

Changing a Stagnant Political Order? End of Ben Ali Era in Tunisia

by [J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](#), [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](#)

J. Scott Carpenter is an adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Today, President Zine al-Abadine Ben Ali of Tunisia stepped down after days of worsening riots and, coincidentally, one day after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bluntly criticized Middle Eastern leaders during a speech in Qatar, where she accused them of tolerating "corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order." In Tunis, it was announced that Prime Minister Muhammad Ghannouchi has taken over as interim president. Ghannouchi said Ben Ali was "temporarily unable to exercise his duties." (Arab television stations report that he has flown abroad.) Ben Ali, who had ruled for twenty-three years, had earlier promised to step down when his term ends in 2014 and hold parliamentary elections within six months. Now the Arab world is watching to see which other regime might be vulnerable and what the U.S. response will be.

Root Causes

Tensions have been rising steadily within Tunisian society over the past decade. According to a 2009 State Department cable released by WikiLeaks and published by a British newspaper, "President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor." Frustrations stem not only from economic malaise, but also from suffocating repression and increasingly visible kleptocracy within the ruling family. The past few years have witnessed a number of tremors that should have given the government adequate forewarning of the current political earthquake. For six months in 2008, concerted labor action froze the mining industry in Redeyef. And last year, protests forced the government to reverse a decision that appeared to benefit Tunisians close to the Ben Ali family. These and other protests were large and well organized, but they took place on the country's geographical and political periphery, and were little noticed by the international press. Moreover, they did not connect fully with the deeper malaise in Tunisian society. In December, however, a young Tunisian man immolated himself in apparent

frustration at being prevented from selling vegetables on the streets of his hometown. In death, Muhammad Bouazizi came to epitomize the humiliation and powerlessness so many Tunisians feel on a daily basis. Young Tunisians -- the vast majority of the population -- now had a symbol around which to rally and create what is fast becoming a fundamental rupture of the state.

The demonstrations have been fueled by several factors, foremost of which is the potent combination of unemployment and underemployment. Tunisian unemployment has long been fairly high -- over 13 percent in 2009 -- but it has been aggravated recently by the concentration of joblessness among the burgeoning youth population. According to the World Bank, nearly 30 percent of Tunisians age 20-24 are unemployed, while young university graduates face nearly 25 percent joblessness. Although youths are being educated at higher rates, this schooling has not translated to improved economic prospects.

Recent years have been particularly difficult for the Tunisian economy. As a result of the global economic downturn, the country faced economic contractions between 2007 and 2009. This has meant even fewer jobs, particularly in tourism, a major sector catering to Europeans seeking cheap Mediterranean sun. Meanwhile, declines in state revenue have coincided with ongoing efforts to implement economic reforms, including an unpopular program to gradually reduce subsidies on some commodities, including food. Earlier attempts to reduce subsidies in the 1980s met with riots and were called off. The latest price hikes were implemented last summer.

Popular dissatisfaction has only been exacerbated by the authoritarian regime's excesses. Tunisians have long been aware of state repression, but lately, with the help of the internet, they are also becoming well acquainted with the voracious corruption of Ben Ali and his ruling clique. According to the previously mentioned 2009 State Department cable, "Corruption in the inner circle is growing. Even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it, and the chorus of complaints is rising." The cable detailed how Ben Ali's daughter's household included "a large tiger, named Pasha, living in a cage, which consumes four chickens a day," reminiscent of "Uday Hussein's lion cage in Baghdad."

Possibilities for Regional Contagion

Tunisia's riots have coincided with civil disturbances in Algeria and Jordan, states facing similar challenges of joblessness and underemployment. With large gas and oil export revenues/reserves and low foreign debt, Algeria is in better financial condition than Tunisia. But lower global oil prices in 2009 stressed state coffers, while Algerians were affected by higher world commodity prices. Like Tunisia, Algeria is an authoritarian state, with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime receiving only slightly better Freedom House ratings than Tunis. Perhaps the most important similarity, however, is that Algeria also has a very young population with bleak economic prospects. Although the country's unemployment rate has decreased from more than 15 percent in 1995 to 10 percent today, it remains a leading source of disaffection.

Jordan has seen civil unrest in recent weeks as well. Although many have likened these disturbances to those in Tunisia and Algeria, they were inspired more by tribal tensions, albeit related to economic opportunities. The kingdom is treating the antigovernment riots in Maan -- an impoverished city with a long history of protests -- with the utmost seriousness. For example, King Abdullah has announced that he will temporarily reinstate state subsidies on some basic commodities by lowering prices. Apparently, Washington is concerned as well, so much so that it increased its assistance package to Jordan by \$100 million this year -- effectively underwriting Amman's subsidies -- to help stave off discontent.

Although these are the only states that have thus far seen popular discontent, several other Arab regimes are concerned about spillover and have taken steps to insulate themselves. Libya and Morocco, like Jordan, have lowered prices on staples. And Egypt -- whose 2008 wheat crisis was so severe that the military had to be called in to bake bread for the general population -- is no doubt watching developments closely.

What Can Washington and Europe Do?

The most striking aspect of Tunisia's countrywide protests has been their wholly indigenous character. President Ben Ali's assertions that the unrest was being instigated by outsiders and led by extremists has only served to reinforce public suspicions regarding how out of touch he was.

The challenge now for the United States and the European Union is to ensure a smooth transition to a new government. The United States has far less leverage over Tunis than do the EU and France. (As the leaked State Department cable put it, "By many measures, Tunisia should be a close ally. But it is not.") The United States provides no economic assistance to Tunisia, and its military financing program is paltry -- a typical complaint from Tunis. Despite this, Tunis provides important counterterrorism cooperation and was held up as a regional model during the Bush administration. It is the EU, however, which fuels Tunisia's economy through large cash infusions and has a robust trade relationship with the country.

Conclusion

The events in Tunisia demonstrate to Arabs around the region how brittle even the most advanced police state can be when resolutely confronted by its citizens. This lesson will not likely be lost on Egyptians, Jordanians, Algerians, and others. By almost all indicators, from education to economy, Tunisia ranks far ahead of other Arab nations in the region. Yet the government's failure to improve the basis of its legitimacy, ensure widespread benefits from economic reforms, and create a path to meaningful political participation has brought the country to the brink of revolution. It has also provided a dramatic and early 2011 reminder to the Obama administration that the perceived trade-off between stability and democratic reform is false and that, furthermore, what one perceives as stable can change within a matter of days.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas. David Schenker is the Institute's Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics. ❖

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