



## On the Jasmine Revolution

Tunisia's political economy exemplifies a region in transition.

BY FADHEL KABOUB

The success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, which put an end to two of the most oppressive police states in the Middle East, continues to spark similar popular uprisings across the region. Despite the different institutional structures, geopolitical roles, and military capabilities across the region, the experience in Tunisia, whose uprising sparked the rest, exemplifies what most countries in the region have experienced since their independence from European colonialism, and can shed some light onto their likely post-revolution paths.

In January, Tunisia succeeded in toppling the 23-year Ben Ali regime via a popular grassroots revolt against injustice, corruption, and oppression. The protesters' demands in what has been dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution" were very straightforward: jobs, freedom, and dignity. Like all revolutions, the Tunisian revolution was not an overnight event but rather a long process that can be dissected into four distinct phases with important economic consequences: the neoliberal phase that started in the 1980s with the introduction of World Bank-sponsored economic policies; the plutocracy phase which began in the early 2000s with the rise of the Trabelsi-Ben Ali business empire; the uprising phase which began after the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010; and finally the ongoing reconstruction phase which began after the departure of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011.

The 1980s neoliberal phase began as Tunisia's external debt soared. Its economy faced high unemployment, low currency reserves, bad harvests, decline in oil revenues, and closure of European labor market outlets for Tunisian immigrants. Like many developing countries,



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Tunisia was subjected to the World Bank and IMF structural adjustment program: in 1985, aggressive austerity measures led to food riots killing at least 100 people. As the crisis intensified, Ben Ali was appointed interior minister in 1986 and later prime minister in 1987. He then took over as president in a bloodless coup d'état on November 7, 1987. His immediate agenda was two-fold: crush the opposition and forge ahead with structural adjustment policies. Opposition party leaders were arrested, tortured, jailed, killed, or exiled. On the economic front, the government began privatizing state-owned enterprises, promoting free-trade zones, supporting export-oriented industries, and capitalizing on the growth of the tourism industry. Despite robust economic growth rates in the 1990s, unemployment remained stubbornly high, and socioeconomic indicators began to show signs of rising income inequality and deterioration of the economic status of the middle class.

The plutocracy phase began in the early 2000s. While the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan was amassing billions of dollars in business deals, corruption ravaged the economy, and the Tunisian middle class

slid further down the income ladder. Highly educated youth were facing humiliating life conditions and long-term unemployment with little to no hope for a better future. After more than a decade of clearing all opposition forces from the political arena and affirming Ben Ali's grip on the political and security apparatus, Leila Trabelsi, Ben Ali's second wife, expanded her First Lady duties to include securing business deals for her family. The Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan built a gigantic business empire in less than a decade. They secured quasi-monopoly deals in industries such as banking, telecommunications, media, real estate, and retail. Their aggressive and violent approach alienated even the traditional business class, which was forced to sell to or work for the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan or face serious consequences. Banks were coerced into extending more than \$1.7 billion in credit to the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan without any repayment guarantees.

The uprising phase that followed was intense, well focused, and effective, taking only 23 days to put an end to 23 years of Ben Ali's rule. The leaderless youth movement was spontaneous, secular, fearless, and determined to put an end to

an era of repression, theft, and humiliation. In a day-long general strike on January 14, the Tunisian economy was brought to a complete standstill, and men and women from all walks of life joined the protesters to unseat Ben Ali.

The reconstruction phase began as soon as Ben Ali fled the country. It is the most labor-intensive phase and it requires active participation from all facets of Tunisian society. Tunisians have faced the challenge of institutionalizing democracy head-on with popular demands to dissolve Ben Ali's RCD ruling party, free all political prisoners, rewrite the constitution, seize all the Trabelsi-Ben Ali assets, and most importantly, cleanse all socio-economic and government institutions of corrupt RCD loyalists.

While Tunisians are forging ahead with radical constitutional, judicial, and democratic reforms, they will still face a major economic challenge: unemployment among the highly educated youth. The Jasmine Revolution's achievements thus far are commendable, but the revolution will be incom-

plete without full employment as a means of achieving true social justice.

The challenges after Egypt's revolution are more serious than Tunisia's. The Egyptian military is very large and owns much of the country's industrial and business infrastructure; it also plays a significant role in protecting the American and Israeli interests in the region. A truly democratic civilian government in Egypt will very likely want a military that is more disengaged from the political and economic arena. Egypt is also facing a more serious economic challenge, with mass unemployment and poverty in a population that is eight times larger than that of Tunisia.

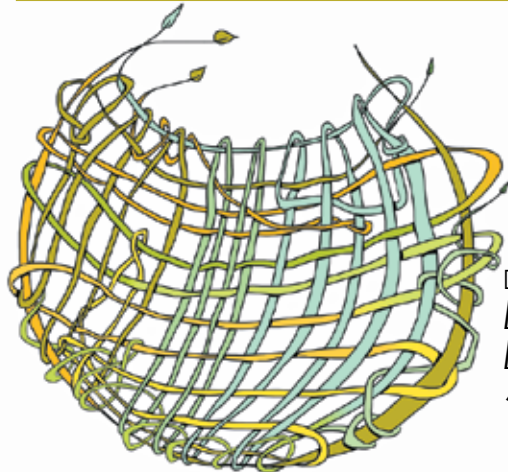
While watching events unfold in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and beyond, one cannot help but wonder about the extent to which a revolutionary domino effect is likely to sweep the entire region, and its significance for the political economy of the Middle East and its relationship with the United States and Europe. It is clear that there is a critical mass of empowered and fearless youth whose move-

ments are supported by labor advocates, human rights activists, and democratic voices. The challenge, however, is to create lasting radical economic and political changes that will ensure a successful post-revolution reconstruction phase.

Western powers must also recognize that a double-standard policy cannot be an effective way of promoting peace and security in the region. The threat of an Iranian-like anti-Western Islamic revolution is simply not plausible today, so one cannot use the anti-terrorism Bush-Cheney rhetoric to justify Western support for oppressive regimes. It is the actions taken by post-revolution movements in conjunction with the reaction of the West to these events that will determine whether the Jasmine Revolution was a turning point in world history or just a footnote in the history of the region. **D&S**

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