

DEMONSTRATING FOR DEMOCRACY: Cairo's central Tahrir Square became the hub of protest against Hosni Mubarak's misrule



SPRING OF DISCONTENT

The tragic self-immolation by street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set off the trend of civil unrest that started in Tunisia but soon spread to other Arab countries also ruled by unrepresentative and authoritarian regimes

By Shyam Bhatia

THE ARAB SPRING started in Tunisia, but its future course, including wider regional repercussions, could well be determined by what happens more than 1,000 miles to the East in Syria. Syria is one of three Arab countries, along with Egypt and Iraq, that makes up what is known as the 'beating heart' of the Arab world. All three countries are in political turmoil. Iraq is still trying to find its feet after years of misrule under Saddam Hussein. Egypt is seeking new directions after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. Syria still has political continuity under the leadership Bashar Assad, son of former Syrian President Hafiz Al Assad, but that too is under threat. If Syria is overcome by the Arab Spring, it will have implications that stretch well beyond its immediate political boundaries.

It was the tragic self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself alight in the city of Sidi Bouzid, that set off the trend of civil unrest that started in Tunisia, but soon spread to other Arab countries also ruled by unrepresentative and authoritarian regimes.

A street vendor by profession, Bouazizi had been repeatedly harassed by the local police. When an especially obnoxious policewoman confiscated his goods on December 17, 2010, the 26-year victim sneared his body with paint fuel and set himself alight. He died three weeks later.

The callous indifference of local officials sparked off an uprising that spread to all parts of the country. On January 14, 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had to flee and seek refuge in Saudi Arabia.

Public perceptions of the injustice pre-

vailing in Tunisia struck a chord in many neighbouring countries where the story of the Tunisian 'burning man' provoked days of rage following Friday noon prayers in such diverse Arab capitals as Cairo, Algiers, Amman and Sana'a.

The crowds in these Arab capitals had their own stories to tell — of intimidation, harassment, bribery, corruption and mismanagement at the highest levels of their respective governments. But it was in Egypt, the largest Arab country, where the protests were especially bitter and often violent.

Fired up by the example of Tunisia, Egyptians soon took to the streets to protest against high prices, authoritarian rule and government mismanagement underpinned by a shadowy state that appeared to be under the control of the secret police known as the *mukhabarat*.

The sheer ferocity of the Egyptian protests was unexpected, given that Mubarak in his earlier years had enjoyed some modest popularity among his fellow Egyptians. He was after all the air force general, who had contributed to Egypt's success against Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. When he succeeded the assassinated President Anwar El Sadat in October 1981, Mubarak enjoyed the backing of many of his fellow Egyptians. In the subsequent years that support changed to disgust and anger, culminating in his resignation on February 11, 2011.

Mubarak's downfall encouraged political protests in neighbouring Libya, ultimately leading to the ouster of Libyan dictator Muammar Al Gaddafi on August 23. Yemeni President Abdullah Saleh was forced to resign in November and political protests were sparked off in Algeria, Iraq,



A DICTATOR DIES: Muammar Al Gaddafi was captured alive, and then killed by members of the Libyan National Liberation Army

Morocco, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and, most notably, Syria.

What happens to these Arab states and beyond will be heavily influenced by developments in Syria. A quick look at the political map illustrates how Syria is at the geographical heart of the Arab world. It shares borders with Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, and Turkey. Oil-rich Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are a stone's throw away. Prolonged violence in Syria could easily spill over to these neighbours.

Apart from its political heritage as one of the intellectual centres of the Arab world, Syria is also home to all kinds of minority groups, such as the Kurds, Maronites, Alawites, Shia and Sunni Muslims, Ismailis, Yazidis, Armenians and Greek Orthodox Christians. All of these communities seek security for themselves and possibly their own place under the sun, as civil tensions multiply across the country. Small wonder, then, that the Arab Spring could turn into a Syrian-led Arab winter with all the extra suffering that it implies.

NEWSPICK



Exposer is exposed

Julian Paul Assange of WikiLeaks was nominated for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. He is wanted in Sweden in a sexual assault case. Though on bail, Assange is in custody in UK. He appealed against a February decision by English courts to extradite him to Sweden. On November 2, the High Court had upheld the extradition decision. However, on December 5, another High Court hearing granted Assange permission to appeal to the Supreme Court on the grounds that his case raises a question if European arrest warrants were valid when a suspect is only wanted for questioning.



Dynasty rules

Kim Jong-il, North Korea's reclusive dictator died, and his untitled young son Kim Jong-un took over the family dynasty that has ruled North Korea after World War II. The military, which is trying to develop a nuclear arsenal, has pledged allegiance to the young ruler. The collective leadership will include Kim Jong-un, his uncle and the military.

France's First baby

French first lady Carla Bruni, 43, wife of President Nicolas Sarkozy, 56, gave birth to a daughter. The baby is the first born to a sitting French president. Carla also has a 10-year-old son from a previous relationship, while Sarkozy has three sons from two previous marriages. Sarkozy is trailing in the popularity stakes to Socialist presidential candidate Francois Hollande, who is the current favourite.

MASSACRE IN NORWAY



Norway's twin-terror attacks were one of the deadliest modern mass killings in peacetime. The bombing and shooting spree by suspect Anders Behring Breivik left 93 persons dead. Breivik belonged to an anti-immigration party and wrote blogs attacking multi-culturalism and Islam.

JAPAN'S SEA OF SORROW



A tsunami in Japan killed at least 1,000 persons. It also caused an explosion in the Fukushima nuclear plant. Radiation leak remained a cause of concern.

THE DSK DALLIANCE



Dominique Strauss-Kahn 62, head of the International Monetary Fund, was arrested and charged with an alleged sexual assault, including an attempted rape, on a hotel maid in New York City. A 32-year-old maid filed the complaint after fleeing the \$3,000-a-night hotel suite at the Sofitel in Times Square.

RIOTS SHAME BRITAIN



Violence raged across London. Starting from Tottenham, it soon spread to other cities. At least 1,000 people were arrested in four days of rioting. Riots started after protesters demonstrated against the fatal police shooting of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-black who was gunned down in disputed circumstances.