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**LE CCDH DANS LA PRESSE NATIONALE**

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## Autumn of the Arab Patriarchs?

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by Lee Smith

It is a rough time in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, not least for the United States and its allies. In Beirut, Hezbollah toppled the government of Saad Hariri while he was being hosted in Washington by President Barack Obama. In Egypt, tens of thousands have flooded the streets to protest against current president 82-year-old Hosni Mubarak and his son and apparent successor, 47-year-old Gamal. Jordan is witnessing widespread demonstrations, and the same holds for Algeria, Yemen, and Mauritania—a seemingly remarkable chain of events all kicked off with the self-immolation on December 17 of a 26-year-old fruit vendor in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid.

As street protests brought the reign of Tunisia's president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to an end, imitators around the region lit fire to themselves, perhaps in the hope of similar results, or maybe just out of a chronic desperation that seems to have no limits. Either way, it is not merely the Arab regimes that should be worried by these popular uprisings, but anyone who fears the dangers of political activism carried out under the sign of self-murder.

"My concern is that the same people who recruit for suicide bombers are now going to start recruiting for these self-immolation operations," says Robert Holley, a former U.S. diplomat who worked extensively in the region. "The whole aim of these guys is to destabilize these regimes." The lives they toss away in the meantime are irrelevant to their ends, of which no one can now be certain. Certainly there are democrats in these gatherings, whom Washington should wish well and assist where possible, but there are plenty of others, too, including Islamists and regime insiders jockeying with each other for position. Holley now heads the Moroccan American Center for Policy, sponsored by the Moroccan government. He led me on a recent tour of the country, including Rabat, the capital, Casablanca, Marrakesh, and the Western Sahara.

Morocco is one of the few places in the Arabic-speaking Middle East that isn't in the midst of political turmoil, even as analysts and journalists have predicted that the monarchy is just another prospective domino about to fall like Ben Ali. Not surprisingly, Moroccan parliamentarians, civil society

activists, and diplomats are unhappy about being lumped together with their North African neighbors in Tunisia and Algeria.

Morocco has gone through its dark periods as a hard security state and is now squarely on the path to liberalization—including political representation, women's personal status laws, and a wide-ranging reform of the judiciary. The purpose of the latter, explained Ahmed Herzenni, head of the Royal Advisory Council on Human Rights, "is to distinguish between the executive and the judicial branches of our government"—a feat rarely attempted in the Middle East or North Africa.

Herzenni spent 12 years in prison for his left-wing political activism, but credits his onetime jailer Hassan II for initiating the reform process that his son, King Mohamed VI, has accelerated since he came to the throne in 1999. Herzenni notes that their "rights are not merely gifts from the monarchy, but were won by Moroccans." And these rights are exercised regularly. "There are people protesting every day in front of parliament," he says.

The lingering myth of Arab nationalism—the notion that all Arab societies share the same goals, desires, and ideas—has led observers to overstate the similarities of the current unrest in countries that are in fact very different. For example, coups d'état are typically the result of powerful militaries, yet in Tunisia it was the military's weakness that toppled Ben Ali.

Habib Bourguiba, the father of modern Tunisia, kept his military relatively small. "He saw the military coups around the region and feared that a powerful military would be a problem," explains J. Peter Pham, an Africa security expert at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in New York. "So the Tunisian military wasn't the overwhelming drag on Tunisia that it was on many Arab countries. It was a professional and well-trained corps, which provided a path for Tunisian men that ended with a certain level of reward for their service."

Nonetheless, Bourguiba fell in a coup to Ben Ali, whose family ties were nothing next to those of his wife Leila, who effectively allowed her Trabelsi clan to rob the country blind. "For the last 15 years Tunisia has been run by a kleptocracy," says Pham. "The Trabelsis drove out anyone wanting to invest in the country, and this prevented sustained economic growth." The inability of educated Tunisians to find jobs was a big factor in touching off the demonstrations. But more important, what toppled Ben Ali was the fact that the Trabelsis had stolen the military's nest egg. "For the army, there was no longer any financial reward after their service," says Pham. Their opportunities for modest participation in commerce and contracting had been gradually taken over by the dictator's in-laws. "When Ben Ali called in the army's chief of staff Rachid Ammar to fire him, Ammar told him, 'No, you're the one who's going.'"

While it's true that pan-Arab satellite TV is apt to inspire revolutionary dreams around the region, the Arabic-speaking Middle East doesn't lend itself to the domino effect. The regimes are not linked but rather ranged against each other, each doing its utmost to destabilize its adversaries. This is why the emir of Qatar uses his Al Jazeera TV network against Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It's why in the past Amman supported the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, while Damascus backed the Jordanian branch. And it's why the Algerians continue to support the Polisario—to destabilize and frustrate neighboring Morocco.

Ever since Spain relinquished the Western Sahara in 1975, the Polisario Front, a Marxist revolutionary separatist group backed by Algeria and Cuba and once supported by former Soviet bloc states, has contested the territory that Morocco says is rightly its own. A 1991 cease-fire brokered by the U.N. brought an end to the fighting, and in 2007 Rabat drafted a compromise political solution that would grant the region a broad autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The Moroccans would like the international community, led by the United States, to help resolve the issue, the top priority in Rabat's foreign policy, but there is little will to do so, even as Washington has publicly endorsed the proposal. The Western Sahara issue shows once again that the benefits of being a solid U.S. ally like Morocco are not always clear, and that it can be easier to get Washington's attention by acting up than by acting responsibly.

In the meantime, the Moroccans are building housing in Saharan cities like Dakhla to encourage refugees to leave the Polisario's camps and come home. Families have been separated for three decades. The conditions in the camps are inhuman, explained one former Moroccan captive, 42-year-old Mohamed Cherif. "I was chained for five years in a hole dug in the earth," says Cherif. "Often the Algerians and the Polisario would take the blood of Moroccan POWs to sell it." And for all that he's seen, says Cherif, "I still can't understand why anyone would light themselves on fire. These lives are precious."

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