Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution' and its aftermath: defining new expectations for the Arab world?

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Tunisia is well known for its dream-like Mediterranean beaches, but it has never hit the British headlines for its vibrant political activity – since independence in 1956, it has been traditionally easy to anticipate election results, as the country has only had two presidents in 54 years. That was until an unemployed grocer, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself in the small town of Sidi-Bouzid on 17 December. This desperate act of protest sparked what would become the 'Jasmine Revolution', which saw the flight of a president who had been in office for 23 years, always re-elected with scores flirting with 100% of votes.

Although it is an unprecedented event in the Arab world, this popular uprising itself is less interesting than what will blossom out of it in Tunisia, in the Arab world, and in Euro-Mediterranean relations. The next few weeks will see a complex struggle between members of the old regime in search for a new lease of life, representatives of recently legalised parties and a civil society that would now like to reap the rewards of its sacrifices. Whilst the army has so far demonstrated its intention to protect the population and to remain apolitical, the unusually strong trade union UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers) is likely to play a moderating role, perhaps even to act as arbiter between the various centrifugal forces that will inevitably hit the country.

The Tunisian events have had a wide echo throughout the Arab world. Self-immolation has become a major means of expressing political discontent, with many cases taking place from Cairo to Nouakchott. Arab leaders have markedly abstained from commenting on the regime change in Tunisia, with the notable exception of Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi – who suggested Tunisians should adopt the Libyan political model of direct democracy ('Jamahiriya') whilst, paradoxically, regretting the demise of his friend Zine Abidine Ben Ali and recommending his return to power. There are many variables which might prevent the spread of the movement throughout the Arab world: population sizes, underground resources, cash flows, political traditions and the lack of surprise effect will all have an impact on possible aftershocks elsewhere in the Arab world.

Regardless of the final outcome of the 'Jasmine Revolution', this grassroots movement which has been able to rout such an efficient police state poses a number of key questions for European countries, which used to be Ben Ali's staunchest supporters.

Has the focus on security threats instigated by radical Islamic movements distracted policy-makers from other ways of approaching the complex societies of the Arab world? What are the best ways to ensure that Euro-Mediterranean initiatives are not limited to security questions but also genuinely help local populations out of poverty? Bearing in mind that the rationale for most undemocratic regimes is that they bring stability and relative prosperity in exchange for civil liberties, what happens when governments cannot deliver their side of the deal, especially as a result of the global economic crisis? In just one month, Tunisians have shaken decade-old assumptions and, clearly, adjustments will have to be made in the conceptualisation of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

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