

Ripple protests could topple U.S. allies

By **Nic Robertson**, CNN senior international correspondent
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Alexandria, Egypt (CNN) -- Tunisia has brought a blast of reality to Mideast politics. Aging autocrats have been put on notice they can no longer count on docile citizens.

But is an era of unrest approaching? Will the winds of change sweep east along the Maghreb and bring down regimes from North Africa to the Levant and even the Arabian Peninsula?

Beyond doubt, those winds are blowing. Across the region they are being driven by the same social and economic factors, including high unemployment, a booming birth rate, and exploding food prices.

According to the International Monetary Fund, if chronic unemployment and the social tensions that accompany it are to be avoided the Middle East needs to create another 18 million jobs in the next 10 years. From where they stand today that's a very tall order indeed.

Amre Moussa, the Arab League secretary-general and former Egyptian foreign minister, warned regional leaders last week: "It is on everybody's mind that the Arab spirit is broken. The Arab spirit is down by poverty, unemployment and the general decline in the real indicators of development."

Regional parties like the moderate Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood, scent opportunity.

"The same disease is in all Arab countries, we have different degrees only but the same origin of the disease, it is the same dictatorship, lack of democracy, lack of freedom restrictions on civil society," Esam el-Erian, spokesman for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said.

In Egypt as in other countries in the region the Muslim Brotherhood faces constant government harassment.

Hosni Mubarak, the 82-year-old Egyptian president, fears their populist power. He allows them and other opponents of his regime a very limited political voice, enough he hopes to defuse anger at the monopoly of power he has exercised over 30 years in power.

It is a balancing act that is now in peril, according to his critics. Ayman Nour, an opposition leader jailed by Mubarak and only released following U.S. pressure, believes Tunisia's revolt has shortened Mubarak's days in power.

He said: "How change happened in Tunisia was the last resort after all peaceful methods were no longer an option. This is what happened in Tunisia and this is what could happen in Egypt. It is the only solution to a situation that never changes."

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There is a presidential election scheduled in Egypt in September this year. The situation is primed, Nour says, everything is ready, all it needs is something to ignite popular passions.

El-Erian of the Muslim Brotherhood talks in more revolutionary terms. "Without solving the main problems we can only delay the revolution, delay the intifada" or uprising he says.

But for all the rhetoric -- and despite several incidents -- the government in Egypt remains very much in control.

In Tunisia the revolt was triggered by anger at the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young vegetable market trader who torched himself over his dire economic plight.

In the week following the flight of Tunisia's President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali to sanctuary in Saudi Arabia, more than half a dozen Egyptians set fire to themselves like Bouazizi.

None triggered wider protests, never mind opened the floodgates to the very real reservoir of anti-regime anger.

But Ibrahim Houdaiby, a savvy young analyst from a family with a long political pedigree, says it is too early to draw conclusions. "There is a lot of anger, and there is a lot of frustration, and if this frustration is not yet tangible and did not yet manifest itself in violent and big forms it is possible that it might happen and it is in nobody's interest that it does."

At a funeral near Egypt's second city Alexandria, where the Egyptian police have an unenviable reputation for brutality, I got a strong sense of just how far away that spark for revolt may be.

If Egypt tumbles then watch the region follow, if change comes in Egypt, it will be domino sequences

--Esam El-Erian, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood spokesman

The gathering was tiny, just family and close friends. Twenty-five-year old Ahmed Hashem Sayed was the only one of the recent self-immolation cases to die of his burns.

As his slender shroud-wrapped body was being laid to rest only yards away on the other side of the high walls surrounding the tiny cemetery plot crowds going about their daily routines thronged the streets, none but a couple of curious kids joined the mourners.

Sayed's neighbor said his death had nothing to do with Tunisia and everything to do with his own poverty.

Later, on the muddy street of the slum where he lived with his family, his father told me his son was out of work more than he was in it. He didn't want to talk to us, didn't want to attract international attention, didn't want to make a martyr or national hero out of his son.

Houdaiby is sure Sayed was aware of Tunisian burn victim Bouazizi, who like Sayed was young and set himself on fire in economic despair, and although he may not have emulated him, he may well have been influenced by his actions.

The big regional lesson of Tunisia, according to Houdaiby, is that people have learnt they can bring about change themselves.

"What happened in Tunisia will of course impact the way people think. They know if they want things to change, at one point they will be able to change things"

But he adds Mubarak's regime has also learnt lessons, offering to subsidize bread and other essentials, albeit Houdaiby suspects, only until the current crisis seems over.

No doubt though, he says, the government's vehement denials ironically show how troubled it is by the Tunisian revolt.

"When you have the minister of foreign affairs saying that Tunisia could not be compared with Egypt and the situation is completely different and it is ridiculous that people are making any sort of comparison that says that they are worried."

And if they are worried in Egypt, with its large, tough state security forces, then other regional leaders may well be troubled too, warns El-Erian, spokesman for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. "If Egypt tumbles then watch the region follow, if change comes in Egypt, not in Tunisia, it will be domino sequences."

Indeed in the long run the United States may be the big loser. Many of the regimes on the defensive, like Mubarak's, are long-standing US allies.

And that says El-Erian -- who calculates that in a democratic Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood would have a large say -- could have serious implications for the United States.

"We are reflecting the opinion of the people and opinion and sentiments here are against the politics and policies of the United States in the region," he said.

It may sound like a bold statement, but on the streets of Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt to name but a few, U.S. credibility has taken a hammering over the past decade.

Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have only served to fuel popular anger with the U.S. over the regional autocrats they support.

The implication is if the winds of change do blow down one or two of the region's rulers the political voices emerging may well bring a new dynamic to such intractable problems as Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

That alone could reset the region in a way unimaginable today.