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The Toppling of the Tunisian Regime: Ramifications for the Arab World

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The overthrow of the Tunisian regime, which prompted authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Bin Ali to flee the country on Friday, January 14, 2011, is an unprecedented event among Arab countries. In its short history, the Arab world – which abounds with autocratic regimes – has experienced many military coups that toppled the existing ruler and replaced him with another strongman. However, in recent decades, military coups have nearly disappeared as a result of stronger internal security apparatuses; growth in the size of armies, which has made organizing military coups more difficult; and pervasive mass media. A battalion commander can no longer carry out a coup by taking over a radio station. In the Tunisian case, and for the first time, an autocratic regime was toppled as a result of a popular uprising.

The Tunisian regime fell because it lost control over mass demonstrations that began when an unemployed university graduate working as a peddler set himself on fire after police confiscated his cart. Throughout the demonstrations, the abundance of media channels and the subversive use of the internet played an important role, as in the demonstrations in Iran more than a year ago. Regimes in the Middle East no longer have a monopoly on the mass media, which makes it difficult for them to withhold information and maintain their rule. The internet was also an important conduit for the waves of responses from other Arab countries.

Indeed, the fall of the regime in Tunisia fomented discontent among the public elsewhere in the Arab world, where those at the helm are generally alienated from the masses. In various Arab countries, protestors have rallied in support of change in Tunisia, spouting defiant rhetoric against the regimes of their own countries. This phenomenon was particularly blatant in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and Libya.

The fall of the regime in Tunisia also departed from the familiar scripts of Arab regimes falling in a popular uprising. These scenarios generally predicted a popular uprising led by Islamist elements against the backdrop of strengthened Islamic movements in the Arab world. From this point of view Tunisia is an exception, since under the Bin Ali regime it has undergone a process of modernization and fast economic development. In addition,

the regime confronted the local Islamic movement with an iron fist, and Islamic leaders that survived fled abroad. The popular uprising was waged mainly by Western-educated young people who were led by activists from the democratic opposition. In fact, this was an uprising by the social class that was essential to the regime in its struggle against the Islamic movement. In contrast, in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan, the democratic opposition does not have a great deal of influence in the local society, while the Islamic movements have a wide circle of supporters and wield much influence.

Nonetheless, it is hard to foresee the outcome of democratic elections in Tunisia after such a long period of autocratic rule, which has prevented the populace from expressing its genuine inclinations. True, the exiled Islamic movement leader declared that his movement would not run its own presidential candidate in forthcoming elections, apparently aware of the difficulty in building a political infrastructure for elections in such a short time. However, the parliamentary elections could reveal Islamic leanings that were concealed during the previous regime, especially in rural areas outside the large cities. This means that free elections, if they are in fact held, could produce a model of a functioning democratic regime or, alternatively, demonstrate the success of the Islamic movement in taking over an Arab state through democratic elections.

Possible reactions in the Arab world to the Tunisian events should be examined in two time frames. In the short term, the demonstrations and protests in some Arab countries could escalate to the point that the regimes would be hard pressed to control them. This scenario pertains primarily to situations in which the regimes use too much force, causing bloodshed and a chain reaction. At this point, it seems that the regimes in most Arab countries have a great deal of experience in controlling situations where the crowd is whipped into a frenzy, and therefore they could manage these events and quell unrest.

Indeed, against the successful example, at least in the short term, of Tunisia is the failure of the mass demonstrations in Iran in 2009, which were firmly suppressed by the Iranian Islamic regime. In any case any regime that wants to suppress a popular uprising at the outset will face a dilemma about how much force to use. Too much force at the start of a demonstration is liable to spark a counter-response that will bring about a more wide scale uprising. However, a response that is seen as sluggish is liable to project a lack of firmness on the part of the regime and encourage those involved in the uprising.

The more difficult question, however, how this uprising will influence Arab countries in the longer term, depends on the developments in Tunisia. If the elections in Tunisia take place in an orderly fashion and seat a Western-oriented government that succeeds in establishing and maintaining a democratic regime, they will produce a model that can influence other Arab publics and enhance domestic democratic oppositions. Two other scenarios – chaos and the democratic opposition's inability to form a stable government, and the rise of the Islamic movement to power through democratic means – will provide tremendous encouragement to a rising Islamist wave in the Arab world, strengthen the

Islamic movements, and even encourage them to take concrete steps towards the overthrow of their host regimes.

The model of revolution through popular uprising will be studied by various opposition movements, which will likely aspire to imitate it. However, there are important differences between the respective Arab societies. Tunisia, for example, with a relatively small but largely Western-educated population, is different from Egypt or Algeria, which have enormous populations. Future uprisings will also to a large extent depend on the particular regime's determination to maintain its rule and its ability to maintain strong security apparatuses and build broad strata in the population that have a vested interest in maintaining the regime.

Israel should be concerned mainly by the developments in its immediate vicinity, i.e., Egypt and Jordan. For some time now there has been a twilight atmosphere in Egypt because of President Mubarak's age and his health, and the uncertainty concerning his successor. Although Mubarak is attempting to groom his son Gamal as his successor, there is much opposition in Egypt to this idea. However, the regime in Egypt has succeeded in building effective security organs and a solid elite that has an interest in the continuity of the regime, and this elite includes all the security organizations, including the military. In Jordan, which is suffering a prolonged economic crisis, there is also unrest because of the tension between residents of Transjordanian origin and those of Palestinian origin; the not-insignificant support for the Muslim Brotherhood; and the dissatisfaction of elements in the Transjordanian tribes, who feel that they have been pushed to the sidelines. It appears that in the short term the two regimes are stable, but what can be expected in the longer term is of serious concern.