

A Personal Perspective on the Tunisian Revolution

Written by Alyssa Alfano

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ALYSSA ALFANO, FEB 9 2011

It was the first cyber-revolution, but it probably won't be the last. Ironically, my friends in the beautiful North African country of Tunisia, where I'd spent last summer learning Arabic, gave me daily updates on a technology formerly censored by the ousted regime.

After spending the two months in La Marsa, a suburb of the capital Tunis, the obvious way to stay in touch with my new friends was through Facebook. Little did I know that only months later I would be watching a revolution unfold in Tunisia by reading dozens of posts from the friends I made there.

Life in Tunis

Prior to arriving in the capital in June, I hardly knew what to expect of Tunisia. Some students in my group Arabic language study program had been to Morocco in the past. But Tunisia? We'd all read the Wikipedia page. We knew the government was oppressive and that we wouldn't have access to YouTube for a few months. But beyond that, up until recently, Tunisia was practically unheard of.

The small nation exceeded my expectations in only a matter of days. The people were incredibly hospitable and the modern capital impressed us with sidewalk cafes and the traditional market place, known as a souk. My school was located in Sidi Bou Said, the picturesque blue and white tourist destination located on the Mediterranean. I lived with a host family in the adjacent town of La Marsa, whose long beaches offered similar sights. But the realities of authoritarian rule slowly became apparent. On my walk to school every morning, I passed a huge billboard adorned with a stately photograph of former President Ben Ali.

Ben Ali's control over the press and internet quickly became apparent. His own Wikipedia page was blocked on the country's internet service providers, along with the web pages of countless human rights organizations, opposition blogs, twitters, and critical newspaper articles.

Yet I was still impressed at how modern the country was. My young Tunisian host-sister had a cell phone and a Facebook profile. My real sister in New York didn't. My Tunisian peers were all informed and well-educated; the country's education system is well-developed and its universities are nearly free for students. However, unlike college campuses elsewhere, political discussions were not on the table. It was obvious that many of my peers and professors held contempt for Ben Ali, but it was unspoken. It had to be, considering the fear of the secret police. My host father told me that no one spoke poorly of the President in public for fear of being taken away and put in an unknown prison. This seemed unreal to me, and I brushed it off as an exaggeration. But even after living and bonding with my family for months, my attempts to bring up Ben Ali's politics after dinner were quickly evaded and became a forum for discussion on the well-respected first President of Tunisia, Habib Bourgiba. The mix of an authoritarian government yet a modern society was striking, and the ability of the state to permeate individual lives was unimaginable.

Cyber-revolution

After returning home to the Hudson Valley, I kept in touch with my new Tunisian friends and family over the internet.

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But before long, their posts and e-mails began to center around the soon-to-be “Jasmine revolution.” Before mainstream press began to cover the events leading up to the revolution, friends on Facebook had posted videos and pictures of protests and links to articles about Mohamed Bouazizi, the man who set himself on fire after police confiscated his produce cart— his only source of income in a nation where some estimates place unemployment well over 20 percent. As the days passed, my “News Feed” was filled with videos, pictures, twitter links, event invitations, and blogs all centered around the protests in each city. Grave updates filled my News Feed and inbox as police brutality, looting and the death toll rapidly increased.

In solidarity with the Tunisians, I, along with my American friends who also spent time in the country, changed our Facebook profile pictures to the Tunisian flag as the conflict escalated.

As I noticed via Facebook and Twitter, the protests began over unemployment, but quickly escalated to include increased food prices, press censorship, and eventually to demands for the removal of President Ben Ali from office.

Facebook groups and event pages allowed millions of youth to collaborate protest details, as well as a means of documenting both successes and horrors. Prior to the relevance of the internet, revolutions relied on pamphlets and word of mouth. It was the internet that facilitated the speed and precision of this revolution.

Although much of the revolution was hardly covered by mainstream media, Bouazizi’s desperate act finally gave citizens the courage, and a good reason, to speak up. On the day Ben Ali fled the country, a former teacher and friend posted: “We witnessed 01/14/2011! I am proud to be Tunisian!” After President Obama’s State of the Union Address earlier this week, numerous friends posted quotes from the speech about Tunisia, impressed with their ability to gain the attention of the U.S. This week, the interim Tunisian government issued an arrest warrant for their former president and relatives for stealing money from the nation.

With the recent protests in Egypt and Yemen inspired by Tunisia, it seems clear that the Jasmine Revolution, fuelled by social-media, will not be the last of its kind. Many Tunisians have changed their profile pictures to the Jasmine flower, a fragrant, pure white flower found throughout their country. While the violence has subsided, they recognize that the struggle for democracy has only begun, and are incessantly posting groups and statuses promoting the necessity of free and fair elections. Their resolve is inspiring to all.

While in the past it was more than common for leaders to rule their people through fear and threat, with increased education and accessibility to the internet, I would like to think that authoritarian leaders and dictators like Ben Ali will soon be known only in history. As Obama said in his State of the Union Address, “The will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator...The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia.” While it is encouraging to have the President’s distant support, Tunisians and protesters around the world have an even better tool at their disposal: social media.

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