

Asseburg, Muriel; Werenfels, Isabelle

Research Report

The toppling of Ben Ali: Isolated development or first domino? Comparable challenges - varying conditions

SWP Comments, No. 5/2011

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Asseburg, Muriel; Werenfels, Isabelle (2011) : The toppling of Ben Ali: Isolated development or first domino? Comparable challenges - varying conditions, SWP Comments, No. 5/2011, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256143>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

The Toppling of Ben Ali: Isolated Development or First Domino?

Comparable Challenges – Varying Conditions

Muriel Asseburg / Isabelle Werenfels

Following the fall of Tunisia's President and in light of the upheaval in Egypt, the spectre of domino effects has been raised. The lack of prospects for young people, social injustice and political repression – all causes that sparked the protests in Tunisia – are problems in virtually all Arab states. Demonstrations against the regimes have gathered force from Algiers all the way to Sana'a. Nevertheless, the Tunisian scenario is unlikely to repeat itself: the differences in political, social and economic conditions are too large. A lot depends on whether Tunisia achieves a successful transformation and on how the situation in Egypt develops. However, the developments thus far have shown that stability can be deceptive and dictators are unable to guarantee long-term stability. The EU should reconsider its benevolent policies vis-à-vis the authoritarian rulers in the Mediterranean region.

Socio-economic factors alone are insufficient for explaining why Tunisia was the first Arab state to see a dictator toppled by the people. The combination of political, economic and social factors proved decisive. Firstly, the growing socio-economic problems hit the regime in its Achilles heel. For a long time, Ben Ali was able to legitimise his rule by pointing to the comparatively high living standards of the Tunisian people. His strategy of substituting economic prosperity for political freedoms, however, became increasingly unfeasible. At the same time, the high levels of unemployment, not least among young academics, the rising levels of social in-

equality, and the increasingly "mafia-like" practices of the ruling family all played important roles. With regard to the ruling family's decadence, the Tunisians saw their suspicions confirmed by the WikiLeaks cables.

Secondly, there were few political valves in Tunisia through which people could voice discontent. The country had a press that was among the world's least free, and the police and secret service prevented any activities or assemblies critical of the regime – including those of legal organisations like the Tunisian League of Human Rights. It can therefore come as little surprise that the demonstrators, who initially

called for jobs and social justice, increasingly called for freedom. It wasn't until the second to last day of his rule that Ben Ali for the first time indicated openness to political concessions – it was too late.

Thirdly, it proved Ben Ali's undoing that political and economic power was concentrated with him and his family. He was therefore unable to subscribe the social injustices, corruption or brutality of the security forces to other parties. In the course of the protests, it became increasingly clear that the situation would only be calmed by his resignation. As a result, divisions opened up among the power elites: key figures within the regime distanced themselves from Ben Ali – it remains an open question whether this was due to political convictions or opportunism. Ultimately it was Tunisia's army chief who induced, or perhaps forced, the president to leave the country.

Fourthly, it was representatives of all segments of society who took to the streets. Tunisian society is modern, educated, and homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and confession, and the considerable degree of equality afforded to women in Tunisia is largely unparalleled in the Arab world. There is also a high degree of networking and mobilisation via the electronic media which generated a correspondingly intense collective outcry over the brute force employed by the security forces. The successful modernisation of Tunisian society provides good conditions for a process of democratisation that has now been set in motion.

Initial Reactions

The events in Tunisia have stirred strong emotions amongst populations stretching from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. Protests against authoritarian regimes have intensified, opposition figures have called for an emulation of developments in Tunisia, desperate individuals have resorted to self immolation – one such individual served as a catalyst for the events in Tunisia. The fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is also unsettling

for Arab elites. Not only have they begun to marshal their defences against protests, but they have also announced political reforms and have taken measures to alleviate socio-economic emergencies.

The concerns of the rulers, the sense of solidarity among the Arab peoples and the emulation effects all arise from a common consciousness: the problems that combined to form the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back in Tunisia also exist in other Arab countries. Using this realisation, however, to predict the end of all Arab autocracies would be premature. After all, the specific conditions in each of the respective Arab states render a repeat of the Tunisian scenario improbable.

Republics At Risk?

When considering possible domino effects, the extremely fragile polities in Yemen and the Palestinian territories come to mind first. The assumption that held sway for Tunisia until just a few weeks ago could, however, also apply to the republics in the southern and eastern Mediterranean area – namely that stagnation has been mistaken for stability. A closer examination reveals a paradoxical phenomenon: structures and dynamics that at first sight seem to have a destabilising effect such as plural power centres or fragmented societies, can play into the hands of the regimes and extend their life spans.

In **Algeria**, riots are almost a part of daily life, at least on the local level. In January 2011, these riots expanded to cover larger swathes of the country. Even if these riots have always died down again and have failed to generate political consequences, it is probable that they will flare up to a greater extent in the future. Similar factors are at work here as in Tunisia: unemployment and a lack of prospects for young people as well as a widespread perception that “mafia-like” clans of elites are enriching themselves at the cost of the general population and – unlike the Tunisian case – a sense that the entire state

apparatus treats the citizens with contempt.

Nevertheless, there are many arguments against the likelihood of Algeria experiencing regime change “from below” in the near future. Firstly, with its strong president and influential military leaders there are several competing power centres. The lack of personalisation and the uncertainty as to who is currently exercising control over specific political and economic spheres makes it easier to shift responsibility off on others. In the end, the forced resignation of Abdel Aziz Bouteflika by the people would not have any major impact on the political system.

Secondly, the Algerian society is very heterogeneous. There exists, for example strong regional solidarity as well as tension between Kabyle Berbers and the Arab majority. The social fragmentation is reflected in the political landscape and is fostered by those in power to skilfully play one group critical of the regime against another. The opposition is correspondingly divided and incapable of action – this even holds true for the Islamists who were so powerful two decades ago. There is no political power existing today that can channel the protests.

Thirdly, the authoritarian ruling powers have established a series of political valves for releasing pressure: opposition parties are included in the Parliament; the press is kept on a rather long leash; the security forces hold back during protests.

Fourthly, with its rich reserves of oil and natural gas, Algeria is a state with considerable currency reserves and little foreign debt. The revenues from oil sales have not only helped to establish a system of patronage-based, regime-stabilising structures, they have also allowed the government to quickly pump money into eliminating social conflagrations (as was recently the case with the subsidisation of sugar and cooking oil).

Finally, the Algerian society cannot be as easily and broadly mobilised to rise up as was the case for the Tunisian society. In

addition to the fragmentation within the society, this is also due to the traumatic experiences of many Algerians during the civil war of just ten years ago.

Ben Ali’s resignation, however, may generate positive effects in Algeria over the medium term. Those in power in public and behind the scenes will reconsider the forced constrictions on political latitude that have existed for many years. Looking forward to the presidential elections in 2014 and the successor to Bouteflika, they will also have to decide whether they will push through an unpopular candidate or if they will allow a candidate who enjoys a certain degree of legitimacy.

No Arab ruler has issued such a clear statement on the events in Tunisia as **Libya’s** ruler, Muammar al-Qadhafi, who condemned the Tunisian people and defended Ben Ali. Concerns about rioting in his own country likely played a large role in this. Riots over housing shortages erupted in Libya in early January 2011 and were noteworthy for both their size and length.

At first glance, there are a number of striking similarities between Libya and Tunisia. Political power is also concentrated in Libya within a single person, Muammar al-Qadhafi, and economic power likewise concentrated within his family. WikiLeaks also published less than flattering reports on the topic. Like Tunisia under the rule of Ben Ali, Libya under Qadhafi’s rule is also one of the least free states in the world. The so-called “grassroots” system allows for neither political parties nor political activities extending beyond tightly controlled processes. The opposition and its most powerful element, the Muslim Brotherhood, has had no chance to organise itself within the country. The problems of unemployment among young people, housing shortages and a lack of prospects all run rampant in Libya.

There are, however, fundamental differences between Libya and Tunisia in two respects. Firstly, Libya is a state with a small population and rich reserves of oil and natural gas. This enables the regime

to quickly pay out exorbitant sums of money to cushion the impacts of maladministration. Oil revenues furthermore allow for Qadhafi to buy the loyalty of a core group of elites. Secondly, the Libyan society is not only considerably less educated than the Tunisian, but its members define themselves first and foremost according to their tribal affiliations. In this respect, the society has a strong hierarchical and vertical organisation, which renders the uprising of broad masses of people rather unlikely. Smaller scale rebellions against Qadhafi by individual tribes have occurred repeatedly in the past and may occur again. These rebellions, however, largely entail power struggles and competition over distribution policies among tribal elites rather than a change to the political order.

The events in Tunisia therefore are likely to primarily have an impact within the elite. Over the short-term, the hardliners seem to benefit from these events. It is conceivable, however, that Qadhafi's son Saif al Islam, who is known as a reformer, may experience an upswing. After all, he has been the one sent out in the past to calm inflamed tempers, whether they be those of neglected tribes or repressed Islamists.

Two weeks after the upheaval in Tunisia, **Egypt** experienced the largest popular uprising since the beginning of the Mubarak era. Indeed, despite considerable police violence, protests are neither a new phenomenon in Egypt nor a rarity. There have been bread riots time and again. In recent years, the protests have increasingly taken on a more political character. In the middle of the past decade, a relatively elitist movement formed in Cairo called "Kifaya!" (arabic for "enough!"). Professional associations and worker unions united to protest against the impact of economic reform and living and working conditions, above all in the periphery of the country. The younger generation has used the new communications channels provided by the Internet and Twitter to give voice to its displeasure and to mobilise.

The current protests pick up on how the regime is viewed by large portions of the population: as sclerotic, corrupt, incapable of making decisions and largely focused on the self enrichment and preservation of power for the presidential family and its entourage. Even though a segment of the economic and business elite supports the path of economic reforms being set primarily by the president's son Gamal, and even though the regime portrays itself as the protector of the Copts, the Mubarak clan has increasingly failed to derive legitimacy from its performance.

At the same time, the ruling elites in Egypt lack the resources needed to purchase loyalty on a grand scale. For this reason the country's rulers have, on the one hand, created an apparatus for repression, which has prevented political counterweights to thrive. To date, the regime has justified this abroad by raising the spectre of a power grab by the Islamists in what is the most populous Arab state as well as one of Israel's neighbours.

On the other hand, the regime has allowed for a certain degree of freedom of expression. As a result, there is currently a relatively pluralistic press as well as a multitude of societal organisations. Following the 2005 parliamentary elections, however, political participation has been gradually limited. In this respect, the November 2010 parliamentary elections marked a low point. As a result of extensive manipulation and open electoral fraud, the opposition has been all but excluded from parliament. This also eliminated an important forum for protest within the system.

Therefore, Egypt has been one of the states in which the developments in Tunisia have had particularly strong effects. As was to be expected, the government responded with mass arrests, spreading chaos and the delegitimisation of the protests. But contrary to what the regime has claimed, as in Tunisia, it has neither been the Islamists nor foreign powers that are fuelling the uprising. While the regime has clung to power, President Mubarak

announced that he will not run for another term in elections scheduled for the fall. He reshuffled the government and announced steps that would grant political freedoms and allow for meaningful political competition. In early February, dialogue began with opposition forces – including the still illegal Muslim Brotherhood. While a transition to a democratic system is by no means guaranteed, at least a dynastic transfer of power has become extremely unlikely as this would be rejected not only by broad segments of the population: Gamal Mubarak also lacks the support of the army.

In **Syria** also there is a widespread perception in the population of self-enrichment among those closely associated with the ruling family and of a political and economic sphere marked by nepotism. In addition, economic reform and the partial liberalisation of the state sector have contributed to a widening of the gap among the social classes. Despite considerable growth rates, poverty has markedly increased. Involuntary internal migration as a result of droughts has contributed to further aggravating the social situation.

Thus far, however, this situation has not resulted in any notable protests and the day of rage that was called for in early February simply did not take place – primarily because demonstrations in Syria are usually organised by the regime, not against the regime. Exceptions are those protests that have repeatedly flared up in the developmentally neglected Kurdish regions in the country's north-eastern reaches, which have been bloodily subdued. Indeed, Syria is viewed as one of the most repressive states in the region. At the same time, a certain degree of political opening has occurred under Bashar al-Asad, who has ruled for the past decade. The freedom of the press has been slightly expanded, NGOs are allowed to operate in areas deemed non-political, and fear of the secret police has diminished. Nevertheless, tight restrictions remain in place in the political sphere. There continue to be no competitive elections, no freedom of assembly or freedom

of association, opposition figures regularly disappear into prisons, and the strongest potential opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, is forbidden. As a result there are scant political valves for releasing pent up frustrations or forums in which opposition elements can organise.

Repression, however, is not the only factor standing in the way of Syrians rising up. A decisive reason seems to be the fear that the regime's collapse could quickly lead to civil war. The society is highly fragmented from an ethnic as well as a confessional viewpoint. The dread is that a collapse of the regime could trigger revenge attacks on the Alawite minority on which the regime is based as well as Christians, which are perceived as supporting the regime. The experience of civil wars in Syria's neighbouring states, Iraq and Lebanon, also has a deterrent effect. In addition, Syrians assume that the regime would crack down brutally on any uprising, even if this generated a large number of victims. This is suggested by the violent events of 1982 when tens of thousands of people were massacred in Hama during the suppression of an uprising.

Last but not least, the path taken by the regime also enjoys popularity and provides the regime with a measure of legitimacy among important segments of society. The business elite and upper middle class have profited in the past years from the economic reforms and have an interest in seeing these reforms continued. Above all, the president can point to a foreign policy, which is viewed by the majority of the population as a success.

Despite this relatively comfortable position, the events in Tunisia and Egypt have led the Syrian leadership to announce measures, such as an increase in subsidies and the introduction of a social welfare scheme for disadvantaged families, aimed at alleviating social hardships. The president has also hinted at future political reform, for example in the area of press, local election and NGO laws. But the events might also affect Syria's foreign policy

discourse: the populist rhetoric can be expected to intensify – after all, the Syrian leadership has identified Tunisia’s pro-Western orientation as the decisive factor fuelling its instability.

Stable Monarchies?

Compared with the republics, the monarchies in the region are generally seen as being more stable. This is due on the one hand to the fact that the main decision maker in the monarchies has dynastic and, in Jordan and Morocco, also religious legitimacy. On the other hand, the monarchs can easily address criticism and dissatisfaction among the people by replacing the government. Nevertheless, specific conditions vary.

Morocco is among the states in which the events in Tunisia have thus far not resulted in any noteworthy protests. This may seem astonishing as the gap between rich and poor is higher in Morocco than anywhere else in the Maghreb, and young people have even fewer opportunities than in Tunisia. For about ten years, unemployed academics have camped out in front of the parliament in Rabat – where they are at least allowed to protest, a freedom they would not be allowed in Tunisia.

If one puts aside economic parallels – both countries are oriented towards reform, are poor in resources, and have difficulties remaining competitive on global markets – the structural differences between the two countries are sizable. First of all, Morocco is led by a relatively young monarch, who has initiated a generational shift within the spheres of politics and the administration. During his twelve years as the state’s ruler, Mohammed VI has earned the reputation of a reformer. He allowed for an increase in women’s rights, the historical processing of his father’s authoritarian regime, and the initiation of a gigantic development project. Two newspapers conducted surveys in 2009, the publication of which the palace blocked, that indicated over 90 percent of the population judged the King’s work positively. Only 17 percent

of those surveyed hit upon his immense wealth. Many Moroccans view the King, who in accordance with the constitution has virtually absolute power and is also the country’s religious leader, as “holy”.

The results of these surveys point to a second structural difference between Morocco and Tunisia, which renders a widespread social mobilisation improbable: large segments of the Moroccan society have a traditional orientation and are structured into vertical (patronage) networks. The urban-rural gap is large, illiteracy rates remain high (among women, over 50 percent), and the middle class is smaller than in Tunisia.

A third factor that helps to stabilise the regime is the considerable freedom, in comparison with other states in the Maghreb, granted by the King’s clemency. Morocco is one of the few states in the region in which there are more than the rudiments of a civil society. At least one portion of the Islamist opposition is incorporated into the system; the palace largely tolerates the non-legalised Islamist organisation “Justice and Charity”. Recently, however, the latitude in terms of freedoms, such as freedom of the press, has tightened and the human rights situation has deteriorated.

Citizens of Western Sahara have suffered more than any others from repression, and have rebelled in the winter of 2010/11. However, they cannot count on solidarity from within Moroccan society. What are likely to become items of broad attention are the King’s economic power and interests, for example those associated with agriculture. During the course of the events in Tunisia, the government was quick to announce the purchasing of cereals in order to prevent “bread riots”. Also, officials pointed to the democratic freedoms enjoyed by Moroccans. It is possible that room for political participation will temporarily be expanded. In the most extreme case the King’s power may be slightly curtailed. At least over the medium-term, nothing else is to be expected.

Against the backdrop of the Tunisian revolt, demonstrations have gained considerable momentum in **Jordan**. For years, the Hashemite Kingdom has witnessed protests, bread riots and even local uprisings. The regime has generally responded by increasing food subsidies and suppressing protest by force. Yet, even an escalation of protests is unlikely to seriously endanger the monarchy. True, it does not oversee any significant revenues from resource sales, which might enable a policy of distribution on a grand scale. Also, Jordan is a country characterised by extremely uneven development and high poverty in rural areas. There are no social or political forces, however, which dispute the legitimacy of the relatively young king. Today this even holds true for the majority population group of Jordanians of Palestinian descent. In addition, within the Transjordanian segment of the population, the bonding force of vertical tribal structures is particularly strong. Tribal representatives are markedly over-represented in the security apparatus, in the core elite surrounding the king, and in parliament. Due to close personal relations between the monarch and tribal leaders, a rebellion from within the security apparatus is rather unlikely. At the same time, in recent months, an increase in political violence has been observed – among the representatives of different tribes as well as between demonstrators and security forces. One reason behind this might be that Transjordanians feel increasingly disadvantaged or see their privileges at risk.

While the regime in Jordan is less repressive than those in Syria and Tunisia, political freedoms are still highly restricted. The political opening that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been gradually reversed since. The parliament, in particular, has been further devalued (aside from its function as a mechanism for patronage). The manipulated November 2010 elections along with the electoral boycott by the strongest party, the Islamic Action Front, have further marginalised the conformist

opposition. They also strengthened the wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, whose focus is not on political reform, but rather on the foreign policy agenda and more concretely on the fight against “normalisation” of relations with Israel. This issue also consumes most of the energy of organised civil society – and thereby offers an avenue for action, ultimately playing into the hands of the regime.

In light of the developments in Tunisia, the king made an effort to address the protests in Jordan once more by rolling back subsidy cuts. He also fired the government. That this approach of short term measures and cosmetic political reform will meet with success is doubtful. Even though the king rests relatively firmly in the saddle, the pressure building on the streets certainly underlines the urgency of sustainable and more just development policies and the need for a political opening. It will also lead to limitations on the monarch’s capacity to act on foreign policy.

Conclusions

The cases from the Mediterranean area clearly show: the end of Arab autocracies is not imminent. So far, the authoritarian systems in the region have proven adaptable enough to generally maintain stability. Still, they have not managed to address the challenges that abound. Although Arab economies have generated moderate growth rates of three to five percent, they have failed to create sufficient employment opportunities for the rapidly growing populations. Young people, in particular, are affected by unemployment – especially those with higher education, who foster greater expectations for their futures. The stricter migration policies of European states have also eliminated an alternative prospect for these people.

Many have abandoned hopes of change brought on through the political process. This bears the risk of violent upheaval, given the prevailing perception that the maintenance of the existing order is not

primarily to serve the well being of the people, but rather the enrichment of a corrupt elite. This perception has been reinforced in a number of countries by the disclosures of WikiLeaks at the turn of the year 2010/2011.

At the same time, young people in the Arab world today are very well informed and networked. Thanks to electronic media, despite censorship, they are able to follow current developments in realtime, and use social networks and mobile phones to quickly, cheaply and effectively mobilise. The discourse in the Arab world is consequently no longer centrally controlled (as it still was during the time of Gamal Abdul Nasser). Instead, it is increasingly determined by the Arab satellite channels and the solidarity and imitation effects created among Arab youths using blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

Protests in other countries across the region are therefore likely to increase and could even develop into more uprisings. This does not, however, mean that the developments will follow the same pattern as the Tunisian case, that is, that the middle class plays a decisive role in driving the people's uprising, that the regime collapses quickly and that the country embarks on a transition. It is impossible to predict when and under which conditions psychological barriers collapse and the people put aside their fear of state powers. Furthermore, the overturning of additional regimes in no way guarantees the transition to political systems that are more representative, inclusive and just. Indeed, few Arab societies offer relatively good preconditions for such a transition as is the case with Tunisia.

The EU has announced its support for a democratic transition in Tunisia: concretely, assistance in judicial reform and the holding of democratic elections. It should indeed closely and actively accompany Tunisia's transformation – without repeating past mistakes. The focus on establishing formal institutions and processes only makes sense if comprehensive political free-

doms are ensured, the formation of political parties is allowed, and equal opportunity is guaranteed – thus incorporating all societal and political forces including the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party. Moreover, the authority to make decisions must rest with the elected parliament and a government accountable to this elected body. Hence, consistent conditioning of support for the Tunisian transitional government is called for.

Generally, the EU should critically scrutinise its policies vis-à-vis the region. The fact that close cooperation with dictators like Ben Ali and Mubarak does not guarantee long-term stability has now been clearly demonstrated. For this reason, Europeans should return to the original approach of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: long-term stability through gradual economic *and* political opening. In recent years, the EU member states and their Mediterranean partners have largely moved away from this approach and instead focused on increased cooperation on combating terrorism and preventing irregular migration.

France's current questioning of its Maghreb policy offers the chance to establish a new consensus among EU member states about the objectives of European policy towards the region. The primary goal should be consistent support for political and economic transformation. In this sense, the Europeans should send out clear signals and push for adherence to commitments before upgrading relations and when providing financial support. Clear benchmarks should also apply to states rich in oil and gas such as Libya. In addition, undesirable developments within states such as Morocco and Jordan, which are viewed as "good performers", should not be ignored but rather be clearly pointed out. Corresponding signals from Brussels will, however, only be taken seriously by partner states to the South and East of the Mediterranean if individual EU member states do not contradict or circumvent them.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2011
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect solely the authors' views.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Robert Blasiak

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 4/2011)