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Populist Discontent in Tunisia: An Omen for Other U.S.-Backed Regimes in the Muslim World

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The [sudden collapse](#)^[3] of the Tunisian government on Friday underscores the turmoil toward which the Muslim world* seems inescapably drifting.

In December, a young man, Mohammed Bouazizi, [set himself ablaze](#)^[4] in the town of Sidi Bouzid after Tunisian police barred him from selling fruit without a permit. The dramatic death touched off weeks of riots that forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia, ending twenty-three years of autocratic, one-party rule.

In recent years, American officials have lamented the previous despotic regime's endemic corruption and crony capitalism. A U.S. Embassy cable uncovered by Wikileaks [reveals](#)^[5]:

President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor. Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom...Compounding the problems, the GOT [Government of Tunisia] brooks no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Instead, it seeks to impose ever greater control, often using the police. The result: Tunisia is troubled and our relations are too.

Back in 2006, then U.S. Ambassador William Hudson [opined](#)^[6], "Given the fact Ben Ali has a dictatorial hold, it is hard to believe he'll voluntarily step down." Even so, "the mere fact an increasing number of Tunisians are talking about the end of the Ben Ali era is remarkable."

As Tunisia's new unity government tries to piece together a coalition with opposition and civil society forces, self-immolation reports have spread across North Africa and may become a catalyst for rebellion against other U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes. Similar demonstrations have erupted in Jordan. Protesters in Algeria and Mauritania [have set themselves on fire](#)^[7]. Already, in Egypt, [demonstrators are chanting](#)^[8] "We are next, we are next, Ben Ali, tell Mubarak he is next." [Earlier last year](#)^[9], over 1,000 political activists—youths, union workers,

university students, and journalists—rallied against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s economic and political policies. This widespread unrest confirms a grim prognosis made several years ago [10] about the demographic youth bulge in the Muslim world and the social upheavals that bulge could potentially cause. Though some Americans, perhaps understandably, will leap to the conclusion that poverty and lack of opportunity are the source of these disturbances, it appears that in many of these countries, economic penury is merely a symptom of the political oppression and rampant corruption that exists at every level of public and private activity. Indeed, U.S. policy makers faced a similar predicament with King Faisal of Iraq.

In October 1957, the State Department’s Middle East experts confessed that “the present regime lacks widespread popular support...a change of regime or a period of chronic instability brought about by successful civil commotion could only greatly endanger our interests.” Despite these troubling developments, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and other leaders in Washington were confident that fostering “a climate for economic development” would “lead to evolutionary reforms and to a broader base of support for the government.” In turn, the Iraqi leader adopted tepid measures of autocratic reform: channeling the country’s oil revenue into irrigation, transportation, and other infrastructural projects without reforming hierarchical political and social structures. On July 3, 1958, the C.I.A. concluded that Iraq’s opposition lacked “the immediate capacity to overthrow the regime.” Weeks later, a revolutionary-minded clique of Iraqi military officers overthrew the U.S.-backed monarchy. Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Lebanon, which came in response to Iraq’s coup and sought to protect the pro-Western regime of President Camille Chamoun, the U.S. National Security Council concluded that King Faisal’s cousin, King Hussein of Jordan, also lacked roots in his country, and that because Hussein’s regime was an artificial creation, the United States should not intervene on his behalf. Of course, that recommendation was relegated to the dustbin of history.

Today, as during the Cold War, policy makers in Washington seem to expect economic growth to act as a substitute for political liberty, thereby ignoring the instinctive desire for freedom. Despotism loves to adopt pseudoeconomic “reforms” to mask their coercive measures and perpetuate the status quo, but in the end, the institutionalized oppression imposed by ruling elites cannot be appeased in that way. Time will tell whether Tunisia and its neighbors evolve toward a freer and more prosperous future. But either way, human history confirms that fundamental change is a gradual and often painful process, and that more often than not forces erected to suppress individual freedoms eventually break down or unravel without—and often in spite of—U.S. intervention and meddling.

Interestingly enough, as U.C. Irvine history professor Mark LeVine notes [8], the timing of Tunisia’s revolt could not have been more fortuitous. Secretary of State Clinton was in Doha meeting with Arab political and civil society leaders. Clinton spoke of regimes whose “foundations are sinking into the sand” and who will disappear unless “reform” occurs. Ironically, these same regimes have historically been backed by Washington. Yet when Clinton was asked directly about the unfolding situation in Tunisia, she responded [8] “We can’t take sides.”

Washington can take sides, although whether it is prudent or not is a separate issue. Whereas American support for last year’s pro-democracy movement in Iran would have likely been the kiss of death for the pro-democracy movement, given Washington’s unsavory record in backing the shah, extending diplomatic support to a political emancipation movement in Tunisia would be significantly different. In that case, Washington would be visibly abandoning its long-time dictatorial client—similar to the ^{eleventh-}hour moves during the 1980s in both South Korea and the Philippines. Those changes, however belated, helped salvage a decent relationship with successor governments—and with the populations of those countries.

The Obama administration can embrace what's being dubbed the "Jasmine Revolt," and push other U.S.-backed despots to end censorship, political repression, and address their people's demands for economic and political reforms. Although such a stance would likely do little to limit recruitment levels of militant outfits in the "Islamic Maghreb," it does have the potential to substantially enhance America's image in the Muslim world. However, Washington could lose whatever goodwill it reaps if its support to Tunisian protesters smacks of hypocrisy. After all, part of the problem with the perception of America in the Muslim world is Washington's double standard in calling for more open civil societies without actually supporting them in countries like Egypt, where antiterrorism laws are often used as a cover to suppress threats to the ruling regime.

Since the end of World War II, U.S. foreign policy has been pulled in opposing directions, trying to strike a difficult balance between interests and idealism. But the United States is doomed to repeat its errors if what Clinton says ^[11] is true: that America will emphasize reforms that focus on economic empowerment, rather than political change.

Clinton has said that leaders of the region are in need of "a real vision" for the future. Although the desire for self-determination and political emancipation are principles well within America's liberal tradition, authoritarian leaders that suppress the popular demands of their people may not get that "real vision" from Washington. If that happens, America's reputation in that part of the world may go from bad to worse.

* The "Muslim world" is a problematic construct used reluctantly for lack of a better alternative.

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[4] <http://wtop.com/?nid=105&sid=2236647>

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/217138>

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[8] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/01/20111167156465567.html>

[9] http://www.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/01/16/entelis.north.africa.intifada/index.html?eref=mrss_igoogle_cnn

[10] http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html

[11] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/13/AR2011011304327.html>