

WINDS OF CHANGE SWEEP THE ARAB WORLD

A New Generation Finds Its Voice & Authoritarian Regimes Crumble

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Last December 17th Mohamed Bouaziz, the unemployed Tunisian college graduate turned street vendor, set himself ablaze with gasoline after officials in his town of Sidi Bouzid prevented him from selling vegetables without permission. He never imagined that his final desperate act would ignite astonishing uprisings across the entire Middle East, forcing Presidents Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and then Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, to abandon their decades-long rule of ruthless repression. Blasts of fresh air are invigorating the Middle East in the most profound transformation since the fall of the Ottoman dynasty.

Across the Arab World voices of a new young generation resound: “*Irhal! Get Out!*” All eyes turn to Libya—when will Colonel Qaddafi *get out*? In the Libyan capital Tripoli all day Feb. 27th pro- and anti-regime forces battled with automatic rifles and pistols, while 6,500 persons have been slain in Benghazi since Feb. 14th. The megalomaniac Qaddafi rants in his enclave in Tripoli, arming civilian vigilantes for roving patrols to man checkpoints and quash dissent. Benghazi is today the center of a ‘liberated’ free Libya with a provisional governing authority in collaboration with dissident military units: the newly formed National Libyan Council. It appears intent on assuming effective control and organizing a new political order – without international intervention. Gaddafi's own Guedaff tribe comes from the desert between Sirte and Sebha, so the western region of Libya remains under his control. Qaddafi defiantly asserted on March 2nd: “We will fight until the last man and last woman to defend Libya... .” The revolutionary fantasy of Qaddafi’s *Jamahiriyah* ‘stateless society’ with its discredited ideology may finally vanish in a whimper, or in a hail of bullets.

Long delayed paradigm shift. The winds of political change blew in with gentle vengeance like a thief in the night. The remnants of Nasserite-style socialism in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, and Sudan are fiercely buffeted. The

seething disgust vented at long-entrenched political elites and selfish ruling cliques propping up one-man rule has overwhelmed rulers and ruled alike. Arab Monarchies now come under great pressure from Morocco to Jordan, Bahrain, and Oman, with insistent demands for constitutional monarchy being raised even within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The spirit of emancipating political activism leapt like a forest fire to half a dozen other ill-governed African nations sparking serious disturbances in Mauritania, Gabon, Cameroon and Zimbabwe. In North Korea the army was called out in the northern city of Sinuiju causing five deaths after violent protests erupted there and in two other cities. Ruling factions in Damascus, Tehran, and Beijing are not sleeping so peacefully at night either. Protest rallies in Iran on Feb. 14th led to the arrest of 1,500 persons, and 79 demonstrators on March 1st. Fears of sleeping giants awakening keep Israeli and American leaders on edge.

Demographics. The emergence of huge urban populations with college degrees but no prospect of employment partly explains what is unfolding. A typical example: in Saudi Arabia about two-thirds of the population is under the age of thirty, while unemployment among youth is three times the national average; many young Saudis must delay marriage given an eighteen-year waiting list for state housing. Throughout the Arab world the norm remains widespread corruption, high unemployment, dramatically higher food prices with housing shortages, persistent poverty, and ongoing deterioration in quality of basic services. Meanwhile, people have been watching and learning from *AlJazeera* what's happening on the streets of Benghazi and Tripoli, on Habib Bourguiba Boulevard in Tunis, in Tahrir Square in Cairo, in Pearl Square in Bahrain, outside San'a' University in Yemen, or across Iraq on Feb. 25th.

The 'people uprisings' are embedded in longstanding economic and historical grievances, and largely led by students and young professionals who are in the main secular and socially diverse. The Egyptian *Ikhwān* 'Muslim Brothers' were dragged into Tahrir Square by their younger

activists, and after much hesitation joined the bandwagon of popular dissent in the street alongside people of all class and educational backgrounds including Coptic Christians. This is not only an ‘Islamic’ movement, but essentially a human movement of the spirit touching all corners of our globe. This young generation has broken with the ingrained habit of passive acceptance and helpless acquiescence of their fathers or older brothers, for whom intimidation and fear were the main levers of control by cynical regimes. They exhibit a growing maturity of political expression—previously people seemed unable to differentiate between rallying for a cause in solidarity and sacrifice, and simply expressing frustration mixed with random violence that only backfired and increased oppression.

Justice and Equity. Optimism and hope are reborn in the frozen societies of the Middle East, where people had despaired of political stagnation amidst a culture of fear and inequity. This generation now fills the existing political vacuum after the collapse of authoritarian cliques who carefully marginalized civil society and suppressed any vibrant political culture. These young leaders are breaking the entrenched pattern of corrupt incompetent rulers imposing harsh authoritarian control – while failing to meet the basic needs of their own people. They are making impartial elections and political participation to be un-negotiable givens, and encouraging the key institutions of parliament and judiciary to emerge with more independence and transparency.

Eighteen days of popular protests in Egypt ushered in a ruling military council to manage the six months transition for establishing independent political parties, free fair elections, and initiate equitable economic stabilisation for sharing the benefits of growth. A major incitement was lopsided economic growth which largely subsidized the rich and profited transnational corporatism. For how long have politicians and princes and their business cronies treated the state as spoils for personal enrichment? Unelected politicians have made government ministries into personal fiefs distributing rewards to their personal loyalists in a tribal manner of patronage and privilege, embezzling and distributing public funds to foster

their medieval style leadership. Rather than state institutions functioning in the public interest, these are frequently abused by private individuals who steal funds and only reward their own circle of relatives and clients.

In Mubarak's Egypt business and government were tightly intertwined, and public resources were reallocated for the benefit of a small and already affluent elite. High-ranking government officials were enriched through a conflation of politics and business under the guise of privatization in a grotesque parody of the 'neoliberal state'. Privatization provided windfalls for politically well-connected individuals who could purchase state-owned assets for much less than their market value, or monopolise rents from such diverse sources as tourism and foreign aid. Since political connections were the quickest route to astronomical profits, businessmen had powerful incentives to buy political office in the fake elections run by the ruling National Democratic Party.

Although Egypt was lauded by the International Monetary Fund as a beacon of free-market success, the reality was that organised labor was fiercely suppressed, public education and health care systems were gutted by a combination of neglect and privatization, and much of the population suffered stagnant or falling wages relative to inflation. Official unemployment was estimated at approximately 9.4% in 2010 (much higher for the youth who spearheaded the January 25th Revolution), while about 20% of the population reportedly lives below a poverty line (defined as \$2 daily per person). Having committed to constitutional changes and democratic elections the 'Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' now appears reluctant to enact further reforms, leaving this to an elected civilian government. The military council has spoken of threats to the "Egyptian way of life" – a veiled reference to political ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Nonviolent Mass Action. A major feature of the change blowing through the region is the dramatic evidence of the effectiveness of nonviolent activism as the most effective tactic for social and political transformation. Many

persons ignorant of the power of this weapon must realize today how significant the Arab awakening is in global terms. ‘People Power’ proved its strength in Iran (1979), the Philippines (1986) and Eastern Europe (1989)—but the Arab demonstration of its efficacy in 2011 is breathtaking. Such spontaneous national mobilization displays conscience and courage, steadfast willingness to suffer for a higher cause, and compassionate solidarity bridging social and economic divides within society. This is always a rare and inspiring phenomenon to witness. With few exceptions, the violence has come from the ruling cliques manipulating loyalists for their own purpose, not from the people protesting. Peaceable outcomes appear to be the rule, but there is no guarantee this will continue in the case of prevailing political culture in Libya and Yemen.

The *Joint Meeting Parties* is the main Yemeni coalition opposed to President Ali Abdullah Saleh (ruling since 1978), and includes the leading Islamist party *Islah*. The chief violence until now has come from angry regime supporters wielding clubs and knives confronting demonstrators. They are playing the same role as armed Egyptian ‘neighbourhood guards’ who beat and killed several hundred people in Tahrir square, or Qaddafi’s thugs and hired mercenaries. Saleh now accuses that the protests are “orchestrated from Tel Aviv and under Washington’s supervision.” But with Washington providing \$150 million annually, and U.S. Central Command proposing increasing counterterrorist assistance to \$1.2 billion dollars over five years, U.S. commitment to Saleh’s regime has not wavered. Yet fears that Yemen’s entrenched tradition of political violence could resurface are real – especially if the Al-Ahmar clan from the Hashid tribe chooses to break with Saleh, initiating a civil war between rival tribesmen. The secessionist movement in Yemen’s south has heated up, with the security forces cracking down harshly. Unless President Saleh reaches a deal with the activist political opposition yielding real concessions, a descent into violent anarchy is possible. Or Saleh could *Get Out!*

After intimidation and threats came attempts at appeasement to buy off the opposition. Here are notable events of the past week alone:

- Feb 24th: the Algerian government formally lifted its nineteen year long “state of emergency”.
- Feb. 26th: protests in several cities in Oman by so-called “vandal groups” led Sultan Qaboos bin Said (ruling since 1970) to change six ministers in his cabinet, and announce increased social benefits for students.
- Feb. 27th: Tunisian P.M. Mohammed Ghannouchi announced his resignation, seen as too close to toppled President Zine al-Abidine. This came on the heels of troops backed by tanks using tear gas to disperse crowds of youths protesting against the caretaker government.
- Feb. 27th: Jordan’s newly appointed Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit promised to introduce new election laws later this year giving Jordanians greater political scope, and to fight corruption and favoritism. But the head of the largest opposition group *Islamic Action Front* (political arm of Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood) insisted on constitutional changes allowing for election of the prime minister and the Cabinet, and dissolution of the current parliament.
- Feb. 27th: Saudi King Abdullah ordered government sector workers with temporary contracts to be issued permanent contracts (affecting over 50,000 employees) in his latest attempt to pre-empt growing discontent. On Feb. 23rd the King had ordered \$36 billion in financial incentives to aid low-income earners – including a 15% cost of living increase for public sector employees enabling debt forgiveness, home purchases, and interest free loans.

Strategic Implications. The ongoing upheavals have shaken the foundations of the current World System dominated by transnational liberal capitalism. Richard Falk has evoked the expectation of “a post-colonial Middle East that finally achieves its ‘second liberation’” – namely the liberation from geopolitical hegemony traceable to the impetus of the 1979 Iranian revolution.¹ Yet it is quite unlikely that liberated peoples in the Arab world

¹ ALJAZEERA, 21st Feb.

will look to Washington and New York for their political or economic model.

The winds of emancipating political activism in the Middle East present a serious threat to the grand strategy of the United States and its beloved regional ally Israel. The core of their bankrupt strategy has been to safeguard their regional security and economic interests by reliance on the military instruments of hard power. U.S. rhetorical commitment to democracy and openness is combined with continued Israeli settlement expansion and violations of the Oslo agreements. President Obama's decision last week to veto the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements shows the *business-as-usual* mindset in Washington—with Obama mindful of presidential elections and the Israeli lobby. On March 1st Obama stressed to the fifty delegates from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that Washington was committed in its support for Israel and its security. A White House statement cited the President on the meeting as “productive” and emphasized “America's unshakable support for Israel's security, opposition to any effort to delegitimize it or single it out for criticism, and commitment to achieve a peace that will secure the future for Arabs and Israelis alike.”

During his Feb. 25th visit to Bahrain's capital Manama U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen demonstrated how the United States misperceives the democracy conflict, when he lauded King Hamad bin Isa Āl Khalifa's “handling of the popular crisis” and reaffirmed Washington's “strong commitment” to the army. Last week 23 high-profile activists were released from prison, but as protesters marched on the Interior Ministry March 2nd demanding the release of hundreds of prisoners, the increasingly unstable situation in Bahrain aggravates the aching nerve of ongoing Sunni–Shi'ah rivalry in the Arab Gulf, Iraq and Lebanon. Crown Prince Salman and King Hamad's Āl Khalifa will be defended by the Āl Sa'ūd of Saudi Arabia herding the other GCC countries – Arabian kings and emirs will not permit a domino effect spreading from Bahrain threatening their autocratic rule. The winds of change are blowing too close for the comfort of the Saudi Kingdom.

An astute former CIA analyst Graham Fuller commented:² “Today the Middle East is the last redoubt in the world of regimes bought, maintained, and guided by Washington. ...We favor democracy—but only when it produces the leaders and policies that suit our interests, not theirs. ...It’s our lack of values in foreign policy they don’t like, our hypocritical lack of commitment to democracy, except when it meets our immediate needs.” In Lebanon the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who recently joined with Hezbollah to oust the Hariri government backed by Washington, bluntly stated: “Why should we follow American advice in the name of democracy? They have nothing to teach us when they have supported dictators.”

It is more likely that peoples in the Middle East will look to Turkey and the example of Erdogan’s AKP party –rather than Malaysia or Indonesia– for guidance in forging an authentic Islamic brand of democratic modernity. Hope, idealism, and solidarity have returned to a region which despaired of ever experiencing them again. Can these great human virtues withstand the insidious cynicism common to European and American liberals ? Will the peoples of the Arab World continue to demonstrate a mature grasp of their own social-political reality ? And what forces are gathering together to impede or deflect the historic transformation underway in this vital region of the globe ?



² Graham Fuller, ‘US can blame itself for anger in the Middle East, and start making peace,’ *Christian Science Monitor* Feb. 4th 2011.