped might finally break through the stagnation of Arab autocracy? Will social media play the role of al-Jazeera this time? Will the outcome be any different?

It's already quite clear that Arab regimes will do whatever is necessary this time around to block popular mobilization. Tunisia's repression has been intense, from mass arrests to overwhelming censorship. Algeria's government has already responded with widespread arrests, including (reportedly) the long-time Islamist firebrand Ali Belhadj. Jordan's security forces maintain a heavy hand, even in the southern tribal areas which have long been, according to cliché, the bedrock of the regime. Kuwait and Tunisia have lashed out at al-Jazeera. Across the region, I expect the authoritarian regimes to continue to clamp down hard, try to censor the media, and blame Islamists or Iran or some other convenient boogeyman. Again, I really don't think that the Obama administration's public rhetoric on democracy is really the key variable here — these regimes will do what they must when they feel threatened, and understand that Obama is no more likely than was Bush to really challenge the fundamentals of their regime survival in the name of democracy.

As I also noted yesterday, the nature of the mobilization feels different this time too. The protests are more violent, there's more of an intense edge to them, there's less focus on formal institutional politics. That's in large part because of the degree of the authoritarian retrenchment across the region, which has largely sucked the meaning out of elections and has battered civil societies and independent political movements. There seem to be fewer organized movements and more wildcat outbursts —- which is just what you'd expect when formal channels have been shut down and hopes of meaningful political participation thwarted. The spread of Salafi Islamist trends and the weakening of the more disciplined and politically focused Muslim Brotherhood organizations in many of the

countries contributes to this sense, as does the legacy of the virulent anti-Shi'ism which spread through the region a few years ago and the general fraying of sectarian edges.

I don't expect these protests to bring down any regimes, but really who knows? It's an unpredictable moment. Many of these regimes are led by aging, fading leaders such as Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali who could pass from the scene in a heartbeat — literally. Nor do I particularly know what to recommend that the Obama administration do. The traditional calls to "promote democracy" are largely irrelevant to this situation, except in the longer-term. What we are now seeing is the fruit of the failure to promote meaningful reform in the past, but that doesn't mean that doing so now would meet the challenge.

If these protests continue to spread, both inside of countries and across to other Arab countries, then we really could talk about this being Obama's "Arab Spring," only with the extra intensity associated with climate change. Arab regimes will do everything they can to prevent that from happening. Most everybody is carefully watching everyone else to see what's going to happen, with news traveling across borders and within countries through an ever-growing role for social media layered on top of (not replacing) satellite television and existing networks. I'm not hugely optimistic that we will see real change, given the power of these authoritarian regimes and their record of resilience. But still... interesting times.

A young man's desperation challenges Tunisia's repression

Posted By Rasha Moumneh, Monday, January 3, 2011 - 6:10 AM

On Dec. 17, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old university Tunisian graduate who took to selling vegetables when he was unable to find work, set himself on fire after police confiscated his unlicensed vegetable cart. His desperate act has caused a spontaneous outpouring of public anger in Tunisia over economic conditions and the ruling family's endemic corruption. The riots started in Bouazizi's hometown, Sidi Bouzid, deep in Tunisia's interior, and spread across the country to Tunis, Sousse, Sfax, Meknassi, and other cities. Thousands marched in solidarity with the residents of Sidi Bouzid, demanding jobs, better living conditions, and an end to uneven economic development and the corruption that drives it.

In the days that followed Bouazizi's tragic act, violence erupted, and police killed an 18-year-old youth as they shot into a crowd of protesters around a police station. Then, on Dec. 22, Neji Felhi, 24, climbed an electrical pole in the same town and shouted, "No to misery! No to unemployment!" then touched the 30,000-megawatt pole, killing himself. Two more of Tunisia's young, disenfranchised and unemployed attempted to end their own lives in similar ways in the days that followed.

What kind of hopelessness drives young men to attempt suicide, making a spectacle of their deaths in desperate protest? What is really happening in Tunisia behind President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's much-touted "economic miracle" that would lead ordinary people to steadfastly face lethal bullets from the internal security forces of one of the region's most notorious police states?

One answer is economic misery. Official statistics place unemployment in Tunisia at 14 percent, but the real

figure is generally believed to be much higher, particularly among the nation's youth. Approximately 90 percent of Tunisia's investment projects have focused on the coastal regions, leaving the interior and south disproportionately underdeveloped. While the demonstrations are still primarily about unemployment, protesters clearly see links to the government's corruption, repression of dissent, and police impunity for abuses. This is the second set of protests in three years that have begun in the underdeveloped regions and spread across the country. In 2008, thousands of unemployed Tunisians took to the streets in the southwestern mining town of Redeyef demanding jobs and an end to poverty and nepotism. The government made promises to develop the region, but they proved to be empty.

As in 2008, President Ben Ali again has resorted to promises to create jobs and reshuffle the cabinet. He even made a sympathetic photo-op hospital visit to Bouazizi, the young man who set himself on fire. But Tunisians aren't buying it. What they do believe, though, is his promise to crack down on the protests "with the full force of the law." He also quickly used his police to respond to protesters with live ammunition, curfews, mass arrests, and citywide lockdowns.

Ben Ali also rapidly implemented a near-complete media blackout, with the tired excuse that news reports are part of a conspiracy to destabilize Tunisia. Protesters report that the police have started a campaign of night raids against demonstrators and union leaders, arresting scores of people, their numbers still unknown. The media blackout is so severe that in the first days of the riots, one Tunisian resident remarked incredulously on Twitter that everyone was lying about the riots, because he had seen nothing of them on TV or in the newspapers. This should not be surprising in a country where the government owns or controls practically all media outlets. Security forces confiscated the latest issues of the two independent newspapers that have reported on the riots, and police have physically prevented journalists from reporting on the demonstrations.

This hasn't stopped Tunisians from diligently getting the word out straight from the ground, though. Videos of the marches taken on mobile phones and minute-by-minute messages on Twitter and Facebook updates have become the activists' primary means of communication with the outside world, to great effect.

The rest of the region is intently watching the events unfold in Tunisia. Solidarity demonstrations have taken place in Beirut and Amman and are spreading to other major cities. Rumors abound that these protests mark the beginning of the end of Ben Ali, who has long insisted on iron-fisted rule as the tradeoff for economic security, but really has delivered only on the iron-fisted part of the bargain. Whether these rumors turn out to be true, such protests — a true grassroots uprising that cuts across class and regional lines — have the power to bring governments to a standstill, as Tunisia has seen previously.

How events in Tunisia will unfold and whether they will lead to significant change remains unclear, but they demonstrate a popular discontent powerful enough that people are willing to face Ben Ali's heavy hand rather than accept an oppressive and impoverishing status quo.

Rasha Moumneh is a Middle East and North Africa researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Tunisia's protest wave: where it comes from and what it means

Posted By Christopher Alexander, Monday, January 3, 2011 - 7:02 AM

January traditionally has been Tunisia's month for political drama — a general strike in January 1978; a Libyan-supported insurrection in January 1980; bread riots in January 1984. This year, however, January will be hard-pressed to top the previous December. The last two weeks of 2010 witnessed the most dramatic wave of social unrest in Tunisia since the 1980s. What began with one young man's desperate protest against unemployment in Sidi Bouzid, in Tunisia's center-west, spread quickly to other regions and other issues. Within days of Mohamed Bouazizi's attempted suicide in front of the local government office, students, teachers, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, trade unionists, and opposition politicians took to the streets in several cities, including Tunis, to condemn the government's economic policies, its repression of all critics, and a mafia-style corruption that enriches members of the president's family.

In a country known for authoritarian stability, it is easy to see this unrest as a harbinger of dramatic change. In fact, the protests have been building for at least two years. The frustration is rooted in a deep history of unbalanced economic growth. Several organizations have helped to convert this frustration into collective protest. To date, the December protests have produced a cabinet reshuffle, a governor's sacking, and a renewed commitment to job creation in disadvantaged regions. Whether they lead to more dramatic change remains to be seen. If Ben Ali's rule is not in immediate danger, the protests at least suggest that his governing strategy is in serious trouble.

Ben Ali's rule has relied on a skillful combination of co-optation and repression. By pledging his fidelity to democracy and human rights early in his tenure, he deftly hijacked the core of the liberal opposition's message. At the same time, he used electoral manipulation, intimidation, and favors to co-opt leaders of ruling-party organs and civil society organizations. Those who remained beyond the reach of these tools felt the force of an internal security apparatus that grew dramatically in the 1990s. Most Tunisians grudgingly accepted Ben Ali's heavy-handedness through the 1990s. Authoritarian rule was the price they paid for stability that could attract tourists and investors. Ben Ali was an effective, if uncharismatic, technocratic who beat back the Islamists, generated growth, and saved the country from the unrest that plagued Algeria.

Over the last five years, however, the fabric of Ben Ali's authoritarianism has frayed. Once it became clear that the Islamists no longer posed a serious threat, many Tunisians became less willing to accept the government's heavy-handedness. The regime also lost some of its earlier deftness. Its methods became less creative and more transparently brutal. The government seemed less willing to at least play at any dialogue with critics or opposition parties. Arbitrary arrests, control of the print media and Internet access, and physical attacks on journalists and human rights and opposition-party activists became more common. So, too, did stories of corruption — not the usual kickbacks and favoritism that one might expect, but truly mafia-grade criminality that lined the pockets of Ben Ali's wife and her family. The growth of Facebook, Twitter, and a Tunisian blogosphere — much of it based outside the country — made it increasingly easy for Tunisians to learn about the latest arrest, beating, or illicit business deal involving the president's family.

Shortly before the December protests began, WikiLeaks released internal U.S. State Department communications in which the American ambassador described Ben Ali as aging, out of touch, and surrounded by corruption. Given Ben Ali's reputation as a stalwart U.S. ally, it mattered greatly to many Tunisians — particularly to politically engaged Tunisians who are plugged into social media — that American officials are saying the same things about Ben Ali that they themselves say about him. These revelations contributed to an environment that was ripe for a wave of protest that gathered broad support.

Tunisia has built a reputation as the Maghreb's healthiest economy since Ben Ali seized power, as market-oriented reforms opened the country to private investment and integrated it more deeply into the regional economy. Annual GDP growth has averaged 5 percent. But the government's policies have done little to address long-standing concerns about the distribution of growth across the country. Since the colonial period, Tunisia's economic activity has been concentrated in the north and along the eastern coastline. Virtually every economic development plan since independence in 1956 has committed the government to making investments that would create jobs and enhance living standards in the center, south, and west. Eroding regional disparities would build national solidarity and slow the pace of urban migration. The latter became a particular concern as social protest organized by trade unionists, students, and Islamists mounted in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Government investment transformed the countryside in terms of access to potable water, electrification, transportation infrastructure, health care, and education. But the government never succeeded in generating enough jobs in the interior for a rapidly growing population. In fact, two aspects of the government's development strategy actually made it harder to generate jobs. First, Tunisia's development strategy since the early 1970s has relied progressively on exports and private investment. For a small country with a limited resource base and close ties to Europe, this strategy generated an emphasis on tourism and low-skilled manufactured products (primarily clothes and agricultural products) for the European market. Scarce natural resources, climate constraints, and the need to minimize transport costs make it difficult to attract considerable numbers of tourists or export-oriented producers to the hinterland. Consequently, 80 percent of current national production remains concentrated in coastal areas. Only one-fifth of national production takes place in the southwest and center-west regions, home to 40 percent of the population.

Education issues complicate matters further. The Tunisian government has long received praise for its commitment to broad education. The prevailing culture holds up university education as the key to security and social advancement. However, universities do not produce young people with training that meets the needs of an economy that depends on low-skilled jobs in tourism and clothing manufacturing. This mismatch between education and expectations on the one hand, and the realities of the marketplace on the other, generates serious frustrations for young people who invested in university educations but cannot find commensurate work. The challenge is particularly dire for young people in the interior. While estimates of national unemployment range from 13 to 16 percent, unemployment among university graduates in Sidi Bouzid ranges between 25 and 30 percent.

The trade unions' role is one of the most striking aspects of the December protests. The government worked very hard, and with great success, to domesticate the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), Tunisia's sole trade union confederation, in the 1990s. More recently, however, activists in some unions have succeeded in taking a more independent and confrontational stance. In 2008 and again in early 2010, union activists organized prolonged protests in the southern Gafsa mining basin. The players and the grievances in those cases resemble what we saw in late December. Education unions, some of the most independent and aggressive within the UGTT, played a critical role in organizing unemployed workers, many with university degrees, who protested the government's failure to provide jobs, its corruption, and its refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue. Human rights organizations, journalists, lawyers, and opposition parties then joined in to criticize the government's restrictions on media coverage of the protests and the arrests and torture of demonstrators. In this way, a broad coalition of civil society organizations has connected bread-and-butter employment grievances with fundamental human rights and rule-of-law concerns. They also pull together constituencies that transcend class and regional distinctions — unemployed young people in Sidi Bouzid, Menzel Bouzaiene, and Regueb, and lawyers and journalists in Monastir, Sfax, and Tunis.

It is too early to know if these protests signal the beginning of the end for Ben Ali. However, Tunisia's current political scene looks a bit like it did in 1975 and 1976, the beginning of the long slide for Ben Ali's predecessor, Habib Bourguiba. Again, we see an aging president who seems increasingly out of touch and whose ability to co-opt and repress has deteriorated. We still see a political system that lacks strong possible successors and a clear mechanism for selecting one. We have a set of economic and political grievances that enjoys the support of a range of civil society organizations, including some with the ability to mobilize considerable numbers of protesters. Over the medium and long terms, this is the most significant aspect of the December protests. The fact that unemployed young people took to the streets is much less important than the fact that their cause has been taken up — and supplemented — by civil society organizations that spent most of Ben Ali's rule under his thumb or too cowed to act.

Despite all this, it is important to recall that Bourguiba did not fall suddenly to a mass movement that rallied broad popular support. His government rotted steadily for more than a decade. Additionally, Ben Ali's bloodless coup and his subsequent rule took great advantage of the disorganization in Tunisia's political class. Tunisia's civil society, including the opposition parties, is notoriously easy to divide and conquer. If Ben Ali's ability to repress and co-opt has deteriorated, it has not disappeared. With the December protests, Tunisia might have turned an important corner. However, nothing in the country's history or its current state of affairs makes it easy to believe that the protests will lead quickly to a coherent, unified opposition movement with a clear message, a charismatic leader, and a national support base. Additionally, another long, slow slide toward chaos could simply set the stage for another Ben Ali — another unelected president who seizes power at the top and changes little below it.

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The limits of silencing Tunisia

Posted By Bassam Bounenni, Wednesday, January 12, 2011 - 2:42 PM

If history remembers one thing about Tunisia's long-reigning President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, it would likely be how he silenced his critics. Since coming to power 23 years ago, Ben Ali has systematically controlled Tunisia's media and silenced his opposition. The last month of social riots in Sidi Bouzid have confirmed that domestic censorship is more than a political constant. It is a reason of being for a government that has never been familiar with press freedom.

This state of affairs is the natural culmination of years of clamping down on critical voices. Few countries facing more economic and security problems impose fewer restrictions on their media. In the late 1970s, party and independent papers emerged while pro-government media slipped in importance. But that momentum did not lasted beyond the early 1990s. Human rights watchdogs describe Tunisia as one of the most repressive regimes. Reporters Without Borders has named Ben Ali as a leading "Predator of Press Freedom."

Private media is exclusively owned and/or dominated by Ben Ali's inner circle. The Tunisian Agency for External Communication (ATCE) unfairly distributes public

advertising and state subsidies among media outlets, according to their editorial stance. Opposition newspapers are regularly seized. Independent journalists are harassed and even jailed. A group of pro-government reporters has seized control of Tunisia's journalist union (SNJT). Foreign media are banned, and the few journalists who sporadically visit the country are tightly controlled. In 2005, on the eve of the World Summit on Information Society in Tunis, Christophe Boltanski, a reporter with the French daily *Libération,* was beaten and stabbed. His colleague, Florence Beaugé, from *Le Monde,* was luckier because she was only stopped at the Tunis airport and expelled from the country hours before the 2009 presidential election.

When protests broke out in December, the regime's first instinct was to escalate its censorship and intimidation of the media. Oussama Romdhani, the president's personal translator and communication minister, is blamed for imposing a complete news blackout on the social riots in Sidi Bouzid that quickly spilled over to other regions. He paid a very heavy price when Ben Ali replaced him in a government reshuffle, though it is unlikely that he could unilaterally have taken such measures.

Samir Labidi, his successor, known for his bombastic speeches on college campuses when he was a far-left activist, failed in his first test. Nessma TV, a private TV channel, gave air to journalists in an astonishing talk show debating social riots with no apparent red lines. It was too good to be true, as the rerun was banned. Printed press suffered the same fate. *Al Mawqif* and *Attariq Al Jadid*, two opposition newspapers, were seized, their only crime having been that they reported from Sidi Bouzid.

The panic-stricken government launched a smear campaign against international media outlets. *Koll Ennass*, a weekly newspaper, lashed out at the Al Jazeera satellite channel. The Tunisia's journalists' union (SNJT) condemned "the tendency of some television channels, especially Al Jazeera TV, to dramatize and distort aiming at sowing discord and stirring up ill- feelings." This hostility toward Al Jazeera is not new. In 2006, Tunisia closed its embassy in Doha, accusing Al Jazeera TV of launching a "hostile campaign" against the country. This campaign echoes Ben Ali's speech in which he suggested that the riots had been manipulated by foreign media and had hurt the country's image.

The government has been caught off guard by the new media. Rioting young eyewitnesses have gone beyond the official sacrosanct principle of not leaking any "harmful" video. Since the early hours of the protests, they have become a dynamic and compelling news source for international media outlets. They have posted dozens of videos showing spiraling discontent and updated death tolls in real time. It goes without saying that new media overwhelmed traditional local media. And while opposition parties have been dithering over the way to deal with the unprecedented large-scale riots, Internet users have given free rein to their views with no fear of retaliation. In response to what it deems as subversive, the government has censored dozens of pages on social networks, stolen passwords, and arrested bloggers.

Although Ben Ali's regime is putting in huge sums of money in public relations efforts to make up its image, it loses credibility since it doesn't show any willingness to move in the direction of political openness and honesty. Quite the contrary, Tunisia has one of the worst human rights records in the region, and freedoms don't seem likely for a while. And, while drawing to an end, the undemocratic Tunisia's ruling elite merely keeps stifling dissenting voices.

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Algeria's national 'protesta'

Posted By Hugh Roberts , Monday, January 10, 2011 - 7:23 AM

The massive wave of protests that have engulfed Algeria and the recent unrest in Tunisia are both premised on a fundamental political deficit — the absence of credible political institutions capable of ensuring adequate representation of the society and so keeping the executive branch of the state under the kind of critical observation and pressure necessary to good government.

It has been widely suggested that the riots have been food or hunger riots, in that they were supposedly triggered by the steep increases in the prices of staple goods, notably sugar and olive oil. These increases were not decreed by the government; the private sector traders appear to have raised prices of their own accord, in reaction to the government's attempts to impose new regulations on their transactions. The government's decision was, in principle, part of the necessary and long overdue attempt to curb the rampant informal sector of the economy by subjecting the trade in foodstuffs to basic regulation and so bring it back into the formal sector. But if so, the government has clearly had no conception of the political difficulty and magnitude of this task and seems to have supposed that it could effect changes of this nature by simple ministerial fiat.

But there can be little doubt that the price increases were simply the last straw. The greater part of Algerian society has been in a permanent state of moral revolt against the regime for the last four or five years. In particular, riots have been a frequent — one might well say a regular — feature of the Algerian political landscape for the last decade, since the massive and protracted riots in Kabylia, the main Berber region, in 2001. Since 2005, scarcely a fortnight has gone by without a riot somewhere in the country.

The immediate motives have varied from case to case but have usually been connected to the state's failings as a distributive state. In January 2005, numerous communities across the country rioted over the steep increase — in the depths of winter — in the price of butane gas on which households depended for heating. The allocation of new public housing by local authorities has frequently been contested by the unlucky claimants, with angry demonstrations, accusing mayors of nepotism and corruption, often turning into bitter affrays. At other times, many villages and even entire municipalities have rioted as the last resort, having despaired of attracting the regional authorities' attention to their particular, long-neglected needs, whatever these might be (water supply, electrification, repair of the only road, a decent school or clinic) by more orderly procedures.

What all these forms of riotous assembly over the years have had in common is the visceral refusal of *la hogra* — the arrogance and contempt with which the authorities at all levels routinely treat ordinary Algerians. At the same time, these varied resorts to direct action have universally expressed the Algerian public's disenchantment with the political parties and institutions established since the introduction of formal political pluralism in 1989. Public opinion long ago concluded that these formal institutions have nothing to offer them, that the last thing they can expect is for the deputies in the National Assembly, of whatever party, to represent them to any effect — first because the parliament has no real power, and second because deputies' elections depend on their position in party lists in vast constituencies and in the circumstances are effectively insulated against the exasperation of their own electors, and are under no pressure to do anything for them. So the Algerians in their majority have learned the hard way that direct action — making a nuisance of themselves to the authorities in one way or another — is the only tactic that works. And rioting has accordingly become both a running popular commentary on the political status quo and the spuriousness of its pretensions to be a modern state (let alone one animated by democratic principles and subject to the rule of law) and a way of getting things done and thus, ironically, a kind of buttress of the same status quo insofar as this

kind of local-level, single-issue rioting is manageable and has become routinised.

What is important about the events of the last few days, therefore, is that we have seen the national proclivity to riot taken to the next level. In place of serial rioting, the Algerians have managed to riot all over the country virtually simultaneously. The speed with which the movement spread from the first incidents in Oran and Algiers on Jan. 5 has been very impressive. This is, among other things, an index of the existence in Algeria today of a genuinely national consciousness, however threadbare and vacuous the official 'nationalism' of the governing elites. But it has also had ominous implications.

As early as Jan. 6, *El Watan*, the national daily traditionally seen as close to the army commanders, was warning of a remake of "October," that is the traumatic riots in 1988 in which hundreds were killed after the army commanders imposed a State of Siege and troops opened fire on unarmed youths in numerous cities. But it is arguably the way in which the latest riots have differed from "October" that has been significant. While they have been far wider and more genuinely national in scope, the army has not acted; no state of siege has been declared. The Police, and occasionally the gendarmerie, have been responsible for coping with the unrest. They have, so far, exercised restraint and have undoubtedly been ordered to do so. Although several hundred people (rioters, police and gendarmes combined) have been injured, only three deaths have been reported so far, in massive contrast to the toll in 1988. We have not yet seen the end of this affair, however.

At this point the eventual political outcome of this national dust-up is quite unclear. The government on Saturday announced measures to get the price rises cancelled, which scratches only the surface of the problem. It has already been relying on the imams (religious leaders) to calm things down and may well seek to avoid taking any political initiatives, because it is probably incapable, as things stand, of envisaging a deeper reform of the sort that is definitely needed. But it should be noted that the rioters virtually everywhere have proved incapable of articulating intelligible political demands and have been acting in radical disconnection from Algeria's political parties, but also — unlike the Tunisian protesters — without any links to or help from the trade union movement or other organized associations.

Certain senior regime figures, in admonishing the rioters for their violence (stoning passing cars and the police, looting offices, ransacking public agencies, etc.) have called on them to "demonstrate peacefully," apparently forgetting that the State of Emergency in force since 1992 expressly forbids public demonstrations of any kind and that such peaceful demonstrations as have been staged — by Algeria's teachers, by the mothers of the "disappeared" — have been regularly dispersed with sickening brutality. The Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) has called for the repeal of the Emergency Law, as has the Socialist Forces Front (FFS). But this is only one of the reforms that are badly needed and the failure of the opposition parties to intervene with appropriate demands at this point has been very striking. It is therefore uncertain how this huge outburst of negative energy will be harnessed and exploited politically. That is probably the next chapter in this story and it remains to be written.

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Arab regimes on edge

Posted By Marc Lynch, Tuesday, January 11, 2011 - 4:34 PM

It's very clear that most Arab regimes are on edge over the possibility of the spread of the protests in Tunisia and Algeria. Arab columnists and TV shows have been excitedly debating the real causes of the protests and what they might mean, while in country after country warnings are being sounded of a repeat of the "Tunisia scenario." It's not at all clear whether these protests actually will spread yet, as regimes on high alert will not be taken by surprise and local conditions vary dramatically.

The protests have already sparked a region-wide debate about the prospects for political change and the costs of political repression and economic stagnation. The discussion of the "Tunisia scenario" is everywhere. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood warned today that the impending price rises planned by the new government will lead to an unprecedented explosion along the North African model — which is the lead story in Lebanon's *al-Akhbar*. In Egypt, Trade and Industry Minister Rashid Mohammed Rashid ruled out a "Tunisia scenario" in his country over the economy, though many columnists and political activists disagree. Leading Saudi columnist Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed today seems worried, rather than excited, that protesters may have broken the psychological barrier against demonstrating and raises the specter of a "domino theory" by which even currently calm Arab states may soon be threatened.

The debate is being carried by social media and by satellite television, despite the outsized efforts by most of the regimes to silence whatever media falls under their control. From Kuwait and Tunisia's moves to ban al-Jazeera to traditional repression of local journalists to the escalating crackdown against Facebook, Twitter, and other social media, Arab regimes are trying to keep control of the narrative. But it doesn't seem to be working. Even status quo media outlets are being forced to discuss the events and to entertain unsettling questions.

It still is not at all obvious that these protests will sustain themselves, lead to revolutions, or even force major changes in the policies of their regimes. But they have already seared themselves into Arab political discourse. Defenders of the regimes generally try to define the events as food and price riots, or else as externally fomented terrorism. Few independent columnists or activists agree with the idea that these are simply food and price riots, or external terrorism. They point to the underlying political problems which have enabled the economic mismanagement and corruption and lack of opportunity. How the events are framed will have real significance for the response.

In the meantime, I'd like to throw out two interesting questions about the developing events. First, as I raised last week, as best I can tell the protests still lack any clear political direction or leadership — primarily because the regimes have so thoroughly decimated the integrity of their political institutions that few citizens see any way to voice their grievances through formal political channels. Few political parties seem to be playing any significant role, even Islamists. Do the protests need to be channeled into an organized political or social movement in order to press clear political demands? If they did continue to escalate in the face of regime repression, without any clear leadership, what kind of change might they produce? The great hope here is that Arab regimes might respond as they did in the late 1980s, where economic protests in countries such as Jordan led to unprecedented democratic openings. But many of the regimes point instead to Algeria in the early 1990s, where such an opening led to Islamist advances, a military coup, and years of horrific bloodshed. Which will it be?

Second, it is striking how little role there has been for international actors such as the United States and the European Union in these protests. Where they have been involved at all, the United States and the EU have been cautious and reactive. While many will see this as a

criticism, I'm not so sure. Americans tend to exaggerate the importance of U.S. rhetoric on Arab popular movements and governments. The Bush administration's "freedom and democracy" rhetoric from 2004 to 2006 may have had some marginal impact, but the real driver of contentious politics in those years came from internal factors: the protest momentum and networks shaped by demonstrations in support of the Palestinians (from 2000-2002) and against the Iraq war (2003); the novelty of al-Jazeera satellite TV and internet-based new media; the timing of political openings, from the series of elections scheduled for Egypt to the Hariri assassination.

That the rising wave of protest today comes in the near-complete absence of United States or international support presents an intriguing variable. Tunisians and Algerians didn't need an Obama speech to begin their protests, even if they anxiously watch Washington now for signs of support. I'd guess that the best way for the outside to have an impact now is by restraining violent repression by their allied autocratic regimes — though, if they feel that their survival is threatened they won't likely listen.

Where are the democracy promoters on Tunisia?

Posted By Marc Lynch, Thursday, January 13, 2011 - 10:40 AM

Barely a month goes by without a *Washington Post* editorial bemoaning Egypt's authoritarian retrenchment and criticizing the Obama administration's alleged failure to promote Arab democracy. But now Tunisia has erupted as the story of the year for Arab reformers. The spiraling protests and the regime's heavy-handed, but thus far ineffective, repression have captured the imagination of Arab publics, governments, and political analysts. Despite Tunis's efforts to censor media coverage, images and video have made it out onto social media and up to Al Jazeera and other satellite TV. The "Tunisia scenario" is now the term of art for activist hopes and government fears of political instability and mass protests from Jordan to Egypt to the Gulf.

But the *Post*'s op-ed page has been strikingly silent about the Tunisian protests. Thus far, a month into the massive demonstrations rocking Tunisia, the *Washington Post* editorial page has published exactly zero editorials about Tunisia. For that matter, the *Weekly Standard*, another magazine which frequently claims the mantle of Arab democracy and attacks Obama for failing on it, has thus far published exactly zero articles about Tunisia (though, to his credit, frequent *Standard* contributor and ex-Bush administration official Elliott Abrams has weighed in on it at his new CFR blog). Why are the most prominent media voices on Arab democracy so entirely absent on the Arab reform story of the year?

Perhaps they've had nothing to say simply because there has been little coverage of Tunisia in the Western media, and the United States has few interests or leverage in Tunis, making it a marginal issue for U.S. political debate. Tunisia is not generally on the front burner in American thinking about the Middle East. It's far away from Israel, Iraq, and the Gulf, and plays little role in the headline strategic issues facing the U.S. in the region. Despite being one of the most repressive and authoritarian regimes in the region, Tunisia has generally been seen as a model of economic development and secularism. Its promotion

of women's rights and crushing of Islamist opposition has taken priority in the West over its near-complete censorship of the media and blanket domination of political society. Indeed, the United States has cared so little about Tunisia's absolute rejection of democracy and world-class censorship that it chose it for the regional office of MEPI, the Bush administration's signature democracy promotion initiative.

This is understandable, but hardly satisfying. I can understand the hesitation of U.S. *officials* to take a strong position on the side of either the protesters or the regime at this point, given the strategic complexities and the implications of taking any rhetorical stance. To my ears, at least, the U.S. message has been muddled, with some officials seeming to take the side of the protesters and warning against too-harsh repression and others seeming to avoid taking a stance. For what it's worth, I told a State Department official in a public forum yesterday that the absence of major U.S. interests in Tunisia and the real prospect of change there make it a good place for the Obama administration to take a principled stand in favor of public freedoms and against repression.

But the worries of official Washington shouldn't apply to advocates and analysts, particularly those who have long demanded a stronger role for the United States on Egyptian democracy regardless of the strategic implications. So what do such voices for Egyptian democracy and Arab reform think about Tunisia? They can't shy away from Tunisia simply because it isn't Egypt. Tunisia is topic number one with Arab publics today, even if it isn't yet in Washington, and Arab audiences keenly notice their silence. If U.S. advocates of Arab democracy don't step up to draw attention to Tunisia's protests, it will only reinforce the skeptical view that their advocacy of Arab democracy is mainly about putting pressure on Hosni Mubarak or scoring points against the Obama administration. And that will weaken any future advocacy.

And along those lines, here's a genuine question: If the Obama administration decides to tacitly or overtly side with the protesters and Ben Ali's regime falls, will these Washington voices for Arab democracy applaud the change or will they attack Obama for selling out a secular ally? How deep does U.S. support for Arab democratic change really go?

UPDATE, January 14, 6:30 am: This morning, the *Post*'s Deputy Editorial Page Editor Jackson Diehl responds with a strong column, acknowledging that "the most imminent threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East is not war; it is revolution." Diehl surveys the events rocking the region — with some gracious links to *FP* — placing the Tunisian protests in a series of "threats" including Lebanon and Iran. It's genuinely good to see the issue finally addressed, and I'm glad to see Diehl step up to the issue. But is "threat" to U.S. interests and Obama's reform record really the right frame for this? Diehl concludes that "It may be too late for the United States to head off a rolling social upheaval in the Middle East this year ... but if it follows up on what Clinton has been saying, it can at least place itself on the right side of those events." But after years of agitating for democratic reform, placing the Tunisian uprisings as a threat seems inadequate. Are the demonstrations against Ben Ali only a "threat" to U.S. interests and not an opportunity for the democratic change about which we hear so much? Let's see this conversation continue.

Anatomy of an Autocracy

Tunisia's deposed president once swept to power with bold promises of reform. What went wrong?

By Christopher Alexander, January 14, 2011

As the end of his reign quickly approached this week, Tunisia's President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali attempted to conjure the spirit that buoyed his government in the months after he seized power more than 20 years ago.

In a televised address to the country on Jan. 13, Ben Ali — speaking in colloquial Arabic and in unusually humble tones — pledged not to run for reelection when his current term ends in 2014 and to usher in a gentler phase of governance in the meantime.

The offer was far too little, far too late, as the reaction in the streets of Tunis made immediately clear. But it wasn't just Ben Ali's tone that recalled an earlier era: In fact, Ben Ali's fall from power has had a remarkable similarity to his original rise.

In 1987, Tunisia teetered on the brink of a civil war between the tottering authoritarian government of President Habib Bourguiba and a popular Islamist movement. Ben Ali, who served as both interior minister and prime minister under Bourguiba, removed the president on the grounds that age and senility rendered him incompetent to govern.

In the months that followed, Ben Ali was widely hailed as the country's savior — the prescient leader who pulled the country back from the abyss. By thwarting chaos, Ben Ali had saved a struggling economy as well as the country's secular political order.

But Ben Ali was more than a savior. He was also, people believed at the time, a democrat. He said all the right things about the need for political competition, transparency, freedom of opinion and expression. He also spoke about individual liberties — freedom of conscience, the right to hold and express contrary opinions, and human rights. Ben Ali didn't just sound like a democrat. He sounded like a liberal democrat.

It was the prospect of legislative elections in 1989 that really ended the honeymoon. Ben Ali was not willing to allow an Islamist party onto the field. Nor was he willing to accept electoral reforms that gave the secular opposition parties any meaningful chance of winning. In fact, the electoral code became one of Ben Ali's handiest tools. On several occasions, and with much fanfare, Ben Ali announced "reforms" in the code. In reality, all of these measures were designed to limit opposition gains and prevent the parties from forming an effective alliance.

Some, perhaps even the president himself, might say that Ben Ali honestly intended to be the leader he appeared to be in his first year and a half and that he was forced to step back because of the need to make difficult economic reforms and fend off an Islamist movement at a time when the raging civil war in neighboring Algeria offered a grim reminder about the dangers of Islamist political influence.

But the results were undeniably ugly. Moroccans frequently refer to the 1960s through the 1980s as the "years of lead" — a time of intense repression against the political opposition. The 1990s became Tunisia's decade of lead. The Islamists believed they had done everything required to satisfy the law and become a legal party. Ben Ali's refusal to admit them into the political game ignited a fierce and bloody conflict with the government. When push came to shove, Ben Ali pushed back — hard. More than 10,000 Islamists and other opponents went to Ben Ali's prisons in the 1990s. As happens with many embattled regimes, Ben Ali's government developed a sense of paranoia. Any bit of criticism was considered aiding and abetting the Islamists. The government went after anyone who dared to complain.

Some of its tools of repression were bland and bureaucratic. Ben Ali never severed the umbilical cord linking the ruling party to the institutions of the state. His Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) was the state, and the state served Ben Ali. As a result, all manner of rules, regulations, and procedures became political weapons that officials wielded to enforce loyalty. A newspaper might not be able to get paper or might see its issues confiscated off the streets because of a story that stepped beyond the state's ambiguous red lines. A businessman might not get a license because he failed to demonstrate sufficient commitment to the president.

Other tools were more blunt. The police force, uniformed and plainclothes, became the regime's praetorian guard, operating directly under the control of the president and Interior Ministry. There is more than a little irony in the fact that the government recruited heavily for the security forces in the same disenfranchised regions that generated the wave of protest that broke in mid-December. The military, on the other hand, remained very professional but relatively weak — a fact that will no doubt affect Tunisia's future political development. Once it became clear in the mid-1990s that the government had forced the Islamists out of the country or so far underground that they could not organize any meaningful opposition, Tunisians began to lose their patience with Ben Ali's authoritarianism. Human rights activists and dissident journalists began to complain more loudly, and the government cracked down even harder. Stories about beatings by plainclothes agents, arbitrary arrests, and torture mounted.

So why revolt now and not a decade ago? The media coverage of the last month has emphasized frustrations over unemployment and prices. However, it is easy to forget that for most of Ben Ali's rule, Tunisia's economy grew at a respectable rate. Tunisia has a larger middle class and a higher standard of living than any of its neighbors. As long as you stayed out of politics, Ben Ali's government left you alone and allowed you to make some money, buy a nice house or apartment, and live a better life than your parents lived.

More recently, however, the Europe-dependent Tunisian economy was experiencing global-recession-related contraction — which hit university degree-holders of the sort that took to the streets against Ben Ali particularly hard.

Then there is social media. When the definitive history of this era gets written, Facebook will get its own chapter. Activists used Facebook to organize on the one space that the regime couldn't control — cyberspace.

Not long ago, police firing on protesters or funeral marchers in out-of-the-way towns like Tala or Kasserine would have remained a bit of local lore, something to whisper about. Not now. Facebook brought the events in Tala to Tunis and helped build coalitions that the government could not break.

Tunisia now enters a truly novel stage. Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi has become the transitional president, with orders to organize new legislative and presidential elections in six months. But that only delays the inevitable questions. Tunisia's opposition parties are small organizations with narrow support bases, no experience in government, and no experience working in a meaningful coalition. Moreover, they didn't play a particularly important role in organizing the protests that have presented them with this new opportunity. Can any of them, singly or together, convince Tunisians that they have the ability to cope with the country's pressing problems and build a democracy?

And what about the presidency? Ghannouchi has the virtue of experience, but his long service with Ben Ali will be a real handicap if he wants the job for a longer term. Other possible candidates have the virtue of principled opposition to Ben Ali, but they have been in exile or lack the bases of support in the country and its administration to easily assume such a critical post.

This transition is vital for Tunisia, and not just in the short and medium terms. Tunisia has never experienced a transition in power at the ballot box. It must develop

the institutions to do so, and it must establish meaningful limitations on presidential authority. There are only so many times this country can revisit 1987.

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Ben Ali may be gone but his constitution is not yet forgotten

Posted By Nathan J. Brown, Saturday, January 15, 2011 - 8:23 AM

Tunisia, which had two presidents since becoming independent in 1956, has now had a series of three people claiming the post in less than 24 hours. What is going on?

Yesterday,President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali left the country a bit too hurriedly to either resign or leave instructions. So the prime minister stepped in front of television cameras and claimed he would temporarily assume presidential duties. He cited Article 56 of the Tunisian constitution. Its provisions allow the prime minister to assume the role of acting president when the president is temporarily unable to serve and issues a decree deputizing the premier.

Politically Ben Ali may have been dead, but constitutionally he was just on vacation. Opposition leaders cried foul. In legalistic terms, where was the required decree? And in practical terms, this was a partial step at best. The regime stood as it had before, minus its head. There was no time limit to the "temporary" measure, and no new elections were scheduled.

So today,under continuing pressure, the scrambling and panicking regime moved down to Article 57, covering vacancy in the presidency. The Constitutional Council can declare the president incompetent to serve, allowing the speaker of the parliament to take the post as long as new elections are held within 60 days.

Do constitutional provisions really matter in a place like this? Can't rulers just do what they like? Is the opposition likely to accept a set of rules tailor-made for an authoritarian regime? The answer to the first two questions is yes. Constitutions can matter even in a place like Tunisia. The answer to the third question is more difficult — use of the constitution would be a mixed bag for the opposition.

In normal times, constitutional provisions matter in a place like Tunisia because they give the rulers the tools to do whatever they want. Even authoritarian regimes need clear chains of command and authoritative structures just as much as liberal democratic ones. So they almost always issue constitutions and generally follow them — it is just that the constitutional provisions are neither liberal nor democratic (and what seemingly liberal and democratic provisions exist are qualified out of meaningful existence). Of course, they do not want to have that constitutional language that will restrict them in any way. If that happens, they will show fewer scruples. But that is why Article 56 was so handy. By relying on it, Tunisia's remaining rulers seemed to be saying: "We are still in charge and we can still do what we want." That was why the step was less than satisfying.

But that also leads us to understand why constitutions can matter even in times of crisis. Today in Tunisia the constitution provides the only framework for the interim

regime and the opposition to negotiate. Of course, revolutions in which constitutions are completely forgotten certainly occur. But not all regime changes happen that way — sometimes they can be negotiated through existing constitutional mechanisms. That often happened in 1989 when communism fell in Eastern Europe, for instance. And in a case like Tunisia, in which decades of political repression have led to an opposition with weak leadership that has little ability to develop a detailed and unifying program, following the constitution may give it the breathing spell it needs while allowing state institutions to continue to function in the vacuum.

But Article 57 — if that is what is used — is a very mixed blessing for the opposition. The problems start when you read the fine print. The presidential elections have to be held according to the current constitutional provisions, and those allow only the Potemkin parliament (and a few other officials) the ability to nominate candidates. And while the acting president is serving, no constitutional amendments are allowed. In other words, invocation of Article 57 kicks into gear a process that was carefully designed for Ben Ali. It is designed for a figure handpicked by current top leaders, not for a truly open election.

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Why Tunisia's Revolution Is Islamist-Free

And how their absence explains the quick fall of Ben Ali's regime.

By Michael Koplow, January 14, 2011

The reign of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali is over. His government's response to the steadily growing unrest in the country was marked by successive tactical retreats: On Jan. 12, he declared his intention to immediately do away with restrictions on the press and step down once his term expires in 2014. When that concession only emboldened the protesters further, he responded on Jan. 14 by sacking his government and announcing that new elections would be held in six months. And now, the latest news suggests that the military has stepped in to remove Ben Ali from power and the president has fled the country.

Given the historical ineffectiveness of Arab publics to effect real change in their governments and the Tunisian regime's reputation as perhaps the most repressive police state in the region, the events of the past week are nothing short of remarkable. And while reports and analyses have focused on the extraordinary nature of the protests, it is equally important to consider what has been missing — namely, Islamists.

Unlike in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and most other secular Arab autocracies, the main challenge to the Tunisian regime has not come from Islamist opposition but from secular intellectuals, lawyers, and trade unionists. The absence of a strong Islamist presence is the result of an aggressive attempt by successive Tunisian regimes, dating back over a half-century, to eliminate Islamists from public life. Ben Ali enthusiastically took up this policy in the early 1990s, putting hundreds of members of the al-Nahda party, Tunisia's main Islamist movement, on trial amid widespread allegations of torture and sentencing party leaders to life imprisonment or exile. Most influential

Tunisian Islamists now live abroad, while those who remain in Tunisia have been forced to form a coalition with unlikely secular and communist bedfellows.

The nature of the opposition and the willingness of the Tunisian government to back down are not coincidental. If it had been clear that Islamist opposition figures were playing a large role in the current unrest, the government would likely have doubled down on repressive measures. The Tunisian government is rooted in secular Arab nationalist ideology and has long taken its secularism and its nationalism more seriously than its neighbors. Habib Bourguiba, Ben Ali's predecessor and the father of the post-colonial Tunisian state, took over lands belonging to Islamic institutions, folded religious courts into the secular state judicial system, and enacted a secular personal status code upon coming to power.

Bourguiba, like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, viewed Islamists as an existential threat to the very nature of the Tunisian state. He viewed the promotion of secularism as linked to the mission and nature of the state, and because Islamists differed with him on this fundamental political principle, they were not allowed into the political system at all. Bourguiba displayed no desire for compromise on this question, calling for large-scale executions of Islamists following bombings at tourist resorts. He was also often hostile toward Muslim religious traditions, repeatedly referring to the veil in the early years of Tunisian independence as an "odious rag."

Ben Ali, who served as prime minister under Bourguiba, has taken a similarly hard line. Unlike other Arab leaders such as Morocco's King Mohammed VI or Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he has been unwilling to adopt any sort of religious title or utilize Islamic imagery to justify his rule. Most importantly, Ben Ali never attempted to co-opt Islamists by controlling their entry into the political system, but instead excluded them entirely from the political dialogue.

This history is vital to understanding why the protests were successful in removing Ben Ali's government. There is an appreciation within the corridors of power in Tunis that the Islamists are not at the top of the pile of the latest unrest. The protesters, though they represent a threat to the political elite's vested interests, have not directly challenged the reigning creed of state secularism.

Ben Ali's fate may have been sealed when military officers — who had been marginalized by the regime as it lavished money on family members and corrupt business elites — demonstrated a willingness to stand down and protect protesters from the police and internal security services. However, a military coup would also represent no ideological challenge to the regime — the state's mission of advancing secular nationalism will continue even after Ben Ali's removal from power. And in the event that the military willingly cedes power and holds new elections in six months, the decimation of the Islamist movement over the last two decades means that any serious challenger is bound to come from a similar ideological background.

The weakness of Tunisia's Islamist opposition also makes it difficult to forecast how other Middle Eastern regimes would react to similar protests. It is unthinkable, for example, that Mubarak would not choose to crack down more viciously on protesters given the very real possibility that, if overthrown, Egypt would become an Islamist state. Given the unique nature of Tunisian society, observers hoping that Ben Ali's fall will portend a similar fate for other Arab autocrats may be left waiting a lot longer than they might now think.

Michael Koplow is a doctoral candidate in the department of government Georgetown University.

The First Twitter Revolution?

Not so fast. The Internet can take some credit for toppling Tunisia's government, but not all of it.

By Ethan Zuckerman, January 14, 2011

Friday evening, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali boarded a jet for Malta, leaving his prime minister to face streets filled with protesters demanding a change of government in the North African country. The protests began weeks earlier in the central city of Sidi Bouzid, sparked by the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed university graduate whose informal vegetable stall was shuttered by the police. His despair exemplified the frustration that many Tunisians felt with their contracting economy, high levels of unemployment and inequality, censored media and Internet, and widespread corruption. Protests spread from city to city, with trade unions, lawyers, and countless unemployed Tunisian youth demanding a change to an economic system that appeared to benefit a small number of families close to power and leave ordinary citizens behind.

As the protests intensified, Ben Ali offered concessions to his people: 23 years into his reign, he agreed to step down in 2014. He ordered the security police to stop using live ammunition on protesters after nearly 70 had been killed, cut the price of basic foodstuffs, and promised to allow a freer media and end Internet censorship. This morning, as pressures increased, he offered new elections within six months. But all that failed to placate the crowds, who finally got what they wanted later in the day: a Tunisia sans Ben Ali.

While the future of Tunisia's governance is extremely uncertain at present, it seems we've witnessed the rarest of phenomena, a popular revolt toppling an Arab dictator. Audiences in the Arab world have been glued to Al Jazeera, which has covered the protests closely. Many states in the region suffer from the same problems — unemployment, slow growth, corrupt government, aging dictators — that brought Tunisians into the streets. Protesters have taken to the streets in Algeria and Jordan, demanding jobs and affordable food. Whether these protests erupt into the revolution Tunisia is experiencing is impossible to know. What's clear is that the actions taken by Tunisians are reverberating around the region.

Outside the Middle East and the Francophone media sphere, the events in Tunisia have gotten little attention, certainly not the breathless, 24-hour coverage devoted to 2009's Iranian election protests. When the protests began in Sidi Bouzid, much of the English-speaking world was focused on the Christmas and New Year's holidays. As protests in Tunis heated up, U.S. eyeballs were focused on the tragic shooting in Tucson, Arizona. Had the Tunisian protests hit during a slow news month, it's still unlikely they would have been followed as closely as events in Iran, which is larger, of greater international security concern, and has a large, media-savvy diaspora who helped promote the 2009 protests to an international audience.

Iran's diaspora was especially effective at promoting the Green Movement to an online audience that followed tweets, Facebook posts, and web videos avidly, hungry for news from the front lines of the struggle. Tens of thousands of Twitter users turned their profile pictures green in solidarity with the activists, and hundreds set up proxy servers to help Iranians evade Internet filters. For users of social media, the protests in Iran were an inescapable, global story. Tunisia, by contrast, hasn't seen nearly the attention or support from the online community.

The irony is that social media likely played a significant role in the events that have unfolded in the past month in Tunisia, and that the revolution appears far more likely to lead to lasting political change. Ben Ali's government tightly controlled all forms of media, on and offline. Reporters were prevented from traveling to cover protests in Sidi Bouzid, and the reports from official media

characterized events as either vandalism or terrorism. Tunisians got an alternative picture from Facebook, which remained uncensored through the protests, and they communicated events to the rest of the world by posting videos to YouTube and Dailymotion. As unrest spread from Sidi Bouzid to Sfax, from Hammamet and ultimately to Tunis, Tunisians documented events on Facebook. As others followed their updates, it's likely that news of demonstrations in other parts of the country disseminated online helped others conclude that it was time to take to the streets. And the videos and accounts published to social media sites offered an ongoing picture of the protests to those around the world savvy enough to be paying attention.

One way to understand the significance of social media in Tunisia is to examine the government's attempts to control and silence it. Tunisia has aggressively censored the Internet since 2005, blocking not just explicitly political sites, but social media sites like video-sharing service Dailymotion. Video-sharing sites were a special target of government censors because Tunisian activists are extremely tech-savvy and had released provocative videos online, including one that documented the first lady's frequent shopping trips to Europe using the presidential jet.

Not content just to filter content, last summer Tunisian authorities began "phishing" attacks on activists' Gmail and Facebook accounts. By injecting malicious computer code into the login page of those services through the government-controlled Internet service provider, Ben Ali's monitors were able to obtain passwords to these accounts, locking out the activists and harvesting email lists of presumed activists. When the riots intensified last week, the government began arresting prominent Internet activists, including my Global Voices colleague Slim Amamou, who had broken the story of the government's password phishing. (Amamou was released, apparently unharmed, Thursday night.)

But if the web was such a threat to the government's authority, why did the regime not block Facebook or shut down the Internet entirely? It's critical to understand that Ben Ali was, first and foremost, a pragmatist. As late as Friday morning, he was looking for a solution that would allow him to remain in power, offering concessions in the hope of placating protesters. Internet censorship was already one of the grievances protesters had aired — when Ben Ali offered concessions to protesters Thursday, loosening the reins was one of the promises that were warmly, if skeptically received.

Pundits will likely start celebrating a "Twitter revolution" in Tunisia, even if they missed watching it unfold; the Atlantic's Andrew Sullivan already revived the dreaded phrase Thursday. Others are seeking connections between unfolding events and a WikiLeaks cable that showed U.S. diplomats' frustration with Ben Ali, and with denial-of-service attacks by online activist group Anonymous, which has been targeting entities that have tried to stop the dissemination of WikiLeaks cables, like the Tunisian government. But any attempt to credit a massive political shift to a single factor — technological, economic, or otherwise — is simply untrue. Tunisians took to the streets due to decades of frustration, not in reaction to a WikiLeaks cable, a denial-of-service attack, or a Facebook update.

But as we learn more about the events of the past few weeks, we'll discover that online media did play a role in helping Tunisians learn about the actions their fellow citizens were taking and in making the decision to mobilize. How powerful and significant this influence was will be something that academics will study and argue over for years to come. Scholars aren't the only ones who want to know whether social media played a role in the end of Ben Ali's reign — it's likely to be a hot topic of conversation in Amman, Algiers, and Cairo, as other autocratic leaders wonder whether the bubbling cauldron of unemployment, street protests, and digital media could burn them next.

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Tunisia and the New Arab Media Space

Posted By Marc Lynch, Saturday, January 15, 2011 - 7:20 AM

An interesting discussion has already broken out over whether Tunisia should be considered a "Twitter Revolution" — a far more interesting and relevant discussion than whether it was a "Wikileaks Revolution" (it wasn't). I've seen some great points already by Ethan Zuckerman, Evgeny Morozov, Luke Allnut, Jillian York, and others. I'm looking forward to being one of the social scientists digging into the data, where I suspect that both enthusiasts and skeptics will find support for their arguments. For now, I would just argue that it would be more productive to focus more broadly on the evolution of the Arab media over the last decade, in which new media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, forums and blogs work together with satellite television stations such as al-Jazeera to collectively transform the Arab information environment and shatter the ability of authoritarian regimes to control the flow of information, images, ideas and opinions. That feels like a sentence which I've written a hundred times over the last decade.... and one which has never felt more true than the last month in Tunisia.

Calling Tunisia a "Twitter Revolution" is simplistic, but even skeptics have to recognize that the new media environment mattered. I would suggest that analysts not think about the effects of the new media as an either/or proposition ("Twitter vs. al-Jazeera"), but instead think about new media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, SMS, etc) and satellite television as collectively transforming an complex and potent evolving media space. Without the new social media, the amazing images of Tunisian protestors might never have escaped the blanket repression of the Ben Ali regime —- but it was the airing of these videos on al-Jazeera, even after its office had been shuttered, which brought those images to the mass Arab public and even to many Tunisians who might otherwise not have realized what was happening around their country. This is similar to how the new media empowered Egyptian "Kefaya" protestors in the early 2000s and Lebanese protestors in 2005, but in a significantly changed media space.

Al-Jazeera may be so 2005, but it is still by far the most watched and most influential single media outlet in the Arab world. It has also embraced the new media environment, creatively and rapidly adopting user generated content to overcome official crackdowns on its coverage of various countries — a practice perfected in Iraq, where it had to rely on locally-generated content after its office was closed down in 2004. Other satellite television stations have followed suit, leading to genuine and highly significant integration among new and slightly-less-new Arab media. All of these media platforms and individual contributors layer together to collectively challenge the ability of states to control the flow of information, images, and opinion. This is the latest stage in the new media revolution in the Arab world about which I've been writing since the early 2000s, and it's profoundly exciting to watch.

I'd point to one other aspect of this which often gets overlooked. Al-Jazeera and the new media ecosystem did not only spread information — they facilitated the framing of the events and a robust public debate about their meaning. Events do not speak for themselves. For them to have political meaning they need to be interpreted, placed into a particular context and imbued with significance. Arabs collectively understood these events quite quickly as part of a broader Arab narrative of reform and popular protest —-the "al-Jazeera narrative" of an Arab public challenging authoritarian Arab regimes and U.S. foreign policy alike. Events in Tunisia had meaning for Jordan, for Lebanon, for Yemen, for Egypt because they were framed and understood within this collective Arab narrative. From al-Jazeera's talk shows to internet forums to the cafes where people talked them out face to face, Tunisia became common focal point for the Arab political debate and identity.

Al-Jazeera's role may not fit the current passion for the internet, but overlooking it will lead to some serious misunderstandings of how the media works in today's Arab world and how the Tunisian events might matter outside of that country over the longer term.