

The political, economic and social factors contributing to the emergence of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010-2011

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the main causes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010-2011 which brought down Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's government and resulted in the democratization of the African country. Its outline follows the three main factors which contributed to the emergence of the revolution. Firstly, political factors such as corruption and state violence created an unstable environment favouring revolution and fuelled and increased the population's will to rebel and change the situation of the country. Secondly, economic factors like unemployment and a high inflation were one of the reasons the people

were unhappy and wanted change. Economic causes also explain the universality of the message of the Jasmine revolution and the unique participation of the youth in the protests. Finally, social factors such as the high use of social media like Facebook and Twitter and the "youth bulge" of the Arab region provide another explanation for the inclusion of young adults in the conflict. Social media also explains how the revolution developed to last and sustain in time, resulting in the democratization of Tunisia, the only country having participated in the Arab Spring achieving this. In addition, this paper links the emergence of the

Arab Spring in Tunisia with a general theory on the causes of revolutions. Indeed, Goodwin's general analysis on revolutions which focuses on political factors, named the state-centred perspective, explained in his book "No Other Way Out", can be used to explain how revolution began but lacks further economic and social analysis.

A revolution is the sudden and radical change of government or social order in a particular country. Tunisia underwent a revolution from December 2010 to January 2011, resulting in the fleeing of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, former leader of the state since 1987 and the democratization of the country. The Tunisian Revolution, or Jasmine Revolution also led to the

Arab Spring, a series of major conflicts and revolutions in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain and minor protests and demonstrations in Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Sudan, Djibouti, Mauritania, Palestine and Saudi Arabia. The most important conflicts emerging from the Arab Spring were the Syrian Civil War, The Egyptian Crisis, the Libyan Civil War and the Yemeni Civil War. This essay will explain the emergence and occurrence of the Arab Spring in Tunisia by examining the political factors, such as corruption and lack of civil rights, linked to Goodwin's state-centred perspective, economic factors, like low conditions of life and high unemployment, and

finally social factors, for instance the large proportion of youths in the population and the uncommon high use of social media.

First of all, political factors were a major cause of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Even though every conflict needs a tiny spark, in this case the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17th 2010, a local vendor victim of police violence, the long-lasting corruption, lack of political freedoms and oppression in the authoritarian state had much more of an influence on the birth of the revolution. Since 1987, Tunisia was ruled by a Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, with the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RDC). Its government was defined as

authoritarian and dictatorial as the country only had one party, interfered with the work of human rights organizations like the Tunisian Human Rights League and restricted basic civil rights such as the freedom of press, speech and association.

The extreme longevity of Ben Ali's government brought out a problem of legitimacy, common to Arab countries like Egypt and Libya. Indeed, after a bloodless coup d'état, 23 years of leadership and five consecutive five-years terms, each won by an implausibly high margin, the government's legitimacy was cynically questioned by the population and fuelled anger as well as a will for change and new, fair elections. The authoritarian regime

affected everyone, except those privileged by the system and only contributed in “uniting the whole society it governed against it” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 21).

Ben Ali’s Tunisia was also a corrupted, repressive, police state which responded to the demonstrations and protests in December and January using violence and fear. The political elite was corrupted with bonuses and privileges and a mafia of families was created extorting money from privatizing national businesses. This increased awareness of the country’s corruption revealed with the internet only “deepened feelings of hatred among Tunisian youth toward their rulers” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 21) and fuelled the population’s will to rebel.

The state’s response to protests was also problematic as militants were often met with ignorance from the government until Ben Ali’s appearance the 13th of January, where he promised not to seek another term in 2014 and vowed to reduce food prices and loosen restrictions on Internet use. The police also used force against protestors, it was “systemic” to “counter popular demands” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 28), resulting in the killing of 338 Tunisians throughout the revolution, according to Fox News. Police violence in response to demonstrations backfired in the whole Arab world, not just Tunisia, and was one of the main reasons for the start of the civil wars in Syria and Libya. It attracted even more

support for the protesters and increased the revolution's popularity.

These political factors contributing to the emergence of the Tunisian's revolution are directly in accordance with Goodwin's general analysis on revolutions, named the state-centred perspective, explained in his book "No Other Way Out". For him, revolutions are mainly caused by "political oppression and violence, typically brutal and indiscriminate" (Goodwin 2001, 3) in comparison to economic exploitation and social inequality. This theory therefore focuses on the state, Goodwin believes that revolutions and their development are dependent to the state and that they will be more likely to emerge "in opposition to states that are

configured and that act in certain ways" (Goodwin 2001, 25), that is authoritatively and violently. The Tunisian revolution can certainly be explained by the state-centred perspective, as it contains the right elements defined by Goodwin such as a corrupt, authoritarian government, prone to violence. Nevertheless, the perspective fails to analyse factors that are not political or from the state, such as economic factors.

Secondly, economic factors were another major cause of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. The whole Arab world was in a situation of economic distress before the revolution which largely contributed to the population's anger and wish for change. Inflation and

unemployment were both high which emphasized the region's economic recession. For example, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, in Tunisia, the real's GDP annual change went from 3.7% in 2010 to -0.7% in 2011. The crisis was even worse in Libya who had a real's GDP annual change of -28.2% in 2011. Economic recession was linked to the government's inaction and change was needed to improve the economic situation.

With the economic recession came a rise in inflation. The most important was the food inflation, affecting the whole population without exception. Even though inflation rose before the revolution, it peaked in March 2011, where food cost 2.1 times more than

it did in 2005 according to the FAO Food Price index. Inflation lowered the population's purchasing power and aggravated already poor living conditions. Indeed, in 2010, 20.5% of the population lived below the national poverty line, according to the World Bank. Some protests were directly aimed at high costs of living and raising unemployment like the demonstration in Thala on 3 January 2011, which ended with the landing of a tear gas cannister in a local mosque.

Unemployment was also very high, reaching 16% in Tunisia, in 2011 (Economist Intelligence Unit), and even higher rates among the youths. Unemployment directly caused an increase of support to the revolution

amongst scholars and “led to massive participation in the revolution, especially in the deprived areas of the country.” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 21). The rise in unemployment is also directly linked to Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, triggering the revolution after his suicide in consequence to the loss of his job. A large portion of the population could relate to Bouazizi’s despair and believed participating in the revolution would bring the necessary changes. As Brinton says, “revolutions are born of hope” (Brinton 1938, 250).

Finally, social factors were the last main cause for the emergence of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. The Tunisian revolution

was special in the way it used social media and internet to defend and spread its opinions without any leader, a clear ideology or program. For Aleya-Sghaier, it was a “revolution of dignity” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 19). In such a state with a lack of freedom of press and speech, the internet proved to be “a significant organizational tool, a transmitter of information, and an instrument of mobilization and media attention” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 38). It gave Tunisians freedom of speech and even informed them on events around the country and the whole Arab region. Social media are also harder for the government to control and censor, Egypt even resorted to an internet

shutdown on January 28, 2011. Facebook and Twitter were the most used social media, with 8908 mentions of #sidibouid, a popular hashtag in Tunisia in reference to the city where uprisings began, on January 14, the day of Ben Ali's resignation. Though social media weren't a direct cause of the revolution, they largely contributed to the revolution's development and its sustainability.

Another social cause of the revolution was the Tunisian "youth bulge" (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 21). Indeed, 15 to 29 years old Tunisians make up 29% of the population according to the World Bank. This new generation didn't see any future for itself in this corrupt state, frustrated by the unemployment

and illegitimate government. The youths constituted the core of the hope-led revolution, they were "its initiators, propagandists, and primary protagonists" (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 31) and felt "restraint, cramp, ... rather than downright crushing oppression" (Brinton 1938, 250). A contrast was also marked between the aging elite and determined youths, illustrated by technological gap concerning social media and internet.

The last social factor contributing to the Arab Spring in Tunisia was the national appeal of the revolution. Its message was universal, simple and patriotic. Protestors waved national flags during demonstrations and shouted the most popular of the rallying calls: "the people want the fall of

the regime”. Its national appeal is also a reason why the Tunisian revolution, or Jasmine revolution sparked the Arab Spring all over the Arab world. The revolution wasn’t only Tunisian but truly universal and its message easily resonated in the region.

The Tunisian revolution ended on January 14, 2011, the day of Ben Ali’s resignation. A democratization process began soon after Ghannouchi’s resignation on February 27, 2011 which resulted in Caïd Essebsi’s election in November 2014, during the first free presidential elections of the country. The Tunisian revolution remains the only conflict of the Arab Spring to result in full democratization of the country, with some conflicts still being

ongoing today, such as the Syrian Civil war and the Yemeni Civil War. The outcomes of the revolution then follow Brinton’s idea of a “honeymoon” (Brinton 1938, 91) period, following the end of the conflict. But according to Brinton, a revolution could follow the English, French and Russian pattern and end “in something like dictatorship—Cromwell, Bonaparte, Stalin” (Brinton 1938, 24). This theory could still hold true, the revolution having ended only eight years ago.

In conclusion, the Arab Spring in Tunisia emerged because of political, economic and social factors. The conflict can be partially explained by Goodwin’s state-centred perspective on revolutions as it is

linked to the country's political causes for the start of the revolution such as corruption, lack of civil rights the legitimacy problem of the regime. Nevertheless, the existence of the revolution is also explained by economic factors, such as a rise in unemployment and inflation and social factors, like the high proportion of youths in the population and the use of social media and internet.

Bibliography

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