

The spillover effects of Sidi Bouzid: a survivability test to the Tunisian regime

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Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old unemployed Tunisian university graduate who turned to selling food in the local market in order to subsist, set himself ablaze on December 17th in front of a government building, in the city of Sidi Bouzid. He died on the January 5th. Bouazizi's desperate act happened after police allegedly confiscated his fruit and vegetable stand because he lacked a permit, and then assaulted him.

It could have been an isolated act if it was not for the wave of street protests that followed and spread nationwide to towns such as Gafsa, Monastir, Sousse, Sbikha and Thala – events which are rare due to the state's tight and forceful control over society. Moreover, other suicides took place after Mohamed Bouazizi took his own life: for example, Lahseen Naji electrocuted himself out of frustration caused by unemployment; and Ramzi al-Abboudi committed suicide due to mounting business debt. Since then, the police have been responding violently to the unrest, which has led to the injury of several protesters and to the death of at least 14 other demonstrators. However, manifestations are not restricted to the streets. Lawyers, through the Tunisian

Bar Association, scheduled a strike and a group of cyber hackers has targeted at least 14 of the government's websites. Trade unions and opposition politicians were also reported to support the protests, which is surprising because both are by and large seen as loyalists. Given the dimension, frequency, social diversity and continuity of these popular demonstrations, one must wonder if, instead of protests, Tunisia is facing an uprising.

The government's response went beyond police repression. On December 28th, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali did a television appearance to say that law would be applied "in all firmness" and to denounce the protesters as "a minority of extremists and mercenaries".¹ Ben Ali also reshuffled his cabinet and sacked some governors. The media, who initially ignored the protests, was then locked down, with the websites of some media outlets becoming unavailable.

Tunisia is often portrayed as an oasis, both in the African and Arab context.² Indeed, considering that shortly after

¹ Quoted in Mohamed Abdel-Baky, "Tunisia unrest continues despite tight security" (*Ahram Online*, 30 December 2010).

² Diogo Noivo, "Tunisia: A socio-economic oasis in a political desert" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 8, December 2009).



its independence Tunis adopted a sustainable economic model, or that it developed social policies that generated unique literacy rates, safeguarded women's rights, and established health care, the country ruled by President Ben Ali is in fact a laudable example. So how has one desperate act fueled generalized civil unrest? The most evident answer is the lack of job opportunities. The Tunisian economy is not able to absorb an important part of the skilled workforce, and even those university graduates that can get a job usually find a reality that is far below their expectations. Nonetheless, behind this employment crisis are other serious and structural problems. First, there is the lack of freedom. In Tunisia there is no proper freedom of speech and, consequently, freedom of the press. Moreover, freedom of association is tightly controlled as well. In a nutshell, people do not have the necessary channels to express their concerns and grievances. Second, there is corruption. Transparency International's *2010 Corruption Perceptions Index* gives 4.3 to Tunisia in a scale where 10 stands for "highly clean" and 0 for "highly corrupt". Corruption not only affects the economic fabric but also generates a sense of injustice. Third, there is the fact that both political and economic decision-making are a restricted domain reserved to those individuals close to the regime and to President Ben Ali in particular. This makes social mobility a one-way road for the common citizen: downwards. All taken together, reasons for frustration have been building up over the last few years. The sources of social discontent are first and foremost political, and can be seen on the World Bank's *World Wide Governance Indicators* in 2009: on a scale ranging from -2.5 to 2.5,³ Tunisia obtained: 0,017 in 'Control of Corruption'; 0,414 in 'Government Effectiveness'; and -1,27 in 'Voice and Accountability'.

President Ben Ali's political strategy over the years has been quite clear: "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".⁴

Only time will tell if the ongoing unrest is the key that will unlock the Tunisian conundrum. Whatever the final outcome, it is without a doubt a challenge to the regime and Tunisia's power players are apparently aware of

it. The recently announced US\$4.5 billion investment program in job creation demonstrates that President Ben Ali understands that protesters are more than a handful of extremists and mercenaries.

Aside from a test to the regime's capacity to survive, these riots can evolve into a domestic and international security concern. From the outset, Tunisia is by definition a preferential target for jihadist groups. According to Islamist terrorists' narratives, Tunisia is – like most Arab nations – a heir of the colonial past (a secular republic inspired on the French model) and supported by the imperialistic West (Tunisia is a central partner in the Mediterranean both for the US and Europe). If to this one adds a disenfranchised youth and all the grievances attached to it, the situation can play well into jihadist hands: "[a] youth empowered by education but disempowered by marginalization can be the spark that ignites social upheaval and social tension. In Tunisia, marginalization is today being translated into irrational and tragic suicides. But tomorrow these can be the triggers of a different type of suicides. (...) [T]he president is strongly advised to recall a simple truth and a time-hardened adage: a fight against those who have nothing to lose is unwinnable!"⁵

Moreover, the crisis might also have an external dimension, bearing in mind the close relation with the European Union (EU). Tunisia is an important player for the EU, not only as a neighbor country and a trade partner, but also as a beacon of stability in the Maghreb. As a consequence of the above, in July 1995, Tunisia was the first North African country to enter into an Association Agreement with the European Union. EU-Tunisia relations are framed by an Action Plan, under the European Neighborhood Policy. This Action Plan sets several short and mid-term goals that, taken together, can be divided between economic and political themes. For a number of reasons, countries and intergovernmental organizations often remove the political dimension from their bilateral ties and mainly focus on the development of economic relations. When there is a political dimension, it is usually centered on gaining leverage instead of promoting change. For example, in the case of the EU, while efforts on the economic dimension have produced significant results, on the political front the Action Plan has clearly been underperforming. This over reliance on trade and business is understandable, but it can have serious consequences in the long run.

Overlooking the importance of political reforms allows structural problems to grow, and to ultimately affect a country's value as an economic partner, among other

³ The higher value corresponds to better governance.

⁴ Christopher Alexander, "Tunisia's protest wave: where it comes from and what it means" (*Foreign Policy/The Middle East Channel*, 3 January 2011).

⁵ Larbi Sadiki, "Tunisia: The Battle for Sidi Bouzid" (*Al Jazeera Online*, 27 December 2010).



aspects. Furthermore, in the case of Tunisia, more than loss of economic gains, instability can also lead to security challenges such as immigration, terrorism and an increase of all sorts of trafficking that will affect the European Union. Therefore, endorsing political reforms is in the European Union's best interest.

This is neither to say that reforms should be externally imposed and immediate, nor that the model should be a strict transposition of other existing systems elsewhere. Still, the ongoing riots in Tunisia demonstrate the need for transparency, accountability and political participation, which can be achieved in a gradual way, taking into account Tunisia's cultural, social and even linguistic specificities.

Although foreign interventions in political transitions should be regarded with caution, due to internal constraints the Tunisian context seems to hold an opening for some action by the EU. On one hand, as paradoxical as it may seem, self-pursued political reforms became a way that many Arab governments found to bypass both domestic and external pressure, and to perpetuate authoritarian regimes and entrench ruling elites. On the other hand, in the case of Tunisia, the opposition is disorganized and the best the regime can do is generate a political carbon copy of Ben Ali. Thus, the EU is an indispensable player in the stabilization of Tunisia.

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