

Another Wave of Decolonization in the Muslim World

by Fouzi Slisli

The triumph of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the domino effects that they have created across the Muslim world are another setback to Western imperial policies in the Muslim world and a new challenge to the power relationship that has governed the Muslim world for centuries now, in accordance with Western interests.

Editor's Update:

Threatening the vulnerable region, US/NATO powers have sent warships to the coast of oil-rich Libya. Air strikes are contemplated and military advisors are already said to have been on the ground.



A young protester holds a sign that reads “Freedom for Wissam Saghir,” a journalist arrested in the media crackdown in Tunisia. Even media blackouts could not prevent a revolt against the western imposed economic policies and autocratic regimes that had maintained power through various forms of violence and corruption.

Photo: Fethi Belaid

The Spark: The Economy of Injustice

How is it that Mohammed BouAzizi, the young Tunisian vegetable vendor who immolated himself, created a spark that ignited the Tunisian uprising that would spread across the Muslim world? BouAzizi held a university degree, but the state did not offer any prospect of a decent life for him. As a last resort—and this is a story that repeats itself across the Muslim world—BouAzizi fell back on one of the most traditional forms of economic subsistence, one that has sustained communities around the world for hundreds of years. He bought vegetables from farmers and

sold them in the local marketplace—part of an informal economy that exists outside the official state and market economies.

Those who rely on this informal economy to feed their families are often hassled across the Muslim world by state authorities who, at the behest of capitalist institutions (IMF-World Bank), deem this form of economic subsistence illegal. In my home country of Morocco, these humble, hardworking, and often educated individuals frequently face police insults and confiscation of their scales and their produce, and are subject to an extortion and bribery system that fills the pockets of corrupt policemen. Because he was harassed and spat upon by the police while he was selling his vegetables, Mohammed BouAzizi set himself on fire. His grisly act is a damning denunciation of the capitalist economic system that uses corrupt leaders and their state apparatus to criminalize the most basic forms of economic subsistence and basic survival. With their humble resources, traditional economic systems are far more humane and compassionate and offer more reliable safety nets than the capitalist market economy could ever squeeze out of its untold wealth.

Western Media Coverage: Tunisia versus Iran

BouAziz's story found resonance throughout Tunisia as it spread through the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter. In spite of the odds, Tunisian protests evolved creatively into an uprising told in the first person, through the work of citizen journalists, circumventing the media blackout imposed by President Ben Ali's regime—a blackout fortified by the deafening silence in Western media and opinion. Mainstream media, its critics, and analysts are still catching up.

Many observers noted the difference in Western attitudes to the protests in Iran after the 2009 elections; at the behest of the U.S. State Department, Twitter postponed maintenance work to allow Iranian protesters to circumvent their government blackout. The personal video clips and reports uploaded on Facebook and Twitter were then given continuous coverage on CNN, BBC, The New York Times, The Guardian, and Le Monde. In contrast, until the first week of January, the Tunisian uprising was covered mostly with 800-word stories picked up from news agencies. Mainstream media largely ignored the personal reports and videos posted by Tunisians on Facebook and Twitter. No Western leaders came out in support of Tunisians' right to choose their own leaders, as Obama and Clinton did from day one of the Iranian protests. France even openly offered Tunisian President Ben Ali policing services. That is not surprising, since the Tunisian uprising was no color revolution. Unlike Iranian protests, it had no support from the National Endowment for Democracy. The Tunisian uprising was spontaneous and genuine—so spontaneous that even after it deposed the despot, it still lacks a leadership and remains today an easy prey for the wolves.

Western political institutions and public opinion were just as wrong on Iran as they were on Tunisia. In Iran, the West willfully promoted instability in a well-functioning Muslim country. Western and Zionist interests took precedence over the

stability and safety of 80 million Iranians. In Tunisia, the West attempted to maintain Ben Ali's repulsive police state and his ruling mafia in place, and again Western interests took precedence over the rights, aspirations, and property of a Muslim nation. The West lost in both cases. Both Iran and Tunisia wrested their country out of the claws of American and Israeli dominance, at least for now.

Decolonization Spreads like Wild Fire

From the beginning, it was clear that the Tunisian revolt would have a ripple effect across Muslim world. A week after the overthrow of Ben Ali, Egyptian civil society called for a "Friday of Protest and Rage" against the regime of Hosni Mubarak that had ruled them with an iron fist for 30 years. The protest started after Friday prayers, and in the first few hours it was obvious that the level of anger and determination of the Egyptians was far stronger than the loyalty of Mubarak's police, estimated to be one million strong. The people who have been beaten, tortured, humiliated, and raped in Egypt's feared police stations shed their fear and confronted Mubarak's crowd control units with bare chests. Memorable were those images of unarmed Egyptians chasing the heavily armed riot police in Cairo, Alexandria, and Sinai.



From North Africa and the Mideast to North America and the Midwest, this "Walk Like an Egyptian" image has become iconic in the stand against oppression.

In a few days of peaceful demonstrations, Egyptians showed Mubarak's police state to be a rotten paper tiger. He called in the army, whose top echelons are his protégés and allies of the United States. But as in Tunisia, the junior officers and the foot soldiers refused to open fire on their own people. The world held its breath for two

weeks while Egyptians occupied the famous Midan Tahrir in Cairo around the clock and, by day, organized demonstrations that numbered in the millions.

In the two weeks of standoff, Mubarak treated the world to a series of appalling and criminal tricks clearly designed to spread chaos and insecurity in the land and give the Egyptians a sense that life without Mubarak would devolve into crime and lawlessness. He ordered the withdrawal of his police force, already defeated and broken, and sent paid thugs who looted and assaulted people and committed wanton crimes. It was shocking to see the state spreading lawlessness and crime to instill in its own people a need for this corrupt state.

People Organize Themselves Peaceably and Help One Another

Many who know the extent to which Egyptian society has been brutalized and impoverished in the last three decades feared that the cynical and calculated retreat of the state would leave Egyptians unable to sustain the social cohesion and keep the peace by themselves. Great was their surprise when the youth of Egypt took the initiative and organized neighborhood committees and security teams to protect public property, banks, and museums. Volunteer groups swiftly formed, and we saw lawyers organizing traffic, teachers doing neighborhood watch, and doctors and nurses open street clinics. Egyptians of all walks of life mobilized. They demonstrated in the millions and cleaned up after themselves. They donated time, skills, care, food, money, and medicine. They organized garbage collection and recycling. The space they organized was not merely a civic space in the Western sense of the word, where people are united by common political interests, it was a space of genuine brotherhood and sisterhood, in which people cared for each other, looked after each other, and protected each other as they do their own families. They were, in doing so, a resounding illustration of Prophet Muhammad's injunction that the Muslim Ummah (nation) is like a single body. If one of its parts is hurting, the other parts respond to it with fever and wakefulness. It is remarkable that a people's revolt, with no discernable leadership, in a country of 85 millions, could organically and creatively and systematically organize its energies, sustain itself and the country, and triumph, in the absence of the state and in spite of Mubarak's various attempts to sow sedition and terror.

New Power Relationships in the Muslim World

Days after Egyptians deposed Mubarak, there was a revolt against the Libyan government which had ruled for 42 years. On day five of the Libyan Revolution, as these lines are being written, some facts are already discernible. It took six weeks to bring down Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia, and eighteen days for that of Mubarak in Egypt, but in Libya it took only four days for Benghazi and the Eastern province of Libya to bring down the regime.

What is collapsing in the Muslim world is not merely an autocratic regime in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya; it is U.S. and Western policies. Protests are being organized

and gaining momentum in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, and everywhere in the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia. The autocratic and feudal regimes that the United States and the West have maintained in power across the Muslim world with various forms of violence and corruption are unraveling, while popular revolts are gaining momentum and spreading.

Two weeks into the Egyptian revolution, the U.S. government was still expressing its “unshakable commitment to Israel’s security,” and Israel’s security demanded loudly that the despot stay in Egypt, that the peaceful millions of Egyptians demanding change be ruthlessly crushed, and those that survive be ruled with steel and fire. The institutions of the U.S. government were shamelessly set to work in pursuit of Israel’s clearly murderous design. The triumph of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the domino effects that they have created across the Muslim world are another setback to Western imperial policies in the Muslim world and a new challenge to the power relationship that has governed the Muslim world for centuries now in accordance with Western interests.



Jubilant protesters celebrate inside Tahrir Square after the announcement of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation in Cairo February 11, 2011. Women were important participants in protests and played active roles in organizing.

Photo: Reuters/Dylan Martinez

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