HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE BRIEFING 2:
Pro-democracy and Dignity Uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East
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You can cut the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming. Pablo Neruda (1904-1973)

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The Beginnings of the Uprisings or the "Days of Rage"

Like the fictional newsman Howard Beale's "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take this anymore!" angry outburst in the 1976 film, *Network*, North African and Middle Eastern progressive forces, young and old, have been demonstrating in the streets to communicate to most of the region's "rulers-for-life" and allies that they too are angry and "as mad as hell and" they are "not gonna take" the oppressive political and economic conditions in which they live anymore. What began as a protest in the informal sector by a humiliated street vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, continues with a string of uprisings that is shaking the foundations of authoritarian rule and is still unleashing a vibrant process of social and political change in the region and beyond.

Because of political oppression, economic marginalization, and social humiliation, on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and died of his burns on January 4, 2011. This was perhaps Mr. Bouazizi's version of Howard Beale's rant, an act that has ignited protests across Tunisia and sparked pro-democracy demonstrations all over the region. Built upon a cumulative record of human rights abuse and economic injustice, young activists have been using social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and mobile phones, to augment and expand the intensity and scale of protests. They have been demanding dignity, democracy, freedom, employment, human rights, and an end to farcical elections, inherited leadership, nepotism, and corruption. The defining and unifying slogans for political change in the region have been "the people want to topple the regime; the people want to topple corruption…" These unfolding developments have been called many things such as: chaos; unrest; turmoil; revolution; Facebook or Twitter revolutions; Al-Jazeera driven rebellions; virus and contagion; and people power. It is too early, however, to assess the far-reaching implications and impacts of these organic social movements that have engulfed the entire region.

Photo: Diane King. A solidarity action for Bahrain in Seattle, April 2011. Some demonstrators are refugees from Basra, Iraq.

A Timeline of the Uprisings

Ever since Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself to death in protest at his humiliation by the Tunisian police, home grown pro-democracy movements have spread throughout the region. The protests in Tunisia started with Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution in December 2010, culminating in an end to the 30 year rule of President Ben Ali. Ben Ali fled the country and took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Outside of the history of military coups and Lebanon's Cedar Revolution in 2005, the events in Tunisia can be said to have ushered in the first Arab people-centered and post-colonial revolt.[1] On January 17, 2011, Tunisia's revolt sparked riots in Algeria and six Algerians burned themselves to death. On January 25, inspired by the Tunisian example, people in Egypt staged a "day of rage" in Tahrir Square using Facebook and other social media to mobilize the protest. Protestors demanded democracy, social and economic justice, and an end to President Hosni Mubarak's almost 30 years of one-man rule and corruption. After 18 days of protests in Tahrir Square, President Mu-

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[1] My colleague, Dr. Diane King, was kind enough to remind me not to understate the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005.

barak was forced to step down and the military took over the control of state functions. On the same day as the day of rage in Egypt, supporters of the former prime minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, staged a "day of rage".

Taking inspiration from Tunisia and Egypt, starting on January 27, 2011, Yemenis have been protesting and demanding an end to inherited leadership and to the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. On January 28, 2011, Jordanians took to the streets in Amman and demanded political and economic reforms. On February 11, 2011, protesters gathered in Manama, Bahrain, for a "day of rage", demanding political participation and reforms. At the same time, the Green Movement staged a demonstration calling for democracy and protesters clashed with security forces in Tehran, Iran. On February 16, 2011, the winds of change reached Benghazi, Libya, where Libyans began waging an armed revolt against Gaddafi's regime. Unlike their stance in all other countries in the region, the United Nations Security Council has taken an active role in the armed struggle between rebels and the Gaddafi regime. On February 20, 2011, Moroccans organized and staged demonstrations demanding political reforms and an end to economic marginalization and corruption. On February 23, 2011, activists used Facebook to call for a "day of rage" in Saudi Arabia. On March 4, 2011, Iraqis staged anti-government demonstrations in Baghdad's Liberation Square. On March 7, 2011, after nine days of demonstrations in Oman, Sultan Qaboos introduced political reforms in response to the demands of protesters. On March 14, 2011, military forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates entered Bahrain to protect the Sunni monarchy from protests by the country's Shiite Muslim majority. To the northwest of Saudi Arabia, beginning on March 19, 2011, Syrians have been challenging President Assad's government and its violent and brutal response to their demands for political reforms.

A Preliminary Analysis

The intensity and scale of protests as well as their causality vary from country to country. Because of the mosaic of different forms of governance in the region, what might drive people to take to the streets in, say, monarchical regimes may not be the same driver as that in republican/military contexts and vice-versa. Uneven political and economic demands also reflect the nature and specificities of each country. Although oil-producing countries have been somewhat successful in "managing" popular contestations, non-oil-producing countries have seen frequent expressions of discontent in the form of incessant strikes and rallies since the early dawn of independence from European colonialism and domination. Despite these diverse political cultures and economic disparities, the societies of the region share more commonalities than differences. In general, these societies suffer from 8 major structural problems, among others that have been festering under the surface.

These problems are:

1. Neocolonial political pacts and external interference which create cultures of dependency and thwart the development of political pluralism;
2. Neoliberal economic arrangements which skew economic benefits, frustrate local/national development plans, and create social and economic humiliations;
3. Closed political systems which are based on patron-client or kinship cleavages, preposterous elections, and external support provided by major Western powers and global institutions (The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organizations, to name a few) for the sake of "stability" but to the detriment of local voices of democracy;
4. Ascendency of the culture of "rulers for life", and in the case of some republican/military regimes, the cultivation of one party rule or one person/family rule;
5. Excessive use of military institutions, internal security forces, and the Ministries of the Interior to maintain the status-quo;
6. The ruthless quest for an singular, modern national identity at the expense of multiple ethnicities and religious communities (e.g., Morocco's policy of sidelining its Berber majority populations and Bahrain's Sunni minority ruling a Shiite majority population);
7. High population trends characterized by a youth bulge, who have been alienated by high rates of unemployment and suffered the consequences of privatization within neoliberal reforms that started in the early 1980s; and
8. The influx of foreign workers into oil-producing countries and the tightening of immigration policies by the European Union in the face of labor exporting countries.

Photo: Diane King. Solidarity action in Seattle, April 2011.

Taken together these issues, or a mix of some aspects of them, have certainly converged to construct a different region from the one that emerged after the decolonization era. However, it is premature to have a full understanding of what the ongoing developments mean to the future of the region.

The United States and the Politics of Democracy in the Region

The effects of the ongoing popular uprisings on the United States foreign policy remain a matter of debate among specialists of the region. Put simply, however, when it comes to the history and role of major western powers in the promotion of universal democratic ideas and values in North Africa and the Middle East, it is safe to state that the struggle for democracy has been stifled by three major forces:

1. Colonialism, which made it its business to weaken local/national institutions and to hinder any emerging local forces of democratic rule;

2. Post-colonial and non-representative regimes that used shallow nationalism and political cynicism to appropriate and/or squash pro-democracy tendencies and manifestations; and

3. The Cold War and major powers' incessant intervention in the management of politics and resources of the region.

With respect to the United States' role in the area, its record of fostering democracy is mixed at best, if not ambiguous and opportunistic. Despite advocating the virtues and ideals of democracy over the last few decades, the U.S. record, framed within national and geopolitical interests, has ranged from sabotaging pro-democratic governments as in the toppling of Mohammad Mossadeq's regime in 1953 through the support of non-democratic pro-west regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to military intervention as in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. People in the region have deep and long memories of the U.S. roles and interventions in the region. Over the last decades, this ambiguous record has not only produced authoritarian regimes but also delayed the development of democracy in the region (see Khalidi 2004).

Lessons that Could Be Learned from Pro-democracy and Dignity Uprisings in the Region

What lessons can we draw from the continuing pro-democracy and dignity uprisings in the last five months? The first is that the use of force and occupation are not the appropriate seeds for the growth and spread of democracy. The second is that policymakers and ideologues alike need to heed the call of the masses and recognize that people in the region, despite their cultural, religious, and ethnic differences, have been experimenting with democratic ideas and institutions even before the arrival of colonial powers to the area and have, time and time again, shown firm commitment to the ideals and practices of parliamentary systems.

The third is the fact that the dearth of democratic ideas and institutions has nothing to do with Islam and more to do with the broader historical, social, and political relations within and outside the region. If anything at all, the current winds of change with its solid universal demands for justice, freedom, and dignity exposes the thin ideological construct of Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations," in which he claims that Islamic civilization/ culture, unlike Western civilization/culture, is antithetical and hostile to democratic pluralism. Based on a thin understanding of workings of culture and history, Hunting-

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ton predicts a showdown between Western and Muslim countries to decide the winner of the clash of civilizations.

Historically and anthropologically speaking, the fact is that Islam and the West have not only co-existed over the centuries but are also based on the same foundations: monotheism as the cornerstone of ethics and religion on the one hand and Greek philosophy and reasoning as the basis of scientific inquiry and democratic governance on the other. Huntington's worldview of Islam, supported by many others, aims to make Westerners the exclusive owners of universal values of pluralism. In the end, this attempt can be viewed as a doctrine to justify Euro-American superiority and neo-colonial intervention in the region. Fortunately, pro-democracy movements in the region have tapped into a battery of shared universal values and software of global social movements to build up a homemade architecture for future democracy operating systems in North Africa and the Middle East; and in so doing they have clearly exposed the naiveté of the ahistorical and false claims of Huntington and his collaborators (see Khalidi 2004 and Ernest 2002).

The fourth lesson, perhaps the most important from an anthropological perspective, is the problematic and unethical notion of any individual or country enthusiastically "democratizing or upgrading" another. The exaggerated – if understandable – wish of outsiders to forcefully insert their role in the region coupled with the blown up effect of "western" social media in the uprisings robs people of their agency and aspirations to shape their own histories and places as they see fit. A sober understanding of the changes taking place throughout the region must lend itself to an anthropological and historical analysis of organic processes of social change that cannot be engineered by social media or imposed from the outside. Actually, despite the advent of the irrational exuberance around what social media is capable of doing, the current situation is built on a long history and tradition of resisting anti-democratic practices and human rights abuses of governments in the region and their allies.

Policy Implications for the United States and the United Nations

Finally, what sort of implications could these uprisings reveal to the future of the United States foreign policy as well as the United Nations' responsibilities in the region? Without a doubt, given the United States' continuous involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and the on-going bloody civil war in Libya, military occupations and the potentiality of boots-on-the ground can only aggravate the po-

litical landscape of the Middle East. Secondly, civil society institutions and the virtues of human rights and dignity should be cultivated and leveraged to offset and counterbalance anti-democratic tendencies of the ruling class and their allies within and outside the region. Thirdly, major world powers must get out of the way of democratic movements in the region. Fourthly, the United Nations should remain a neutral and peace-promoting force in the management of international affairs and it must refrain from becoming a military tool for major powers. The United Nations must use all its assets and capital to craft peace-based initiatives to solve regional problems. The United Nations' participation in NATO's bombing of Libya is a distressing state of affairs that should not be replicated in the future. Finally, external forces to the region should refrain from deciding the futures of others and should leave that vital task to the people themselves to sort out their own affairs in a free and dignified manner.

Implications for Applied Anthropology

Applied anthropologists can play many roles in this by: 1. providing ethnographically grounded accounts of the problems of governance in the region; 2. exposing the effects of local and global dynamics on the peoples' social and economic lives; 3. offering holistic and meaningful explanations of the complexities of the region's history and politics in order to eliminate bias and negative stereotypes that are commonly found in the Euro-American public discourse; 4. providing alternative solutions to and suggestions for the region's pressing problems; and 5. investigating the intricate relationships at the confluence of social movements and new media to better understand the organic processes that shape societal transformations.

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SOME WEBSITES FOR GROUPS WORKING ON THE ISSUE:
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        Tunisia - http://www.facebook.com/cha3b.tounes.ya7re9.firou7ou.n4?v=info
We Are All Khaled Said- Egypt - http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk