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Tunisia's "Unemployed Uprising" and the Prospects for Political Change

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The mass protests which erupted late last month in Tunisia indicate that the country's festering socio-economic difficulties and political discontent may have reached the boiling point. Some foreign observers and commentators rushed to conclude that Tunisia was on the cusp of a general public uprising against the government's heavy-handed repression of all political dissent, dating back to the early 1990s. Indeed, the "unemployed uprising," of jobless Tunisians railing against their economic plight, was greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm among the Tunisian regime's opponents at home and abroad. The protests, which originated in the country's periphery and spilled over to the capital, Tunis, and the country's second largest city, Sfax, also attracted a great deal of international attention. Foreign coverage of the clashes between protestors and security forces departed from the accolades frequently showered on the Tunisian government's economic policies and the country's political stability, and highlighted the state's repression and absence of civil liberties among ordinary Tunisians.

Three weeks after their outbreak, the unrest has still not subsided. Dozens have been killed, according to varying reports. In an effort to restore order, the Tunisian government announced that it was closing all schools and universities

until further notice. To that end, army units have been introduced to maintain order, and a night-time curfew has been imposed on the Tunis metropolitan area. The government has also promised to address some of the protestors' grievances.

As it now stands, the situation is shrouded in uncertainty. Is Tunisia on the brink of sustained and widespread public rage against the ruling regime? Do these protests reflect an institutionalized movement capable of challenging—let alone vanquishing—the regime? Is political change on the horizon? To even begin addressing these questions necessitates an examination of the unfolding situation on the ground, in all its complexity and nuances.

The unrest broke out in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, some 200 kilometers southeast of the capital Tunis, over the weekend of December 17. They were triggered by the suicide of 26-year old Mohammed Bouazizi. In many ways Bouazizi's life story encapsulates the current plight of a growing number of young Tunisians. An unemployed university graduate, Bouazizi was forced to sell fruits and vegetables from an unlicensed street pushcart in order to provide for his family. Local authorities refused to grant him a permit, confiscated his merchandise on several occasions, and according to various reports, insulted him as he made repeated requests to obtain a license. Frustrated and humiliated, Bouazizi set himself aflame in protest, in defiance of police officers. His death triggered a rare public outpour of anger. Hundreds of local residents clashed with security forces in Sidi Bouzid, smashing cars and shop windows. Tensions were exacerbated when another young Tunisian in the same town electrocuted himself, saying that he was fed up with being unemployed. Clashes then continued, as protestors demanded the release of dozens arrested in earlier protest rounds, as well as more development and jobs in the region. They were further enraged by the fact that no government official had come to listen to their grievances. Gradually, the protests spread to neighboring cities such as Sousse and Sfax, and by December 28, they had reached the capital. There, hundreds of protestors, mainly unemployed university graduates, gathered outside the offices of the

country's main workers' union to demand jobs and an end to government corruption. This became the protestors' rallying cry.

Anti-government public protests have been extremely rare in Tunisia, where the authorities have little tolerance for any form of dissent. Accordingly, the government's reaction to the unfolding events was typically swift and forceful, in Sidi Bouzid and elsewhere. Initially, the government sought to downplay the Sidi Bouzid protest's significance, arguing that it was an "isolated incident" that had been blown out of proportion. An unnamed government official accused the regime's opponents of seeking to exploit the riots for "unhealthy political ends." But as the protests intensified, the Tunisian regime was forced to acknowledge them. In a televised address, President Zayn al-`Abidin Ben `Ali, in power since his removal of the country's founding president, Habib Bourguiba, in November 1987, asserted that the use of violence by "a minority of extremists" was "not acceptable." He added that the law would be "applied in all firmness," indicating that the regime was not about to alter its approach towards domestic dissent, and that those involved in instigating violence and disorder would be punished. Ben `Ali warned that further protests were likely have a negative impact on plans for job creation and would discourage potential investors and tourists. On a more conciliatory note, Ben Ali declared he would seek to reduce unemployment and improve the standard of living, indirectly acknowledging the protestors' message. He also removed the country's youth minister from his post, a signal that the government was attentive to the rising discontent. Then, on January 12, he removed Minister of Interior Rafik BelhajKacem, who had directed the police crackdown on the protests, from his post. Ben `Ali's actions demonstrate the seriousness with which he views the challenge to his regime, and his intent on taking both symbolic and practical steps to address the protestors' grievances while maintaining the existing political and economic order.

It is important to note the protestors' socio-economic profile. A large number were unemployed, many of them university graduates, frustrated with their

inability to find jobs that would meet their expectations. They were quickly joined by others from the middle and lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. In the past, these groups were considered part of Ben `Ali's coalition, as they rallied around the Tunisian president after his rise to power in 1987. These groups accepted what is often referred to as Tunisia's "Devil's Compact," in which they effectively agreed to forgo civil liberties in exchange for economic development and an improved standard of living that the regime would provide. In recent years, this understanding has frayed considerably, as economic growth has receded. In addition, increasing reports of corruption amongst the highest government echelons, involving members of Ben `Ali's family, have eroded public support for the regime. Much of the public is disillusioned by the government's failure to address their economic needs and institute more progressive social policies. Tunisian politics and society, under these circumstances, remain stagnant, and overshadowed by the regime.

It remains unclear whether these protestors will be able to crystallize into a more established opposition force to the ruling regime, which would likely do everything in its power to repress it. Tunisia's recognized opposition parties remain weak, ineffective, and locked in internal squabbles. They are in no position to serve as a viable alternative to the regime. Other groups, such as the banned Islamist al-Nahda movement, have been so effectively evicted from the political landscape, that they are not capable of spearheading a broad movement of dissent. Although Tunisia's social discontent has now been publicly displayed, political change may not materialize so quickly.

Nevertheless, some positive outcomes of the recent riots could emerge. Foremost, Tunisian society has signaled that it is not as passive and apathetic as many have branded it. Some of the country's traditional political locomotives, such as the trade union activists, reemerged in the protests, in what may become a revival of their former (even pre-independence) position in public life. While Tunisia is likely to continue to slog along in the near future, attempting to ameliorate the economic conditions of its citizens, the unrest and confrontation between the

authorities and young demonstrators have at the very least indicated that the era of complete atomization of political life is apparently coming to an end.

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