

Yearning for Respect, Arabs Find a Voice

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — In Yemen, the chants invoked Tunisia, a continent away. A Lebanese newspaper declared that all of the Middle East was watching Egypt. A long-dead North African poet's most famous poem has become the anthem of a moment the most enthusiastic call revolutionary.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, conflict has pitted the West against the Arab world, as war in Iraq and Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Bush administration's policies forged grander narratives of "them" against us. Last week, as more protests erupted in Yemen, Jordan and Egypt and as the United States remained largely on the sidelines, the struggle in the Middle East became firmly about "us."

For the first time in a generation, it is not religion, nor the adventures of a single leader, nor wars with Israel that have energized the region. Across Egypt and the Middle East, a somewhat nostalgic notion of a common Arab identity, intersecting with a visceral sense of what amounts to a decent life, is driving protests that have bound the region in a sense of a shared destiny.

"The experience of Tunisia will remain the guiding light for Egypt and may be so for people in Yemen, Sudan and the rest of the Arab world looking for change, with a readiness to accept risk, especially given that even the worst possibilities are better than the status quo," Talal Salman, the editor of Al Safir, wrote on Friday.

A chant in Egypt put it more bluntly, playing on the longstanding chants of Islamists that "Islam is the solution." "Tunisia," they shouted, "is the solution."

Unlike Eastern Europe, whose old order dissolved with breathtaking speed in 1989, Arab countries are distinct in their ideologies and governments, though they often share the same complaints of their citizens and some degree of support by the United States. But rarely has there been a moment when the Middle East felt so interconnected, governments so unpopular and Arabs so overwhelmingly agreed on the demand for change, even as some worry about the aftermath in a place where alternatives to dictatorship have been relentlessly crushed.

The Middle East is being drawn together by economic woes and a shared resentment that people have been denied dignity and respect. From Saudi Arabia to Egypt and beyond, many say, there is a broad sense of failure and frustration.

"After so many years of political stagnation, we were left with choices between the bad and the worse," said Fadel Shallak, a Lebanese writer and a former government minister. "Now there's something happening in the Arab world. A collective voice is being heard again."

As a unifying force, an older Middle East had the Voice of the Arabs, the wildly popular radio station of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's charismatic but repressive leader from 1956 to 1970. Its mix was oratory, propaganda and music, most memorably of Umm Kulthum, the iconic Egyptian diva. Today it is Al Jazeera, the news network, and though his popularity pales before the singer's, the Tunisian poet, Abul-Qasim al-Shabi, whose work has seemed to define the protests and their ambitions.

Khaled Abdullah/Reuters

Protesters chanted slogans Saturday during an antigovernment demonstration in Sana, Yemen

But even Al Jazeera has turned its gaze inward. Always provocative and critical of the United States and Israel, it has covered the Egyptian protests breathlessly, as it did Tunisia's, sometimes even egging the protesters on. It is joined by Facebook and Twitter, which have stitched together disparate places bound by a common language.

Egypt shut down Internet services in the country on Friday, in a remarkable demonstration of how powerful those tools have become. Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, reverted to a more old-fashioned tactic reminiscent of the feuds Nasser had with his Arab colleagues: he complained to the leader of Qatar, where Al Jazeera is based. The channel, he said, was aiding those "seeking to ignite dissent."

That is, no doubt, true. It describes, as well, Facebook and Twitter messages, some of which have turned into a 21st-century Middle Eastern version of agitprop.

On Facebook, a group in Jerusalem pledged support for Egypt and Tunisia. The Arab world, it said, "is moving from darkness to light ... from dictatorship to freedom."

The changes may have deep repercussions for the United States. Mouin Rabbani, an analyst in Jordan, said economic

frustrations mirrored resentment at governments perceived as agents of the United States and its allies. In fact, a more democratic Arab world, given recent polling, is likely to be much more hostile to American policy.

But the preoccupation now is internal.

“Had they been able to resolve the underlying economic issues, people would have overlooked the corruption, the mismanagement, the autocratic rule,” said Abdel Aziz Abu Hamad Aluwaisheg, a Saudi economist, speaking from Riyadh. “But when they failed to do the bread and butter issues, people started looking at their governments.”

That may have forged an idea of common cause, where protesters in the most remote locales take their cues from like-minded people in faraway places.

In Tunis on Friday, a group of Tunisian protesters gathered outside the Egyptian Embassy in solidarity. “Mubarak out!” they chanted. A Lebanese newspaper quoted Tunisian activists offering this advice to their Egyptian counterparts: Protest at night, wear plastic bags to avoid electric shocks, wash your face with Coca-Cola to fend off the effects of tear gas and try to spray black paint on the windshields of police vehicles.

“I wish I could join them, and I wish these protests could get rid of all these regimes,” said Mona Sibai, an Egyptian woman living in Beirut. “I feel proud.”

Laith Shbillat, a veteran dissident in Jordan, said: “People want their freedom, people want their bread. People want to stop these lousy dictators from looting their countries. I’d follow anybody. I’d follow Vladimir Lenin if he came and led me.”

Mr. Shbillat mentioned Shabi, the poet, who died as a young man in 1934. “If one day, a people desires to live, then fate will answer their call,” his most famous poem went. “And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall.”

“He’s leading us from his grave,” Mr. Shbillat said. Nada Bakri and Hwaida Saad contributed reporting. (The New York Times)