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## **Temples of doomed democracy begin to stir from their coma**

Peter Hartcher, Peter Hartcher is the international editor.

The Arab world has been on holiday from history for four decades. As the number of democracies worldwide tripled and representative government flourished on every continent as never before, only one region has been in a state of suspended animation. Until now. The arrested development of the Arab world appears to be approaching an end. Spontaneous uprisings in Tunisia and now Egypt have revealed the terrible truth that the region's dictators had been desperately trying to hide: that the people have power if they choose to exercise it, that the repression is a relic, that autocracy is no longer the norm but an aberration.

A journalist specialising in Egyptian affairs, Hugh Miles, says Arabs have long said that by opposing the government "you are just fighting a mountain; don't knock your head against it". It turns out that the mountain is papier-mache.

And it's on fire.

The first flame was lit by a 26-year-old street vendor in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi, when he set himself alight. Angry that the police had confiscated his wares, humiliated when, seeking redress from the local government, a female official slapped his face and spat on him, frustrated when the governor refused to see him, Bouazizi doused himself in petrol and burnt to death.

It's too early to be certain of any outcomes, but already one Arab strongman has fled his country in fear and another has had to abandon his plan for his son to succeed him as president.

The flames that consumed Bouazizi set alight the unquenchable protests that ended the 23-year rule of Tunisia's strong man, Ben Ali, who is now taking refuge in Saudi Arabia. And he set aflame the smouldering resentment of the people in the biggest Arab state, Egypt. After 30 years in power, Hosni Mubarak thought he had the right to manoeuvre his son into the presidency at the faux election due in September. Instead, he has been panicked into appointing his intelligence chief as the first vice-president of his reign and his family members are reportedly fleeing abroad.

One of Bouazizi's sisters asked: "What kind of repression do you imagine it takes for a

young man to do this?" It's the same kind of repression that moved 11 other young men to set themselves on fire in emulation of Bouazizi in the last two weeks in Egypt, in Algeria, in Mauritania and in Saudi Arabia.

The events of this so-called Jasmine Revolution expose the fatal flaw in the much-hallowed concept of an army-enforced "stability". Egyptians have been living under a declared state of "emergency rule" since 1967 as a pretext for denying them their freedoms.

The uprising shows that, if you impose this sort of repression for long enough, you are guaranteed to end up with an emergency.

"Stability" imposed at gunpoint is not stability at all. It is an unsustainable stasis which creates the conditions for eventual upheaval. In 1974, the 19 countries of the Middle East, including North Africa, contained only three democracies - Israel, Lebanon and Turkey. Since then, the number of democracies in the world has trebled from 40 to 123, according to Freedom House. Yet in the Middle East and North Africa, only one new democracy has been added, Iraq.

How has the Middle East remained somehow immune to one of the great movements in world history? The two answers are oil and US support, and the two are closely intertwined. Oil revenue has given dictators the money to run big security forces and the cash to buy some popular quiescence. It may not be coincidence that Tunisia and Egypt are two of the least-endowed oil countries of the Arab world.

The oil delivered not just money but also the undivided attention of Washington. The US first made clear the centrality of securing Gulf oil supplies in 1943 when Franklin Roosevelt sent military help to Saudi Arabia. But the US was happy to let Britain enforce the Western writ in the region until Britain's withdrawal in 1968.

Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon decided the US needed to protect its interests more actively through what is known as America's "surrogate strategy". That is, supporting friendly regimes as "guardians" of Western interests. The policy was set out in a still-secret document, National Security Decision Memorandum No. 92.

"What we decided," said an undersecretary of state at the time, Joseph Sisco, "is that we would try to stimulate and be helpful to the two key countries in this area - namely, Iran and Saudi Arabia. They could become the major elements of stability as the British were getting out."

The perversity and futility of that strategy was plain long ago. The two centrepieces of this so-called stability have become two of the greatest sponsors of terrorism on the planet and two of the most troubling sources of instability.

The US then adopted Egypt as one of its key Middle East allies. After Israel, it is the second-biggest recipient of US aid. Washington gives Cairo \$2 billion a year, about half of which goes to its military.

With America's Egyptian surrogate, Mubarak, in trouble, the US is now trying to edge nervously away from him lest it antagonise the newly active sovereign in Egypt - public

opinion.

Repression, by closing all the doors to legitimate protest, only helps fuel extremists, including terrorists. Indeed, the real warriors in any "war on terror" are not men with guns but the ordinary people of the Arab world.

By respecting the will and the hopes of the broad mass of people, democracy marginalises extremists. And allows religion to find its true level. The world needs more Indonesias and fewer Saudi Arabias.

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