

Towards an 'American Spring' of Justice and Equality?

Written by Housseem Ben Lazreg and Amira Hassnaoui

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HOUSSEM BEN LAZREG AND AMIRA HASSNAOUI, JUN 3 2020

The Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, MeToo movement, Pussyhat marches, protests in Hong Kong, Chile, France, Beirut, Baghdad, and Barcelona constitute the zeitgeist of the previous decade. In recent years, the depth and variety of global social movements that are committed to issues of social justice and new democratic politics have exploded and transcended national borders, races, ethnicities, and genders. Most of us are familiar with the butterfly effect: the idea that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil may cause a tornado in Texas. The butterfly effect is a metaphor to show that the seemingly disconnected are connected and that the small can create the large. "Butterfly politics," is defined by Catharine Mackinnon, who states that "the right small human intervention in an unstable political system can sooner or later have large complex reverberations". We invite you to reflect upon the remarkable influence that the protests in Tahrir Square had on the Occupy Wall Street Movement in terms of rhetoric and mobilization tactics. Also consider the thousands of people who protested in London, Berlin and New Zealand in solidarity with protesters in the United States demonstrating against the death of a Black man (George Floyd), shown gasping for breath in a video clip, as a white policeman knelt on his neck in Minneapolis. A domino effect seems to be occurring as we are writing: demonstrators sought to highlight similar cases of police brutality and systemic racism in France.

In the course of the past decade, socio-political movements that were deemed revolutionary have swept the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The 'Arab Spring' dismantled autocracies, challenged Samuel Huntington's theory, "the Clash of Civilizations," as well as conceptualizations of emancipation in the MENA region. In the same vein, 'Black Lives Matter' has been pushing the national dialogue on police violence and systemic racism in the U.S. It has become a community reflex to record interactions with police—a habit that is empowering— even as it highlights black vulnerability. Cornel West, Philosopher, former Princeton professor, and a wide known supporter of the Black Lives Matter Movement states in his work "Race Matters" that conservative and liberal views of race both see black people as a 'problem people'. Instead of questioning these views, they try to find ways to control black people in America; ways that the Black Lives Matter movement are bringing to light.

Today, the George Floyd protests could become the spark of an "American Spring" of justice and equality. Interestingly, the Arab Spring was every bit about social justice in the MENA region as the George Floyd protests and the Black Lives Matter movement is in the U.S. As diasporic scholars who lived under the dictatorship and through an uprising that led to substantial changes during the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, we acquired a critical understanding of the complexities and layers of social movements. Thus, we posit that the similarities are truly manifold.

A symbolic spark

In the Tunisian context, the self-immolation of a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi after being harassed by municipal officials catalyzed the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution' and helped inspire a wider pro-democracy protest movement in the Middle East and North Africa. Bouazizi's life in the southern city of Sidi Bouzid was defined by economic struggle and political marginalization. Within hours of Bouazizi's self-immolation, protests had started in Sidi Bouzid. Despite police attempts to stem the demonstrations, the wave of discontent spread throughout the country. Public frustrations that had long been quashed, rose to the fore with protesters chanting for better governance, improved welfare, and regime change. On January 14, 2011, the president Ben Ali and his family fled the country, ending his 23-year rule, and paving the way for a monumental change locally and regionally.

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In the U.S., four Minneapolis police officers have been fired for their involvement in the death of a black man named George Floyd. Bystander video that circulated on social media shows a white officer (identified as Derek Chauvin) pressing his knee into Floyd’s neck. Floyd can be heard repeatedly pleading with the officer to get up as he cannot breathe. This incident shocked the conscience of the nation and sparked demonstrations in Minneapolis and across the country demanding justice for Floyd and accountability for Chauvin. Demonstrators also demand justice in the killings of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, and Ahmaud Arbery in Glynn County, Georgia.

By the same token, George Floyd could be perceived as the Tunisian “Bouazizi” as both their deaths constitute the straw that broke the camel’s back. More profoundly, while the self-immolation of Bouazizi echoes a phoenix reborn of its ashes to rejuvenate the image of a free Tunisia where young Tunisians live in dignity and freedom, the killing of George Floyd could be the flame that not only burns America’s racist legacy to the ground, but also revives Langston Hughes’s deferred dream of racial equality and justice.

The Power of Social Media

Extensive use of social media and technology has played an essential role in the spread and development of both protests. During the Tunisian Revolution, Bouazizi’s cousin (Ali Bouazizi), shared a video of the immediate aftermath of the death of Mohamed on Facebook. In the George Floyd protests, the incident was seen on video in every corner of the U.S. and across the globe as well. Most phones with cameras and video capabilities are helping record abuse and police brutality: a technology that was unavailable decades ago. For instance, the 2008 mine workers’ protests in the southern Tunisian city of Gafsa were eventually suppressed by the former Ben Ali regime due to both a media blackout and lack of access to social media platforms.

In the U.S., 1991 marked the year when Rodney King – a young black man — was brutally beaten by several police officers on a Los Angeles highway. The incident was filmed by a nearby civilian with a camcorder from his apartment and was shared with the police as evidence. The police members who were initially charged in the same year were eventually acquitted the following year. That acquittal spawned a riot that — despite being contained by the National Guard — did not spread across the nation, nor did it incite others outside of the U.S. It is important to emphasize that even though the contexts are different, these incidents were not filmed as extensively. In addition, social media did not play a vital role in propagating the atrocities of law enforcement. Fortunately, George Floyd’s brutal murder was filmed and shared on social media as he was gasping his last breath and asking for water. The power of social media is manifested when highly graphic and shocking raw videos of injustices go viral and are shared within minutes and seen by millions of people. Although it has been argued and it continues to be argued that new media functions as a form of “panopticon”, in reference to Michel Foucault’s theory on surveillance, it is undeniable that users managed to subvert new media for the purpose of ushering in social change.

Government Response

Although both waves of protests primarily sought to call out and condemn inequality peacefully, there were issues of violence as large fires, clashes with police forces, and looting have occurred. Whether in Tunisia or in the U.S, peaceful protests were met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and even live ammunition, leading to the death of civilians as seen in Louisville and Syria. Like most autocratic regimes in the MENA region which do not enjoy freedom of the press, some journalists and reporters covering the demonstrations across the U.S., have been either arrested, such as CNN correspondent Omar Jimenez and his camera crew, or shot, such as two members of a TV crew from the Reuters news agency.

Rhetorically, political leaders, whether it is Gaddafi, Ben Ali, Bashar Al Assad or Donald Trump, resorted to the same repertoire of labels in order to delegitimize and defame the protesters. From Ben Ali’s “terrorist and thugs” to Gaddafi’s “rats, mercenaries and cockroaches”, Donald Trump did not deviate from that trend, and declared the George Floyd protests as ‘acts of domestic terror’. Moreover, he called the protesters “thugs” and threatened to have them shot in a tweet, which read “When the looting starts, the shooting starts,” parroting a former Miami police chief whose words spurred race riots in the late 1960s. He even went further to declare himself “the president of law and order” and threatened to deploy the U.S. military to American cities to quell a rise of violent protests. Such language

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has historically served as code to some white voters that Republicans stand with them against the “violent mobs” of African-Americans threatening their peace. I

In fact, the turmoil of 1968 is the most obvious parallel to today’s unrest. At that time, the Republican Party’s Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew were the candidates of “law and order,” pledging to crack down on the violence and extend sentences for rioters. Nixon’s and Agnew’s electoral strategies probably helped them capitalize on the anger and anxiety of many white voters. Since then, characterizing protests as racial violence and promising to crack down on it has become a “linchpin” of the Republican Party’s electoral playbook. In this regard, Trump may return to the same politics of racial division that served him last time in 2016 in his new quest for four more years of presidency.

Reactionary Responses

In Egypt, several thousand supporters of President Hosni Mubarak, including some riding horses and camels and wielding whips, attacked anti-government protesters. The turmoil erupted after Mubarak went on national television and rejected demands to step down. Some in the Arab world were content with the regimes because of their stability, thus they viewed the demonstrations and protests as a source of destruction and disorder. In the U.S., officials in Minnesota believe that white supremacist “agitators” were inciting chaos at protests against police brutality and the killing of George Floyd. Armed, white vigilantes threatened BLM Protesters in Philly and sent a Journalist to the hospital. Others are egging on the violence from behind their computers, urging followers to carry out acts of violence against black protesters with the goal of sparking a “race war.”

To illustrate, Twitter has suspended a fake “antifa” profile on its platform, which the tech giant says was linked to the white nationalist group Identity Evropa, for making posts inciting violence during ongoing protests in the U.S. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson began his show with a graphic labeling the Minnesota protesters “Criminal Mobs,” and wondered aloud why Republicans were not reacting more intensely against the violence in Minneapolis. TV hosts and commentators Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham condemned the demonstrators while accusing them of “exploiting” George Floyd’s death. Charlie Kirk, the founder of conservative student group Turning Point USA has been similarly forthright, tweeting that the real problem is that Minnesota elects too many Democrats rather than Republicans like himself — a party that recently sent a white supremacist to the White House.

These reactions remind us of the Tunisian media figures who strove to discredit the protesters and their demands for freedom, justice, and dignity during the uprising. In addition to the previous communications minister Samir Abid, Borhan Bsais played the role of the Ben Ali regime propagandist and his notable participation in the Aljazeera TV show “The Opposite Direction” — three days before the fall of Ben Ali — speaks volumes about the discreditation of protestors in both contexts. Therefore, we could argue that before it succeeds in engendering measurable and satisfactory change, the George Floyd protests might have to hold out against an assault from those who wish to preserve the status quo and sustain state violence against those who call for social justice.

With an unabated pandemic affecting largely black Americans, an economy in meltdown, and cities in chaos over police killings and brutality, all the U.S. President does is threaten to deploy the army, criminalize and delegitimize protests, and thus spawn more toxic polarization and partisan rage. Nevertheless, the George Floyd demonstrations could metamorphose into a unifying national movement that not only transcends political, ideological, class, and ethnic cleavages but also, in CJ Werleman’s words, “peel back the scab that conceals everything that is wrong in America: from racial inequality to a racially biased justice system; from poverty to wealth disparity; from a corrupt political system to a corporate-owned media class that is no longer able to tell the truth”.

More profoundly, the George Floyd protests and these social movements in the MENA region have proven that values such as dignity, equality, and social justice are not exclusively achievements of Western civilization. They are rather universal values and a common theme in the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, Paris, Minneapolis, Santiago, and Tehran. By reflecting on Gramsci’s statement that “crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”, the realization of racial justice and the undoing of systemic racism would be a long and painful process for racialized people. In his book *The Wretched Of The Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote: “National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood

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to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.”

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