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The Arab Spring and Human Rights

Poverty. Repression. Corruption. Unemployment. For people living under the rule of corrupt dictators in the Middle East and North Africa, these indignities are part of their daily lives. Under these circumstances, it is easy to think “that’s just the way it is – what can *I* do about it?” But on December 17, 2010, when 26-year-old Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of a government building, a spark of change was ignited. This single act of defiance empowered Tunisians to demand their human dignity. Suddenly, people were *doing* something—uniting to challenge a corrupt government. Their nonviolent, rebellious spirit was contagious, and spread quickly through protests—from Egypt and Libya to Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. The Arab Spring was born. Remarkably, Tunisia’s president Ben Ali fled the country in less than a month and the Egyptian people toppled the Mubarak regime in eighteen days (Amnesty International).

Consequently, for the Middle East and the international human rights community, these successful, largely nonviolent uprisings set in motion a global transformation that convinced citizens that they can *do* something to change their societies. The Arab Spring illustrates that creating a more just society is a realistic rather than unattainable goal. Average citizens have gone from being silent victims to outspoken activists. They have gone from having history thrust upon them to being history makers. In fact, Time Magazine voted “the protestor” its 2011 “person of the year” for “capturing and highlighting a global sense of restless promise...[and] for...shin[ing] a light on human dignity” by helping shape a future society that respects human rights and democratic principles (Andersen 53).

These successful Arab Spring movements were largely fueled by the energy and resourcefulness of the region's young people. Comprising one third of its population, youth ages 15-24 were armed with tools that were unfamiliar to their elder, more powerful adversaries (Amnesty International). These tools – high-tech, futuristic, and non-destructive – were capable of mobilizing and instantly connecting people world-wide. These tools were social media—Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube coupled with video-capturing mobile phones and 24-hour TV news. These technologies gave the protesters glimpses of the outside world and the possibilities of a free society. Also, they became both a platform for sharing images of police brutality and a digital bulletin board for organizing events and marches. They allowed the movement to thrive by grabbing people's attention and educating them in the tactics of other successful nonviolent movements (Kirk). By quickly getting people into the streets in large numbers, they ignited the energy the movement needed to sustain itself.

However, despite this initial influx of change with its difficult political transitions, there are no guarantees that free elections will result in stable governments embodying democratic principles. In fact, it is more likely that these countries will experience even more turmoil due to conflicting political views and a sudden void of leadership. Already, Egyptians are back on the streets protesting the military rule and police brutality that followed the fall of the Mubarak regime. Thus, there is no one solution to the many problems that plague this region.

So we ask ourselves, what do we do now? And more specifically, what can groups like Amnesty do? Most importantly, they can inform and shape this new energy. The Arab Spring gave birth to countless activists and spurred interest in human rights. Whether it be through the Occupy movements springing up in the United States or the more recent protests in Moscow, human rights and democracy have become part of the global dialogue. Since Amnesty has fifty

years of experience championing human rights, it can immediately provide leadership, organization, and information to newly-committed activists. Also, in conjunction with local NGOs, Amnesty can use its unique expertise to make a positive contribution to ensure that human dignity is respected during these complicated and sometimes frustrating political and social transitions.

We have witnessed the words “that’s just the way it is” transform into the cries “let’s do something!” In fact, people’s thoughts now echo Mother Teresa’s words, “You say my work is a drop in the ocean. I say the ocean is made up of drops.” One man in a small Tunisian town became the first “drop” in this ocean-sized movement. His sacrifice provided the energy needed to create a wave of drops with the force of a tsunami. With the efforts of Amnesty International and other human rights activists, our world could become a more just place where all people will be treated with dignity and respect.

Works Cited

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