Middle East Fact Sheet:

How Did this All Begin?

The uprisings that have shaken the Arab World over the last month are largely a response to mass unemployment and poverty and the more recent intensification of political repression. Political repression intensified in countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Sudan as the levels of unemployment and poverty increased throughout the late 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s. As these countries further embraced the privatisation and economic liberalisation mantra of the US, EU, World Bank and International Monetary Fund formerly state owned enterprises were sold off to local elites and foreign investors who quickly focused these enterprises towards profitability which meant hundreds of thousands of job losses, wage cuts and out-sourcing. Owners and senior management (usually local elites tied to the ruler as well as foreign corporations) of these formerly state-owned companies benefited immensely from the privatisation but at the expense of the mass of the population. In addition, most Arab countries agreed to the IMF stipulations to downsize the public sector with education, health-care and the bureaucracy suffering from massive budgetary cuts which only served to raise unemployment even further and close down opportunities for tertiary graduates. The only area of the state-sector not to be downsized was the security sector where thousands have been employed to ensure public compliancy with the new economic program. It is no coincidence that it those Arab states such as Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco that adopted the neo-liberal program most effectively are exactly the states that have experienced the largest uprisings.

The more immediate cause of the popular uprisings in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and Yemen can be located in the steep rise in food prices over the last twelve months. Corn and Wheat prices have doubled in the six months to the end of 2010 and there have been serious food shortages in other staples such as rice.

The sharp increases in food prices led to rioting in some of the above-mentioned countries even before the massive upsurge of unrest that began in Tunisia in December. The issue of food prices and shortages though are not disconnected from the larger global economic picture as some analysts have tried to suggest. Neither, are the protests that have broken out in Tunisia, or those that have spread to Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab World, somehow unrelated to the economic policies adopted by Arab states over the last two decades, as Michel Chossudovsky explains:

“The food price hikes were not “dictated” by the Ben Ali government. Wall Street and the IMF imposed them….. The media in chorus have presented the crisis in Tunisia as an issue of domestic politics, without a historical insight. The presumption is that with the removal of “the dictator” and the instatement of a duly elected government, the social crisis will eventually be resolved.”

So, to really grasp the causes of the anger in Arab countries, the recent uprisings have to be paced within a context of privatisation, economic liberalisation and mass
impoverishment. Sadly, this level of analysis has been missing from news and media (un)analysis.

While this background should not be ignored, the immediate spark that created the conflagration helps to explain why we are witnessing these events now and not twelve months ago or two years from now. The spark I’m referring to, was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17. Mohamed died on 4 January, but by then the Tunisian regime that he despised so deeply was tottering on the edge of collapse and within weeks the long-time ruler of Tunisia had fled the country.

**How Did Events in Tunisia Unfold?**

As mentioned, Mohamed Bouazizi’s desperate, and dramatic, act of protest provided the symbolic moment that inspired the Tunisian people to rise against the government. Bouazizi’s act may have been extraordinary but his situation had become far too ordinary in a country where the wealthy were getting richer and the oppression of the masses more brutal.

Mohamed Bouazizi was 26 years of age when he took his own life. His levels of education were minimal despite reports that he had a tertiary degree in computer science. The misunderstanding over his scholarly achievements seems to have arise because almost 45% of university graduates in Tunisia have been unable to find employment and often find themselves peddling wares on the streets in a way similar to Mohamed Bouazizi. Like Bouazizi, they probably faced arbitrary arrest and humiliation from the hands of the Tunisian police-force. It was one such incident that proved to be the catalyst for the revolution that swept across Tunisia.

It seems that on the morning of December 17, Mohamed Bouazizi was selling fruit and vegetables from his cart on the streets of Sidi Bouzid when he was confronted by two male and one female officer who demanded to see his permit. Bouazizi didn’t have a permit, but recent reports from Sidi Bouzid suggest that a permit is not required to sell from the street and this is just a tactic used by a corrupt police force to extort money from likely victims. Bouazizi refused to pay the money, more than likely because he did not have any, and was subsequently beaten and his goods confiscated by the police. Suffering from the public humiliation and the utter desperation of the loss of goods he had yet to pay for, Mohamed Bouazizi was driven to take his own life. In this action, Bouazizi became a symbol of everything that Tunisians had come to despise about their government and protests in his home town against his treatment the day after his self-immolation soon cascaded into a nation-wide revolution.

The revolution was also aided by the President’s reaction to events. Initial protests were relatively small. As the protests grew so did the anger on the streets of Tunisia’s main cities. Tensions were heightened even further by the shooting of protesters on December 22 and then again on December 24, as well as a poorly timed and worded televised warning from President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on December 28. Ben Ali’s default response was to turn to the security forces to disperse the protesters and restore what he perceived as a law and order issue. However, by this stage events had
gone too far to be resolved by force as protests had spread with Tunisian lawyers and professionals joining the Tunisian General Labour Union (which had been at the forefront of the protests from day one) in a general strike on January 2. Ben Ali responded to what had become a revolution in the making by offering major political and economic reforms, including reversing the neo-liberal program by promising government initiatives to create jobs and boost funding for the government sector, but all this was to no avail as protesters were now adamant that the President had to go. When the military refused to move against the protestors, Ben Ali saw the writing on the wall and fled Tunisia for Saudi Arabia on January 14.

Even with Ben Ali deposed Tunisians continue to protest against the interim government which has been comprised mainly of Ben Alists. Tunisia is still unstable and it remains to be seen whether the concessions being offered by the interim government of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi reduce tensions and pave the way for a resolution. In the meantime, the Tunisian revolution has caused a ripple-effect across the region.

**What Part did Social Media and Wikileaks play in the events in Tunisia?**

There is little doubt that the protesters were able to organise and spread word of their actions a result of their access to Facebook and Twitter. Whether this was a necessary precondition for the speed, or success, of the revolution is far less certain. Revolutions are not new to this technological age and successfully organised protests and revolutions existed well before the internet. What may be different is how quickly the
initial events became internationalised, as international news, and also possibly the pace at which the protests in Tunisia influenced people in other Arab states.

What is more clear is that *Wikileaks* played a more marginal role in the Tunisian case and the news of US diplomatic knowledge of the corruption and levels of repression in Tunisia were released after the protests had already escalated to a point of no return. What *Wikileaks* can be said to have influenced is the US and international response. Barack Obama, as the most important world leader, was unable to deny knowledge of the state of affairs in Tunisia or to support Ben Ali in a way that he may have done if *Wikileaks* had not exposed the US familiarity with the actual conditions that existed in Tunisia.

In either case, it was people power and the deep grievances and anger felt by Tunisians that provoked the uprisings, not modern forms of communications.

END PART ONE