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Tunisia Today.
How about Morocco or Algeria Tomorrow?

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The Tunisian Revolution of January 2011 ushered a new era in the states of the Arab World. While its repercussions were plainly perceived in the cases of Libya and Egypt, one needs to assess the revolution's lasting effects in Tunisia, as well as its influence on the democratic process of the rest of the Maghreb countries.

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On January 14th 2011, after 23 years in power, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali decided to leave the country of Tunisia and resign without looking back. As a result, the Tunisian regime that was locked in place for decades suddenly collapsed like a house of cards. The fundamental characteristic of the rebellion against Ben Ali was that it was not planned or led by a political group or party. It was a demonstration of collective indignation that found its roots in demands for economic reform and step by step focused on throwing the President out of office. The day after Ben Ali's mandate ended, a government of national coalition was announced and all political parties were legalized. The ruling Troika consists of the leading Islamist Ennahda party and two secular centre-left parties, the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties party and the Congress for the Republic party. The opposition has come together as the National Salvation Front, an electoral alliance led by left-wing and liberal parties.

Today, almost three years after the Jasmine Revolution, civil unrest is still in the headlines of the Press and the minds of the Tunisian people. The government does not have the Tunisians' trust as it has failed to drive the country through a democratic transition and to minimize the sense of insecurity that reigns in social and economic matters. The Tunisian people are demonstrating and demanding the resignation of the government. Consequently, new investments are kept at bay since the Tunisian periphery is still in economic infancy and unattractive, while the Tunisian economic growth rate remains stagnant[1]. The Tunisian GDP growth in 2013 is expected at only 3.2% against 3.6% in 2012[2]. In the meantime, strikes multiply as the prices of goods and services are at an all-time high with the inflation rising at 6%. Those in power seem to turn a blind eye to the urgency of the situation while the opposition as well as the radical salafists seem unable to offer a solution to the issues at hand.

The fact that tensions have risen since the beginning of last year is making matters worse. On February 6th 2013 Chokri Belaïd -a member of the opposition- was shot fourteen times and killed in Tunis while negotiations were moving forward to enlarge the party coalition in power. On July 25th 2013 Mohamed Brahmi[3] –a key member of the National Constitutional Assembly- was assassinated as well, at a time when the work on the Tunisian Constitution was seemingly reaching its end. It seems that every time a symbolic anniversary or important event approaches, attacks are planned and Tunisia is put through the wringer. One fails to see the coincidence in the fact that each time Tunisia attempts to take a step in the direction towards further democratization, a violent event occurs that halts or at least undermines the entire process. These (highly political) crimes have not but one objective: to undermine and perhaps reverse the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. It comes as no surprise that further investigation has led the Tunisian police to the conclusion that both assassinations were conducted by the same individuals[4] who seem to belong to the radical salafist Ansar Al-Shariah movement. The ruling Troika has seen its policies, however misguided, challenged, its decisions weakened and its Constitution-building efforts paralyzed by an anemic economy, by political crises that come one after the other, by political assassinations, as well as by the reemergence of targeted attacks. As a consequence, the state of emergency in place since 2011 has been prolonged until June 2014[5]. It is of note that the state of emergency was each time extended for one or three months. The latest decision prolonged it for the first time for 8 subsequent months. During the month of October 2013, nine police officers were killed in attacks in which jihadist groups targeted tourist sites. The government has attributed these attacks to groups affiliated with the salafist Ansar Al-Shariah movement which has been accused of maintaining ties with Al-Qaida. Ansar Al-Shariah has been classified as a terrorist organization by the Tunisian authorities[6]. To make matters worse, suicide attacks are not

uncommon for the past few months. For instance, on October 30th 2013, two kamikaze bombers were stopped, one at the touristic port of Sousse and another at the coastal city of Monastir[7]. As a direct result of the political instability and the succeeding attacks, Tunisia's tourism, a key economic factor, is struggling and ailing.

Contrary to the rest of the countries affected by the Arab Spring, the Tunisian military forces –despite their crucial role in 2011– are willingly sidestepping politics and stand only as guardians of the state's security. Until recently, consensus or political dialogue seemed to be non-existent and the democratization of the country and its institutions, by putting a Constitution in place, looked like a pipe dream for Tunisians. On October 25th 2013, a national dialogue began, aiming to find a new Prime Minister that would lead Tunisia to elections from which a new government of experts would emerge[8]. The objective was to move away from the current political dead-end and to move forward. Although this decision was met with some satisfaction by the Tunisian people, they also shared a fair amount of skepticism, since half-measures have been common practice from the very beginning of the government's mandate. As of November 5th, the dialogue between the political parties was suspended indefinitely by the government, the latter citing irredeemable differences concerning the candidacy of the future Prime Minister[9]. Needless to say that when a country is in a constant state of shock, no economic growth can be achieved and no democratic progress can effectively move forward.

The Jasmine Revolution in January 2011 and President Ben Ali's fall from power proved that no authoritative regime is safe from the wave of revolution and seemed to plant the seeds for other countries in the region to follow Tunisia's lead. It's no surprise that in February demonstrations were organized in Algeria by the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (a movement created a few weeks earlier) while tensions were running high in the adjacent country. Algeria and Tunisia had common political systems in place in which power was personified by the country's President: Ben Ali in the former, Abdulaziz Bouteflika in the latter. At the time that the Tunisian revolution was ongoing, the Algerian government went ahead with counter-revolutionary measures in order to stay ahead of the curve.

Lately, because of the deterioration, since April 27th, of the health of President Bouteflika, who took over power in 1999, the Algerian government is put to the test[10]. The economy, tightly linked with the gradually diminishing revenue of oil exports, is in decline, with the oil sector accounting for a third of the GDP and representing 98% of Algerian imports. As a result, economic development is at risk while youth unemployment is peaking at an alarming 21.5%[11]. The political regime lacks transparency, is corrupt and its decision-makers are not held to any accountability, while the police system reigns[12]. This can only lead to a loss of political legitimacy and a paralyzed country in need of some drastic changes that will occur sooner rather than later, either through the foresight of its current administration, either through demonstrations and the demands of its citizens. Currently, elections are planned to take place in April 2014 as President Bouteflika returned[13] in September 29th, after his leave of absence due to health-related issues, and went ahead with restructuring the Algerian government. Demonstrations seem to have slowed down as the Islamist parties are optimistically preparing for the 2014 presidential elections and the current government is effectively putting together its final act[14].

The domino effect that was predicted after the events of the Jasmine Revolution did not take place in Morocco. The middle class, the one that led to Ben Ali's downfall, is not contesting the monarchy's grasp of power. The ruling dynasty is considered by the Moroccan people as its savior and its protector. Contrary to the situation in Tunisia, the unemployment and poverty indicators are at a much lower level and the rights of expression

and basic liberties are usually respected and protected. This strengthens the feeling of security among the Moroccans and makes the country a stable one in the region.

Nonetheless, common points can be found in both Morocco and Tunisia. The structure of the economy is identical and a high percentage of the population is francophone and educated, while both countries suffer from poverty and unemployment[15]. Both indicators in 2013 were officially reported at 9% and 15% in Morocco and Tunisia respectively.

When the Jasmine Revolution occurred, pro-active measures were taken to stop prices from going up and to dilute the voices against King Mohammed VI, who has, for the time being, managed to keep them at bay. These voices target the corrupt elites of the Moroccan society who have benefited from the current state of affairs. Some emulation of the events in Tunisia took place in Morocco, as self-immolations occurred in 2012. King Mohammed VI announced a new wave of reforms and amends to the Moroccan Constitution, which seems to have ushered a new era for the country's political system as well as its civil society. It goes without saying that by staying ahead of the demands of the Moroccan people, the ruling dynasty is maintaining its power while slowly but progressively modernizing the way of life of its citizens[16].

Recently, two events drove King Mohammed VI to announce a new government on October 10th 2013. The first was the pardon on July 31st that he issued to the Spaniard Daniel Galva, who was convicted and was serving a sentence of 30 years for crimes of pedophilia, and the subsequent recall of his decision[17] on August 4th, as a result of demonstrations that occurred the day after the pardon. The government and the King himself were subjected to strong criticism and their ethical values were put to the test as a large majority of the demonstrators rallied against the King's decision for the first time. The second event was the arrest on September 17th of Ali Anouzla[18], a journalist who posted a message from Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb that was targeting King Mohammed VI. Demonstrations comprising journalists and human rights advocates took place in support of his immediate release and in defense of the freedom of expression of the Press. It is of note that the main Islamist and liberal political parties –Istiqlal and RNI respectively- aligned with the government's decision, accusing Ali Anouzla of terrorist activity.

The latest coup in Egypt and President Morsi's ouster found the leading political forces in the Maghreb countries ambivalent and in shock. It appears that the parties of the opposition are labeling it as the "next phase" in the revolutionary process of the Arab Spring while the Islamist parties in charge are taking a stance against it, their views heavily influenced by the possibility of being removed from power as well. One could certainly consider this dichotomy a harbinger of things to come as the North-African political landscape shifts anew.

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