Revolutionary Challenges in Tunisia and Egypt: Generations in Conflict

written by Stuart Schaar | June 30, 2011

THE GREAT SYRIAN POET, Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998) more than four decades ago called on a new Arab generation to break with their dictatorial, bankrupt, and corrupt leaders and their supporters. Qabbani, from his London exile, hoped that young people would transform the Arab world into a new free and vibrant society where citizens could develop their full potential and flourish. His prophetic vision in "The Catastrophe of Arab Defeat" could not be realized until new technologies in the contemporary Information Age empowered young digital-savvy men and women. By the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 mobile phones, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter gave a new generation the means to organize revolts against police states in the North African countries of Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. The power of numbers — tens and even hundreds of thousands of hits on the same sites and the resulting massive crowds that turned out to demonstrate — allowed internet users and other citizens to break the bonds of fear that had held multitudes of people prisoners of conformity and intimidation.[2] When mass protests broke out, dictators everywhere rushed to grant concessions to their "subjects" such as raising subsidies on food staples, building affordable housing, giving monthly payments to unemployed youth, distributing cash, and increasing the salaries of their police forces in an attempt to ward off revolutions.

In recent years, new Arab media supplied independent sources of information to wide audiences, as the number of periodicals and satellite TV stations multiplied in the Gulf, other Arab States, and Western Europe. New networks formed to diffuse these publications and media over large geographic areas. Many new television channels led by Saudi Arabia's *Al-Arabiya* and Qatar's *Al-Jazeera*, broadcasting in Arabic and employing journalists homegrown and raided from Western channels, offered unadulterated news without Western spins. The staffs of news magazines and newspapers published in Arabic translated the best articles gathered from mainstream and alternative presses throughout the world. Arabs could follow global events without learning foreign languages or needing external intermediaries as news providers. This media explosion offered print and on-line readers and TV-viewers in-depth coverage of world events and analysis, which aimed at educating large masses of people and added to their political sophistication.[3]

A large array of news in Arabic democratized the media. At the same time, internet social networks provided users with a myriad of sites where individuals could write and receive messages in their own as well as foreign vernaculars. Poor people began learning foreign languages in order to navigate the worldwide web. They now participated in the Information Age along with the richer, privileged, and more educated youthful elites. The latter launched a movement of revolt, which spread through poor neighborhoods where internet cafés proliferated. Usage of the internet varies from 25-40 percent in the Arab world, making it a mass media of great importance for its mainly young users. Spreading the word of revolt to urban slums and mobilizing youth for mass demonstrations for the first time became possible through texting, tweets, and postings in Arabic on social media sites and mobile phones.

Tunisian and Egyptian Youth Collaboration Since 2005

BETWEEN 2005 AND 2008, middle class young leaders from Tunisia and Egypt, both ruled by dictators, collaborated in preparing for large-scale nonviolent revolts, which by the end of 2010 began shaking the Arab world. As early as 2005 they read the writings of an American professor,

Gene Sharp, who, in several books and pamphlets, laid out blueprints for overthrowing dictatorships without resorting to force.[4] They studied how Mohandas Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King in the United States marshaled nonviolence to galvanize mass protest movements that successfully mobilized millions of people to liberate India from British rule and gain civil rights for African-Americans living in the United States. In 2008 some Egyptian bloggers, then in their twenties, visited Serbia where a youth movement allied with factory workers had orchestrated a nonviolent revolt against their dictator, Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, forcing him from power. Meeting with youthful members of the Serbian Otpour (Resistance) movement, which helped orchestrate the revolt, the Egyptians learned how to organize a large-scale decentralized campaign, characterized by mobility, without a permanent office and recognized leaders (to avoid arrests). With good humor and much inventiveness, the Serbian youth leaders had created simple and forceful posters and repeated the same slogans continually. By doing so, the Serbs succeeded in eradicating fear of Milosevic's police state in the minds of demonstrators and transformed them into revolutionaries. When returning to Cairo, the Egyptian emissaries shared what they had learned with their Tunisian counterparts.[5]

The revolts in both North African countries did not break out suddenly in reaction to local events. The youthful leadership had time to develop the theoretical bases for revolution and benefit from experiences elsewhere, thereby allowing them to avoid pitfalls stemming from inexperience. They learned that they had to have on hand when demonstrations began considerable supplies of fresh lemons, onions, and vinegar as antidotes to tear gas as well as bottles of soda and milk to apply to eyes when the police or army flung canisters of gas into crowds. They likewise knew that they needed medical personal to treat any wounded and clinics filled with first aid supplies. They prepared rudimentary body armor composed of kitchen pots to protect heads, cardboard and crushed plastic bottles, which they placed under demonstrators' clothes to protect against body blows from armed thugs and rock throwing regime loyalists.

Anyone watching both revolts on TV had to be amazed at the high level of organization of the leadership. Senior members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, after initially boycotting the demonstrations, joined at a critical moment when armed pro-Mubarak supporters, including police officers wearing civilian clothes, attacked them in Liberation Square in the center of Cairo. The experienced older Islamists helped organize the crowds into brigades to prepare rocks for throwing against their adversaries. They also divided the demonstrators into task-oriented groups, imposing a solid organization on amorphous protestors. In effect, they saved the day. But they had to share the limelight with thousands of young people from all walks of life — men and women — who risked their lives daily by returning to the Square to join their fellow protesters. Money collected from local supporters allowed leaders to buy blankets and in Egypt to purchase tents for those staying overnight on protest sites. A volunteer convoy system developed, bringing food and water to demonstrators. In Cairo, a croissant brigade supplied those who slept at Liberation Square with pastries, tea, and coffee as dawn rose. The leaders of the revolt decided to emphasize one demand and repeated it over again, interspersed with the singing of respective national anthems. "Down with Ben Ali," the Tunisian strongman, and "Down with Mubarak," the Egyptian dictator, became the slogans that each country's demonstraters reiterated tirelessly.

When Wael Ghonim, the thirty year-old Google executive who helped organize the campaign, set up shop in Cairo, he applied his knowledge of marketing and created a revolutionary brand that Egyptians could relate to, thereby facilitating their joining demonstrations. In June 2010, he placed on Facebook photographs of a dead victim from Alexandria, Khalid Said, before his police tormentors tortured him and after, a horrible photo showing his battered and terribly disfigured face. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians entered the site and left in revulsion, ready to revolt. After having spent twelve days in prison blindfolded in January 2011, Ghonim gave an interview to a

popular talk-show hostess, in which he broke down in tears over the deaths of protesters while he was confined. His sincerity, humility, and spontaneous grief galvanized those Egyptians on the sidelines who joined the demonstrations, swelling their ranks multifold.

The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia

EACH COUNTRY HAD ITS OWN HISTORY of repression and death that pushed its population to revolt. In Tunisia under Ben Ali, the one-party state brooked no opposition. His Minister of Interior rigged all national elections while Ben Ali made Parliament into a rubber stamp for presidential decisions. The president's wife, Leila Trabulsi's family milked the country for billions of dollars and invested their wealth in overseas properties and bank accounts. Successful businesses faced shakedowns from members of "the family" amounting to some 25 percent of profits or annual worth. Anyone investing in areas dominated by the family quickly faced official harassment, denials of import and export licenses, and either had to close, or share their businesses with one or another of the Trabulsi clan. Madame Ben Ali, originally a hairdresser, bought a PhD from Tours University in France, much to its shame, and rumors spread that she intended to run for president when her husband stepped down or succumbed to prostate cancer, which he fought in recent years. The police also took bribes for minor infractions and in the past year, petty corruption in their ranks began to rise to unprecedented levels.

Unemployed youth, especially students with bachelor's degrees (equivalent to a U.S. associate's degree from a Community College), faced new dilemmas in recent years. In order to lessen vociferous complaints about few students passing end of the year examinations — the pass rate a few years ago was a mere 35 percent — Ben Ali forced university professors to inflate grades. In the last couple of years 70 percent of those who sat for the bachelor's examination passed. Previously, a student who received a grade of 16 out of 20 could expect to enter one of the important professional schools in the country or overseas. With grade inflation, students recently need 18 or 19 out of 20 to enter such schools, leaving the elite even angrier, since it was almost impossible to score that high on any examination.

On December 17, 2010, in Sidi Bouzid, a small forgotten town in the center of Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six year old high school drop out and fruit peddler, whose produce a local police officer confiscated, set himself on fire before the town's municipality. The next day, lawyers, wearing their black court robes, marched on that site where Bouazizi's mother, surrounded by members of her family, demonstrated and demanded redress. The victim's cousin, Ali, filmed the scene and placed it on YouTube. That galvanized a much wider protest movement. One of their own had been singled out and slapped in the face by a local policewoman before some fifty witnesses, thereby wounding the collective pride of Sidi Bouzid's citizens. The immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi provided the spark that exploded into general revolt.[6]

His death on January 4, 2011 set off mass national demonstrations, which led to the flight of the country's President, Zine Al-Abadine Ben Ali with his wife Leila Trabulsi and some of their family to Saudi Arabia. The Tunisians had internalized the plight of the 26 year old and, suddenly, many of the country's youth, under or unemployed themselves, felt assaulted by a political system mired in corruption and favoritism, which tyrannized them and took away their dignity. Overnight, they lost their fear of the dreaded 53,000 strong national police force, (a smaller number than most people thought, according to the first post-revolutionary Minister of Interior) and found the courage to die for their freedom. The transformation took everyone by surprise and, under the weight of determined crowds throughout the country, men and women of every class and ideological background confronted armed police and members of the country's single party's militia in a startling show of courage, reminiscent of earlier periods of Tunisian nationalist history, that suddenly put the small country on the map. The Jasmine revolution, named after Tunisia's national

flower that both men and women carry or wear, became a model for the rest of the Arab world to emulate.

The Egyptian Revolution

EGYPT HAD THE LARGEST AND MOST important popular uprising. On January 25, the anniversary of a police revolt in 1952 in the town of Ismailiya near the Suez Canal that had led to the overthrow of the ruling *khedive* (king) and the creation of the military government secretly led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser, another popular explosion broke out. Young opponents of the regime, led by youth from the April 6th Movement (commemorating a workers' strike on that date a few years earlier) using their cell phones and social media sites called one of their periodic demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak's regime.[7] Surprised by the surge in the numbers of protestors amounting to tens of thousands and inspired by what had happened in Tunisia, young activists who had prepared for this moment over several years now found themselves at the head of a revolutionary movement. The crowd took over Cairo's Liberation Square and the revolt spread to Alexandria, Suez, and other Egyptian cities. Opposition political party rank-and-file, including the youth wing of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood broke ranks with their elders and joined the people on Liberation Square, emboldening them to call for the dissolution of the Mubarak regime. After eighteen days of mass protests, many of them marked by violence provoked by pro-Mubarak supporters, the ranks of revolutionaries swelled all over Egypt. Workers, demanding pay hikes and improved benefits, went on strike for economist reasons and paralyzed the country's economy. The army stayed mostly neutral, stating publicly that they would not fire on the protesting crowds. In all, over 365 people lost their lives and more than 5,000 wounded ended up in hospitals and makeshift clinics.

The United States waffled, one day calling publicly for Mubarak to stay in power, the next calling for his retirement from the political scene, and then they reversed themselves under pressure from allied states such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Jordan. The rulers of these states wanted President Mubarak to stay in power. Finally on February 11, 2011 the High Military Council staged a coup, with the blessing of the demonstrators, and sent President Mubarak and his wife to the southern resort town of Sharm al-Shaykh. When Omar Suleiman, the caretaker Vice President (appointed by Mubarak), announced that the president had resigned and had handed power to the military, Egypt broke out in gala street parties. These were reminiscent of the celebrations all over Europe and the United States at the close of the Second World War.

Recurring mass demonstrations in Liberation Square every Friday kept pressure on the transitional military supreme council to prepare for elections for a new parliament and president. They forced out Suleiman, the former head of Egypt's military intelligence. In Tunisia protestors at the Kasbah before the prime minister's office staged multiple events to remove the officials left over from Ben Ali's regime, including the prime minister himself. Their continued actions forced the new military-backed regime to appoint Béji Caid Essebsi, an 84 year old former interior and foreign minister from the Bourguiba era, to lead a new government.

On Fridays following noon prayers masses of people gathered in Tunis and Cairo to keep the pressure on their respective militaries and transitional governments. Every time the crowds surged in numbers, the military in both states granted concessions.

The revolutions affected the two countries' economies both negatively and positively. Strikes broke out, with workers and administrators demanding salary increases and purges of directors appointed by the old regime. Tourism, a key sector of North African economies, fell dramatically as Europeans were frightened away by the uprisings. Many hotels were forced to close and thousands of workers found themselves jobless, adding to post-revolutionary jitters. Many expatriates returned from abroad, however, bringing skills and capital with them, which will have positive effects on

future growth. Both states promised to create new jobs, build affordable housing, and subsidize food staples in order to control rising prices. The Washington consensus, whereby the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund forced both states to privatize industries, shrink the state sector, and lower subsidies came under attack as a prelude to rethinking the entire policy of liberalization as espoused by the United States and the European Union. Both states will need bail-out funds to meet the demands of their revolutionary populations.

The Islamists

DICTATORIAL RULERS such as Ben Ali and Mubarak had Western support in return for their active role in the War on Terrorism and their aggressive persecution of Islamist movements, which both states outlawed. Tunisia allowed the United States to establish a military base in its Sahara — in a direct line south of Bizerte — to track al-Qaeda and other Islamists or vice versa roaming through the desert.

Regime change means that the Tunisian *Al-Nahda* Party and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will now be free to organize openly. Repression created unity within their ranks, but now I expect a splintering to take place within these movements as they begin to vie for political power.The more extreme elements have begun to break away from those who want to accommodate with electoral politics. There have been signs that this is beginning to happen in both countries.

In Tunisia *Al-Nahda*, led by Rachid Gennouchi who recently returned from long years of exile, is beginning to reorganize a mass base in preparation for forthcoming elections. The more radical Liberation Party (*Hizb al-Tahrir*), a radical offshoot in Tunisia of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, has staged demonstrations recently in front of bars and brothels, in an attempt to shut them down. They have also harassed and threatened feminists demonstrating in the center of Tunis after Ben Ali quit power. This group wants to install a regime based on Islamic law (*shariah*) and while denouncing violence, the party does not rule out rebellion or civil disobedience to create an Islamic state. The party's Secretary General Abdelmajid Habibi has declared that if the party won power (an unlikely probability in modern Tunsia) they would then ban other parties. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood, after many years underground, appears to be fractioning as well. Its youth movement joined the April 6th movement in Cairo's Liberation Square, disregarding orders from their elders in the party to stay away. They want the Brotherhood to reform and become more democratic, which may not be possible, given the party's history of tight centralization. Radical wings of the Brotherhood have broken off as well to prepare separate electoral campaigns.

At first, after Mubarak quit power, the military higher council had allied with the Brotherhood to win a referendum calling for elections this coming summer. It won by more than 70 percent of the electorate despite the opposition of the April 6 movement and other youthful revolutionaries. Meanwhile the military frightened the youth movement by arresting thousands of protesters and have just sentenced a blogger to three years in prison for criticizing army rule. By mid-April, however, the military had shifted its stance and called for a secular Egypt. The drama lies in whether other political figures running for president will be able to organize mass political parties over the short run to sweep their parties into power. At this point, organizational advantages lie with the Brotherhood and Mubarak's old disbanded party. Much has to be done by the revolutionary movement to use old fashioned methods of canvassing and meetings throughout the country to convince the population to vote for them. Time constraints will make their tasks onerous. With 42 percent of the population illiterate in Egypt, and computer illiteracy even higher, the internet will be of marginal help in bringing out the vote. The parties of Allah and the old guard might therefore have a decided advantage.

That is not the case in Tunisia, where literacy is high and the population has experienced

massive social transformations under Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. As an indication, the Constitutional Commission of some 150 members chaired by the ex-dean of the Law School, Iyad Ben Achour, just voted overwhelmingly that women and men should have an equal number of candidates for forthcoming elections for the assembly, which will create a new constitution. The interim President, Caid Es Sebbsi, in a far ranging interview with the French weekly, *Jeune Afrique*, also stated that the Islamist Liberation Party will not be recognized and that the gains that women have made in Tunisia will continue to be enforced. This time, an octogenarian, as a good Bourguibist, has reaffirmed major principles that Tunisia has long upheld, drawing a red line that he and many of the youthful revolutionaries will fight to uphold.[8]

The Neighboring Libyan Revolt

PRESSURES MOUNTED ON AUTHORITARIAN regimes from the Atlantic shores to China. Something had cracked in the Arab world after the Tunisians demonstrated their courage and ousted President Ben Ali. Fearful masses grounded down by security police and militias in next-door Libya also began the process of throwing off their repressors.

The ruler of Libya, Muammar Qadhafi, had condemned the removal of the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali. Demonstrations in Benghazi, Tripoli, and other cities, against Libya's homegrown dictator led to significant violence, with several thousand protesters killed and many more wounded by security forces and hired mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa. As violence mounted against demonstrators, more Libyans joined their ranks. The state cut off the country's internet service and most telephone lines, making it difficult for outsiders to follow events on the ground. Nevertheless, *Al-Jazeera* continued reporting outside the country and interviewed participants in the revolt by satellite phones. Tweets and cell phone movies reached TV viewers with appalling messages and scenes. Qaddafi and his son Seif al-Islam gave increasingly violent speeches, calling the protesters "rats," drug addicts, and agents of Al-Qaeda. The Libyan leader added a threat that "either I'll rule you, or kill you." As the East of the country liberated itself from his control, the president called on his loyal subjects in the Western capital, Tripoli, to pick up arms and attack his opponents. The more he ranted and raved in his usual incoherent style, the more state officials quit their jobs while denouncing his actions.

The international community lacked unity. Too many Western countries had entered into multi-billion dollar contracts with Libya while ignoring Qadhafi's human rights record. While speaking about the need for spreading democracy worldwide, they once again collaborated with a notorious dictator. When oil prices rose to $120 per barrel towards the end of February, some Western powers took limited steps to set up war crime investigations, freeze assets of Qadhafi, his family and entourage, and place travel bans on them. Anti-government Libyan leaders pleaded for the institution of a no-fly zone over the country and other actions that would speed the end of dictatorial rule. The United States instituted unilateral sanctions and froze Libyan bank accounts in the U.S.

The population of Eastern Cyranaica, with Benghazi as its center, ejected Moammar Qadhafi's military and set up a counter incipient state, while reiterating that Tripoli remained the capital of a united Libya. The rebels formed a ragtag army after raiding state arms depots and responded to Qadhafi's forces attacks with counterattacks of their own. Army officers who defected from the Libyan military found it difficult to train and create a disciplined force to confront state troops. Despite the application of a NATO no-fly zone over the country, a stalemate developed between the opposing forces. Qadhafi clung to power and relentlessly attacked his opponents. If he succeeds in staying in power, his Tunisian and Egyptian neighbors would have much to fear since the Libyan dictator could back opponents of his bordering regimes. He has already done this ten times in sub-Saharan Africa, sowing havoc with his oil money, and will have ample funds to do the same in the future closer to home. His demise will therefore give further hope to the new generation that has

sparked the Arab revolt against dictatorships and has already changed the region dramatically.

Footnotes

1. For the complete poem see Marvin Gettleman and Stuart Schaar (eds.), *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2OO3), pp. 194-198.

2. See David Faris, "The digital Roots of the Revolution," *meta-activism project*, February 11, 2011: "...as a catalyst for what happened on January 25th [in Egypt], *social media were not just ancillary but critical*." See Stuart Schaar,"Arab Dictatorship under Fire in the New Information Age," *Economic & Political Review* (Mumbai, India), Vol. XLVI No 6, February 5, 2011, 12-15 posted on Gertrude Ezorsky's blog, *New Politics*, February 7, 2011.

3. Fatema Mernissi has been tracking these trends in Morocco for the entire Arab world.

4. See Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 4th ed. 2010). See also Michael True, "Gene Sharp: Scholar of Strategic Nonviolence," *Peacework Magazine* (May 2005); Samuel P. Jacobs, "Gene Sharp, The 83 Year Old Who Toppled Egypt," *The Daily Beast* (February 14, 2011); Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2011 and Stephen Zunes, "Attacks on Gene Sharp and Albert Einstein Institution Unwarranted," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, June 27, 2008.

5. David D. Kirkpatrick and David E. Sanger, "A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2011.

6. Al-Jazeera English in the series People and Power had an important film on the subject in February 2011, summarizing these events.

7. See the astute article by David Faris, "Revolutions Without Revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook, and the Egyptian Blogsphere," *Arab Media & Society* (September 2008), 1-11 describing organizing through Facebook of the April 6, 2008 strike. I'd like to thank Professor Todd Gitlin of Columbia University for bringing this article to my attention.

8. Marwane Ben Yahmed, "Béji Caid Essebsi [interview]," *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2621, 3-9 avril, 2011, 58-63.