

How a man setting fire to himself sparked an uprising in Tunisia

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A relatively minor incident has become the catalyst for a wave of protests that may end the presidency of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali



The Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, is facing a wave of protests against his regime. Photograph: Str/AP

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Watching events in Tunisia over the past few days, I have been increasingly reminded of an event in 1989: the fall of the Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. Is the Tunisian dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, about to meet a similar fate?

After 22 years in power, Ceausescu's end came suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly. It began when the government harassed an ethnic Hungarian priest over something he had said. Demonstrations broke out but the priest was soon forgotten: they rapidly turned into generalised protests against the Ceausescu regime. The Romanian public, to put it mildly, had had enough.

The riots and demonstrations that have swept through Tunisia during the past 10 days also began with a small incident. Twenty-six-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, living in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid, had a university degree but no work. To earn some money he took to selling fruit and vegetables in the street without a licence. When the authorities stopped him and confiscated his produce, he was so angry that he set himself on fire.

Rioting followed and security forces sealed off the town. On Wednesday, another jobless young man in Sidi Bouzid climbed an electricity pole, shouted "no for misery, no for unemployment", then touched the wires and electrocuted himself.

On Friday, rioters in Menzel Bouzaiene set fire to police cars, a railway locomotive, the local headquarters of the ruling party and a police station. After being attacked with Molotov cocktails, the police shot back, killing a teenage protester.

By Saturday, the protests had reached the capital, Tunis - and a second demonstration took place there yesterday.

Reporting of these events has been sparse, to say the least. The Tunisian press, of course, is strictly controlled and international news organisations have shown little interest: the "not many dead" syndrome, perhaps. But in the context of Tunisia they are momentous events. It's a police state, after all, where riots and demonstrations don't normally happen - and certainly not simultaneously in towns and cities up and down the country.

So, what we are seeing, firstly, is the failure of a system constructed by the regime over many years to prevent people from organising, communicating and agitating.

Secondly, we are seeing relatively large numbers of people casting off their fear of the regime. Despite the very real risk of arrest and torture, they are refusing to be intimidated.

Finally, we are seeing the breakdown of a long-standing devil's compact where, in return for submitting to life under a dictatorship, people's economic and welfare needs are supposedly taken care of by the state.

Officially, unemployment levels in Tunisia are around 13% though in reality they may be higher - especially among university graduates. According to one recent study, 25% of male graduates and 44% of female graduates in Sidi Bouzid are without jobs. In effect, they are victims of an educational system that has succeeded in providing them with qualifications that can't be used and expectations that can't be met.

The regime also seems to have overdone its trumpeting of Tunisia's economic progress. If those claims are true, people ask, what happened to the money? One answer they give is that it has gone into the pockets of the Ben Ali family and their associates.

"The First Lady," Dr Larbi Sadiki of Exeter university wrote the other day, "is almost the Philippines' Imelda Marcos incarnate. But instead of shoes, Madame Leila collects villas, real estate and bank accounts". Then there's the president's son-in-law and possible successor, Mohamed Sakhr el-Matri whose OTT lifestyle and business interests were eloquently described, courtesy of WikiLeaks, by the US ambassador.

The defining moment in the Romanian revolution came when President Ceausescu and his wife held a rally - televised live - to drum up support. But instead of cheering as they had always done before, the crowd booed and heckled. Visibly stunned, the Ceausescus disappeared inside the building and the whole country knew their game was up.

President Ben Ali has so far avoided that mistake and continues to be extolled by the official media. But there was a telling straw in the wind when his Constitutional Democratic Rally party called a meeting in Sidi Bouzid last week. "The meeting, which was supposed to deliver a

The regime's claim that (unspecified) sinister forces lie behind the riots and demonstrations also sounds half-hearted. By hastily finding \$15m (£10m) in economic aid for Sidi Bouzid it has, after all, acknowledged that the protesters have a point.

The crucial question is what members of the security forces, members of the ruling party and government officials - all those who have helped to keep the Ben Ali show on the road for the past 23 years - really think. How many of them have family members among the unemployed? And, more important, how many really believe Ben Ali is the man to lead the country out of its problems?

Most Arab regimes rely on patronage networks to keep themselves in power but Ben Ali's support base looks comparatively small and increasingly fragile, as the US ambassador noted last year in one of the WikiLeaks documents. He described a regime that has lost touch with the people, a regime that tolerates no advice or criticism and whose corruption has become so blatant that "even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it".

Ben Ali may try to cling on, but his regime now has a *fin de siècle* air about it. He came to power in 1987 by declaring President Bourguiba unfit for office. It's probably just a matter of time before someone else delivers that same message to Ben Ali.