

## Eclipse of Spring

*The Statesman*

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On 17 Dec 2010, in the dusty town of Sidi Bouzeid in Central Tunisia, a police woman by the name Faida Hamdy confiscated the vegetable cart of a street vendor, slapped him and spat on his face. In despair, that young man, Mohammed Bouazizi, set fire to himself. His death on January 4, 2011, sparked widespread protests that ultimately overthrew the dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years of rule, who had to flee to Saudi Arabia with his family in the spring of 2011. The world watched with a mixture of joy and disbelief as thousands of people danced and celebrated their new-found freedom as these images were beamed live to the TV screens across the world. On that day - 24th January 2011 - fear had died in Tunisia. The Jasmine Revolution, called after Tunisia's national flower, then triggered a series of similar protests in Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Morocco, sending ripples of fear throughout the entire Arab world which, with a few remarkable exceptions, were ruled by autocratic Sultans and Sheikhs, to whom words like democracy or human rights, especially women's rights, were anathema. This spring of discontent in the Arab world became known as the Arab Spring.

In Egypt, the first street protests had erupted at the Tahrir Square of Cairo on 25th January, 2011. Three days later, President Hosni Mubarak's police marksmen shot dead hundreds of people in Cairo and Alexandria, and Cairo's Tahrir Square became a symbol of the protests. It galvanised an entire nation in an ultimate do or die struggle against decades of poverty, oppression, tyranny and denial of human rights. After 18 days of demonstrations and more than 800 deaths, Mubarak was finally overthrown. That day, around sunset, at the Tahrir Square, thousands of people danced and recited poetry, to celebrate the end of his three decade long dictatorial rule.

In February, 2011, protests erupted against the rule of Col Muammar Gaddafi, which subsequently turned into an 8-month long civil war, ultimately snowballing into an international war in which rebel forces were supported by NATO air attacks. The war ended with the death of the hated dictator in October 2011. In February 2012, President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen was forced out of power. In Morocco, more than 37000 people marched in nationwide protests demanding political reforms and democracy in February 2011, forcing King Mohammed VI to cede some of his powers to a newly elected government in the parliamentary elections held in January 2012. The spread of the contagion seemed unstoppable. In Syria, protests against President Bashar al-Assad that began in March 2011, had turned into a complex, intractable and prolonged bloody war. Thousands of Syrians are dead, thousands more have fled the country seeking refuge elsewhere, and hundreds have died on their perilous journey to safety on the European shores. The Syrian conflict has created the largest refugee crisis of the 21st century.

Now after five years, the Arab World is in ferment again. Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen are tottering on the verge of collapse while militant terror and repression stalk the region, taking their daily toll. The movement for democracy has now morphed into a struggle between Islam and liberal forces on the one hand, and between Sunnis and Shias within Islam itself on the other. Iraq and Libya are being torn asunder in endless bloodletting between nationalists, Islamists, Shias, Sunnis, tribes and plain old thugs – all deeply entangled in a conflict that shows no sign of abating. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State

roam free in much of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Just as the Islamic identity has been badly shaken by its encounter with the Western world, the West is struggling hard to come to terms with Islam. The space vacated by the democratic movements in the Arab world has already been occupied by radicalised adherents of Islam, whose appeal, strangely no longer seem confined only to the deprived and marginalised sections of the community. Failure of the Arab spring seems to have sparked and unleashed the fury of a resurgent Islam, whose appeal is proving to be especially strong among the Muslim immigrants in Europe.

In Tunis, protests had started in the central avenue Habib Bourguiba. The main public square called the November 7 Square, now renamed Mohammad Bouazizi Square, was the place where protesters had converged in thousands, demanding democracy and justice. Visiting the tranquil and beautiful square around a fountain, I reflected on the turmoil that had convulsed the country, and given rebirth to another nation. Tunisia probably remains the sole success story in a region that has been unable to shake off the burden of the past. It has successfully sailed through two general elections since then, with a coalition led by the moderate Islamist party, Ennahda, winning the first. Under its governance, the country drew up its constitution that guarantees basic fundamental rights and freedoms including rights to freedom of movement, opinion, expression and assembly, including the rights to form association and political parties, and guaranteed “equality of opportunities between women and men to have access to all levels of responsibility and in all domains”, making Tunisia one of the few countries in the Arab world to do so. The transition to democracy had fundamentally changed the country. Public are now free to debate on contentious issues which are considered taboo in Arab world – ranging from religion, political orders, rule of law, reform, gay rights, artistic expression, meaning of revolution and of course on democratic polity, and they do so with gusto. Ennahda was defeated by an alliance of secular parties led by the liberal Nidaa Tounes party in elections held in October 2014. After 5 years though, the currents of discontent and frustration are again surfacing due to high unemployment and inadequacy of economic policy reforms, belying the hope of better life for the youth who had massively participated in the protests five years ago. But democracy is now deeply embedded in psyche of the country.

In contrast, in Egypt, the revolution devoured its own children. After the overthrow of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the world’s oldest and most influential Islamic movements that also became the face of political Islam, was elected to power in the elections held in late 2011, and its leader Mohamed Morsi became the country’s first democratically elected President. He tried to force an Islamist constitution by decree, granted himself unlimited powers and cracked down on dissent, triggering nationwide protests. In July 2013, the unpopular Government was toppled in a coup led by the Army chief Abdel Fatah al-Sisi who outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, herded its members into jail including President Morsi who was subsequently convicted on corruption and spying charges and sentenced to prison and death. In one of the harshest crackdown on dissent, more than a thousand protesters, mostly supporters of the Brotherhood, were killed across Egypt. Sisi elected himself as President in May 2014, and Egypt is back to military dictatorship again, with thousands jailed, brutalised and dead. This has only reinforced the indispensability of the military as the only reliable source of establishing political order and stability in that country.

The voice of the liberals that had supported the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi has fallen silent. As the Economist has commented, “Tarnished by this history, riven by infighting and lacking broad appeal,

the liberals now appear helpless to check Egypt's slide back to authoritarianism." The violence unleashed by the regime has ensured that another Arab revolution of the kind that sparked the protests on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 does not spring in Egypt again. The result - Egypt has now become a rich recruiting ground for the Islamic State's merchants of death. Restoring past Islamic glory now seems to be more appealing to the youth than restoring democracy. Most Egyptians seem to have reconciled themselves to the new reality, and protests are becoming infrequent, even though the economy is weakening and unemployment rising. The country today is in dire financial straits, with more than 80% of its budget going to debt service, subsidies and wages, leaving very little to spend on education and other activities that build the future of a country. The cry for bread, freedom and justice that had sparked the revolution five years ago now seem infinitely far away.

In downtown Cairo, Tahrir Square, once the revolutions beating heart and healing symbol, is busy and vibrant as usual. It was hard to believe that hundreds of thousands of protesters had occupied the square in that tumultuous January of 2011. A little further away, in one corner of the square stood the majestic Egyptian Museum that houses the ancient glory of one of the mightiest empires the World has ever seen. Sitting around it in a summer afternoon, I reflected if time, space and history had become warped inside that small square. More than five years ago, the Arab Spring was born in the act of self-immolation of a vegetable peddler. Most of the countries which were then swept by the spring winds of change seemed to have been caught again in the vortex of a spiral of violence and are reverting into a past they are trying hard to forget. Through revolution and counter-revolution, they have sailed from the heights of elation to the depths of despair. Is the Arab spring dead finally? Or is it gathering strength, unseen, within human hearts that are too resilient to accept defeat, and will suddenly unleash a gale of irresistible force that will overthrow the old order and usher in a world where justice and freedom would prevail finally? What would be its price in terms of human lives?