Tunisians overthrow dictator and demand political and economic reform (Jasmine Revolution), 2010-2011

Time period notes: Protests continued (and still continue at the time of writing) after the end date noted here. However, this end date marks the end of the campaign leading to a new interim government.

17 December 2010 to: 27 January 2011

Country: Tunisia

Goals:
To oust all Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party members from government positions and to introduce new political reforms. Protesters also demanded an expansion of political freedoms, and an end to police brutality and government corruption. Campaigners also sought new economic reforms that would address high unemployment, high food prices, and poverty in Tunisia.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- Other... → self-immolation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike
• 104. Professional strike
• 193. Overloading of administrative systems ☞ excessive traffic to government websites to shut them down

Methods in 4th segment:

• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 187. Seizure of assets

Methods in 6th segment:

• 020. Prayer and worship
• 042. Motorcades
• 043. Political mourning
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 097. Protest strike
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws ☞ defiance of curfew

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 016. Picketing
• 019. Wearing of symbols

Notes on Methods:
The campaign was begun by the self-immolation of 26-year-old Mohammed Bouazizi, although the classification of this method of protest as nonviolent is debatable.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice

Group characterization:

• Labor unions
• Lawyers
• Unemployed persons
• students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Tunisian Federation of Labor Unions, Tunisian General Labor Union, Tunisian Bar Association

**Partners:**
Not known

**External allies:**
The hacktivist group, “Anonymous” launches “Operation Tunisia” in support of the protests. The online hackers flooded government websites with traffic and temporarily shut them down.

Wikileaks, the whistle-blowing organization, published US diplomatic cables revealing that US diplomats knew of the extent of Tunisian government corruption yet still chose to support President Ben Ali.

The Swiss government ordered a freeze on all funds held by President Ben Ali in Switzerland.

UN High Commission for Human Rights announced its plan to send a team of human rights officials to investigate protest-related violence in Tunisia. The team also advised the new coalition government.

**Involvement of social elites:**
Not known

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

**Groups in 1st Segment:**
- unemployed persons

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**
- Lawyers
- Unions

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**
- Anonymous
- Students

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**
- Swiss Government
- United Nations
- Wikileaks

**Groups in 6th Segment:**
- Firemen
- National Guard Members
- Police

**Segment Length:** 1 week

**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

**Opponents:**
Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) Government, including President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, and other RCD party ministers and officials.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Although violence was not sanctioned by the leadership, campaigners set fire to tires and government buildings, often attacking local offices of the RCD ruling party. Looting and gang activity were also reported.

**Repressive Violence:**
In order to disperse the protesters, security forces fired tear gas canisters, water cannons, and bullets into the anti-government crowds. A curfew was imposed, and people were banned from gathering in groups consisting of more than three persons. State media did not immediately report on the protests, and police forces were reported to have beat, tortured, ‘disappeared’, shot, and killed many demonstrators, including bloggers, lawyers, journalists, and activists.

**Success Outcome**

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

Over the past several decades, high unemployment, high food prices, and widespread poverty have characterized much of Tunisia. Government corruption and a paucity of political freedoms have also painted its landscape, making it exceedingly difficult for Tunisians to express dissent against the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party. However, on 17 December 2010, 26-year-old Mohammed Bouazizi doused himself in paint thinner and set himself on fire in front of the Sidi Bouzid municipal office in response to the confiscation of his produce stand, his violent treatment at the hands of police officers, and the municipal office’s refusal to hear his complaint. Bouazizi had been struggling to support his family, and his act of desperation inspired many of his anguished friends and relatives to publicly voice their frustration over police violence, poverty, high unemployment, and a lack of human rights.

Thus beginning in Sidi Bouzid, the street protests soon spread across the region. Demonstrators, carrying signs and shouting in the streets, denounced the government for failing to effectively address the problem of unemployment. To help quell the protests, development minister Mohamed Al Nouri Al Juwayni traveled to Sidi Bouzid on December 20 and announced a new $10 million employment program. However, the protests continued unabated as protesters clashed with security forces. Reports circulated that the police were implementing a crackdown on Sidi Bouzid and other regions where the protest had spread, and many protesters were beaten and shot at by police personnel.

Despite this police crackdown, demonstrations continued. On December 22, 22-year-old Houcine Falhi shouted, “No to misery, no to unemployment!” before electrocuting himself amidst a crowd of protesters. On December 24, hundreds of demonstrators rallied in front of the Tunisian labor union headquarters, demanding that joblessness and poverty be addressed. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces continued as protests spread to Tunis, Kairouan, Ben Guerdane, and Sfax. Police forces conducted a campaign of overnight crackdowns, beating and arresting many protesters. In response to criticism regarding reports of police brutality and use of arms against peaceful protesters (many demonstrators had already been shot, injured, and killed), a Tunisian interior ministry spokesperson argued that the police were forced to “shoot in self-defense” after warning shots had failed to disperse the crowds (reportedly, some demonstrators were also setting fire to buildings and police cars).

On December 28, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (who had been in power for 23 years) appeared on a national television
broadcast, stating that the protests were unacceptable and that such public defiance would be met with “firm” punishment. That same day, however, 300 lawyers held a rally in Tunis near the government’s palace in support of the protesters (lawyers also staged marches in several other cities). The Tunisian Federation of Labor Unions also held a rally in Gafsa province, although security forces forcibly dispersed the demonstrators. News of the torture of the prominent Tunisian lawyer, Abderrahman Ayedi, by police forces for his involvement in the protests, as well as a series of governmental personnel dismissals (including the ministers of communication, trade, and handicrafts) continued to spur the resistance.

As the Tunisian government continued to crack down on the demonstrations and maintain its media blackout (Nessma TV, a private news channel, began covering the protests twelve days after the demonstrations began), the hacktivist group “Anonymous” announced its “Operation Tunisia” on January 2. In solidarity with the protesters, the hackers attacked Tunisian government websites, flooding them with traffic and temporarily shutting them down.

The next day, students in the city of Thala staged a march, and police forces responded by firing tear gas canisters at the crowd. In retaliation, the protesters set fire to tires and attacked the local offices of the RCD.

On January 4, the Tunisian Bar association called for a strike to be staged on January 6 in protest over police attacks on its lawyers. Following news of Mohamed Bouazizi’s death (he died of his burn wounds on January 5), close to 8,000 lawyers observed the strike and demanded an end to police brutality against peaceful demonstrators.

Over the next several days, security forces continued to arrest, torture, and disappear dissenters, including bloggers, journalists, lawyers, and activists. The toll of protesters killed continued to increase as demonstrators and police continued to clash in the streets. However, on January 13, President Ben Ali made a televised announcement in which he pledged to introduce widespread reform and refrain from seeking reelection in 2014. However, the following day, Ben Ali declared a state of emergency and fired members of the ruling government. In response to the ongoing demonstrations, he promised new legislative elections within six months. Yet despite these concessions, Ben Ali was forced to flee the country on January 14.

Following Ben Ali’s departure, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi announced on state television that he would be assuming the role of interim president and promised to form a new coalition government.

On January 17, Ghannouchi announced a set of widespread reforms, promising press freedom, the release of political prisoners, and the removal of the ban on human rights groups. However, because several members of the RCD continued to hold key government positions, protesters rejected the new coalition government and again took to the streets. Opposition ministers also threatened to quit, saying that they did not want to be part of a government that included members of the former ruling party. In response, Ghannouchi resigned from the RCD.

Meanwhile, the Swiss government ordered a freeze on all funds held by Ben Ali in Switzerland (Ben Ali had taken refuge in Saudi Arabia). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also announced the UN’s plan to investigate reports regarding police violence against protesters.

On January 20, all ministers in the interim government withdrew their membership from the RCD party, and the central committee of the RCD was dissolved. The following day, protesters declared a three-day period of national mourning for those who had been killed during the previous weeks. During this mourning, protesters demanded the complete removal of all RCD members of the interim government. It was also in this moment that approximately 2,000 police officers joined the civil resistance, calling for better working conditions and a new union.

By the beginning of the three-day mourning period, former RCD government ministers had still not resigned. In order to increase pressure on the interim government, hundreds of Tunisians defied the nighttime curfew and traveled to Tunis in what they called a “Liberation Caravan”.

Over the next several days, former members of the RCD were arrested and charged with corruption, yet many security forces remained loyal to the government. Thus, clashes continued to break out throughout Tunisia, and protesters continued to call for
the arrest and trial of former RCD government officials, including former President Ben Ali. On January 26, the Tunisian
general labor union declared a strike in Sfax, one of Tunisia’s economic centers, and thousands continued to demand for the
removal of all RCD members from government positions.

On January 27, Tunisia’s foreign minister announced his resignation, after which Prime Minister Ghannouchi announced a new
reshuffling of the cabinet and the dismissal of several former RCD ministers.

Research Notes

Influences:
The Jasmine Revolution sparked the wave of Arab Democracy Campaigns (2011) and inspired the other campaigns in the
Arab Spring, especially the democracy campaign in Egypt (see, Egyptians campaign to oust President Mubarak, 2011) (2).

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Additional Notes:
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