

The Geopolitical Repercussions of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution on North Africa

By Lakhdar Ghattas

The political upheaval which toppled Ben Ali's regime in the most spectacular way is undoubtedly a historic moment. While acknowledging the Tunisians' agency in bringing about this change it will not be an overstatement to say that Ben Ali's regime would be the first Arab authoritarian regime to be toppled by Aljazeera and the London-based Al Hiwar TV. They have played a pivotal role in maintaining the momentum of the uprising and providing a platform for the grassroots movement through the broadcasting of videos and tweets sent by mobile phones. The Jasmine Revolution, as it has come to be known, has been a geopolitical earthquake which is having a series of ripples on its immediate North African and regional Middle East neighbouring countries.

While calm and order started to be restored as the Tunisian army deployed across the country and arrested the remnants of the regime's secret police militia there is now an emerging food crisis, as is to be expected in such circumstances. There are also concerns over the Tunisian army's ability to control the situation given its limited numbers and resources, which was part of Ben Ali's policy to expand the police and other secret apparatus units to the detriment of the army. Neighbouring Algeria has an interest in stemming the signs of this food crisis before it escalates, and there is already news of organised solidarity on the ground in the Algerian towns bordering Tunisia. Algiers might need to consolidate that effort officially. More importantly, the immediate concern in Algiers is the return of order in Tunisia, across which one of Algeria's gas export pipelines reaches Italy. A deterioration of the security situation in the western part of Tunisia might compel the Algerian leadership to negotiate a way with the Tunisian army to come to its aid at least in that region. This would have fallouts on Europe's energy supplies at a time of rising demand in winter, in that Algeria supplies 20% of the EU's gas needs through this pipeline and others. There was a precedent for this during the Bread Uprising in January 1984, under the former president Lahlbib Bourgiba.

Beyond these two immediate concerns the fall of the Tunisian regime will have significant repercussions in North Africa. The ripple effects are already being felt strongly by Tunisia's neighbours and also in the Middle East. The initial reaction of Arab capitals was reserved and diplomatic. No Arab leader has so far commented in person on the downfall of Ben Ali's regime except for Libya's Al Qadhafi. Yet there was little of substance to be drawn from Qadhafi's speech on events in Tunisia save for a sense of alarm and concern. The plethora of security organs in Libya, its vast hydrocarbon revenues, large territory and small population of 6 million (smaller even than Tunisia's 10 million) means that the chances of a regime challenge remains remote unless the tribal alliance system supporting Qadhafi's regime breaks down, as happened in the 1990s when he escaped a failed attempt on his life. Although a domino effect to the south in Libya is out of the equation, Tunisia may have significant impact on the politics of neighbouring Algeria and Egypt.



From Cairo, Amro Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League, declared the change in Tunisia 'a historic moment' in a tone of utter surprise and disbelief. A domino effect in Egypt seems plausible in a presidential election year and in a country where the ingredients for an uprising are all there waiting only for them to reach their critical mass and a trigger event. The bogus way in which the parliamentary elections were run two months ago, when the overwhelming majority of seats were won by the ruling party, totally excluding the Muslim Brotherhood (who had won 88 seats in the 2005 elections) and other parties has contributed to the build-up of frustration among Egyptians.

Ben Ali's decision in his last desperate speech on Friday night to scrap his plans for constitutional amendment to allow him a sixth term before he fled his country would have been watched with alarm in Algiers, Tripoli, Cairo, and Sana'a. The Algerian FLN party declared ten days ago, during Algeria's nationwide uprising, that Bouteflika (now 74 and serving a third term after the amendment of the constitution in November 2009) would be the party's presidential candidate in 2014 and that the FLN would "stay in power until 2030". In Egypt the Mubarek regime, in power for over 25 years, declared that Egyptians would know the ruling party's presidential candidate by next July and that elections would be held next September. In Sana'a, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for around 33 years now, launched plans last December to amend the constitution which would allow him yet another term. All these plans might have

now become unappealing to these regimes in light of the events in Tunisia, but they have a Plan B. Abdullah Salah has his son Ahmed Salah, Mubarek of Egypt is grooming Djamel, Qadhafi has Seif-Al Islam and Bouteflika has his brother Said, although his chances seemed largely damaged recently. But as soon as news of Ben Ali's fleeing by night to Saudi Arabia were confirmed demonstrations got organised in Algiers, Sana'a, Jordan, Nouakchott, and in front of the embassies of some Arab countries in Europe. Plan B is increasingly a difficult scenario to execute, especially in Egypt and Algeria which have scheduled elections next September and in 2014 respectively.

Current Arab regimes are unpopular not only because they failed to deliver economically but more importantly because they have undermined the national security foundations of their countries. We are witnessing a miserable failure of the post-independence regimes in North Africa. The Mubarek regime has undermined the strategic interests of his country through his mishandling of the southern Sudan crisis, where the Nile stems. This would be his regime's legacy. A great deal is at stake and the equilibrium of power in the Middle East has been redrawn now to Egypt's detriment under his ailing watch. General Omar Al Bashir would go home leaving behind a country imbued with disintegration challenges as is the case in Darfur. After forty years of chaotic and adventurous mismanagement of the resources of his country Qadhafi finds himself, last week, obliged to abolish tariffs on foodstuff imports in a country of only 6 million people, whose energy export revenues rival those of neighbouring 36 million Algeria. Qadhafi wasted the country's resources in his wars in Chad, and sub-Saharan Africa, to name a few of his disastrous adventures.

It is in Algeria where the ripple effects of the Jasmine Revolution are being felt the most. A country which is no stranger to political violence, local revolts and nationwide uprising, the most recent one (mistakenly reported in the international media as one triggered by rising prices of foodstuffs) erupted early this month. This hydrocarbons rich country, where 70% of the population is under thirty and that produces almost a quarter of a million of graduates every year, struggles to take off economically. Moreover, Algeria seems to be regressing in terms of political openness and freedoms of speech, assembly and organisation, which were gained following the October 1988 uprising and paved the way to democratisation. So what happened in Tunisia elicits a sense of déjà vu in Algeria. There is a more than a possibility for another political upheaval in Algeria in the next 18 months, but if that does occur its sources would lie with internal factors rather than any Jasmine impetus. 2011 is significant, as it is this year that the political cards within the establishment are being reshuffled in preparation for the parliamentary elections next year, and by extension the presidential ones in 2014 when Bouteflika's third term ends. Unlike Tunisia, major political change in Algeria would entail immediate consequences for the EU in terms of energy security, and Algeria's security cooperation with the United States has been pivotal in the Sahel since 9/11. It is no coincidence that John Bernnan, Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism as and a close advisor to Obama, was in Algiers this weekend. The official aim of his two-day visit was "strengthening the relations between the two countries, especially regarding security and military cooperation", but it is impossible not to make a link between the visit and the transition arrangements being made next door in Tunisia.

The same logics that drove change in Tunisia are in process in Algeria. Since Bouteflika came to power in 1999 the rhetoric has been that the priority is for stability and the return of peace (following the political violence of the 1990s) and that development would follow.

Twelve years later, Algerians have lost hope and faith that this government could deliver, among a host of corruption scandals. At the same time, Algerians have seen an increasing systematic crack down on the freedoms of expression, press, and assembly.

The January uprising was less because of rising food prices than because of a multitude of social, economic and political failures which are of a structural nature. Neither high oil prices, nor Algeria's \$150 billion of reserves, could redress this situation, as Algerian leadership believed they could. The Jasmine Revolution has bought these structural issues to the fore once more, re-energising the fragmented elements of the unofficial civil society in Algeria and abroad. There have been protests by Algerians in Geneva, Paris, London and Montreal, organised by various groups all calling for freedom of expression, press, assembly, and more importantly for a profound change of the political establishment and social contract. There is reason to believe that there is a sense of urgency and recognition within the ruling establishment in Algeria that the situation has reached alarming levels. Corruption scandals in every sector and at every level of the state's echelons have come to represent a huge challenge for the system, and are a direct consequence of the absence of public oversight on the management of the country's budget, which together with a lack of political accountability, bogus elections and the undermining of the civil society serve to highlight the facade of democracy.

No one thought the most repressive Arab regime of Ben Ali could crumble in the way it did. For the US the implications are not significant given the limited strategic interests in Tunisia. In the EU, Michele Alliot-Marie, the French minister of foreign affairs, revealed how out of touch France, considered by European capitals the best-positioned country to decode the dynamics of North Africa, has become, with her comments about helping the Tunisian and Algerian authorities deal with the revolts. The EU and the US are aware of the strategic importance of Algeria in terms of EU energy security, the security situation in the Sahel, as well as the huge economic opportunities in a country which is the heart of the Maghreb and whose economic integration is paralysed by the Western Sahara conflict. There are also rivalries among the EU club as far as the role of Algeria is concerned; Merkel seemed to have obtained assurance by Bouteflika during his visit last December to Berlin that the Desertec solar energy project will go ahead. Early this month, Youcef Youcefi, the Algerian minister of energy, confirmed that no choice has been made between Desertec and the French Trans Green energy project. Moreover, following Sarkozy's second Sahel debacle last week while trying to free two French hostages in Niger, it has become clear Algeria's assertion against foreign intervention in the Sahel region is gaining support across the EU.

All those geopolitical elements would be affected should the situation degenerate in Algeria. For now calm has been restored and seems holding. There is no guarantee things will not flare up again in few months. The Algerian daily *Liberte* documented in 2010 alone 112,878 cases of anti-riot police intervention, i.e. 900 protests per month. Should the Algerian domino fall then the repercussions would be immediately felt across the Mediterranean to the north and the Atlantic to the West, and inevitably in the Sahel.