**Bitter spring**

BY M A H I R A L I 2020-12-23

EVEN in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid, many people don`t look back kindly on MohamedBouazizi,the26-year-old Tunisian f ruit vendor who set himself on fire 10 years ago this month.

It was an act of despair rather than rebellion. He had a family of eight to feed. Being deprived of his only means of livelihood his fruit cart by of ficious representatives of the state was more than Bouazizi could bear. His self-immolation sparked protests across Tunisia. Ten days after Bouazizi succumbed to his burns on Jan 4, 2011, Zine alAbidine Ben Ali, Tunisia`s president for 23 years, fled to Saudi Arabia (where he died last year). Even more amazingly, though, events in the relatively small North African state resonated widely across the region as pent-up political and socioeconomic frustrations bubbled to the surface.

The tensions exploded most spectacularly in Egypt, with spontaneous mobilisations centred on Cairo`s Tahrir Square. Hosni Mubarak was the next head of state to be toppled, after 30 years at the helm. Popular rebellions also erupted in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Even in countries with little or no unrest, the ruling elites panicked.

A decade on from what was dubbed the `Arab Spring`, it is neither unusual nor inappropriate to ask: but what good came of it, af ter all? The horrifying trajectory of Yemen, Syria and Libya speaks for itself although in both cases it is worth taking into account the liberal doses of foreign intervention. Egypt`s storyis very different, butnonetheless deeply depressing. There, a short-lived experiment in representative government, somewhat blighted by the Muslim Brotherhood`s dismal administration, made way all too swiftly for a return to strongman rule. Abdel Fattah alSisi`s regime is widely viewed as even more repressive than the Mubarak variant.

Tunisia is often held out as the sole instance where the changes wrought in 2011 have been institutionally entrenched to some degree. It has had close calls, but managed to crawl back from the brink. Yet economic conditions remain precarious and corruption remains rife. Tunisians are among the most eager recruits to the jihadist cause, as well as the most numerous contributors to the refugee flow towards the Italian coast. Hardly a happy ending.

A recent report in The Guardian quotes a roadside bread seller in the Tunisian hinterland, 60-year-old Aisha Quraishi, as looking back on Ben Ali`s ouster in these words: `We won a little freedom. Under him we couldn`t speak. But does this affect my life? I want freedom and dignity. Can`t I have both?` The direct or subtle response from most Middle Eastern regimes would be a simple `no`. Thecontinuing tragedy across much of the region is that for large segments of the population neither freedom nor dignityis a viable option.

Historically, the unwritten compact between authoritarian regimes and their populations could occasionally be summed up as: keep quiet and your basic needs will be met. That is generally unfeasible in the age of neoliberal capitalism. The lesson autocrats would like their subjects to draw from the Arab Spring is that resistance is futile.

A recent YouGov survey carried out in nine countries across the region suggests that most people acknowledge things are in many respects worse than they were 10 years ago. At the same time, though, many of them don`t regret the uprisings.

The absence of any obvious alternatives was among the f actors that blighted the Arab Spring. The protests may have been very successfully coordinated on social media, but there was no organisation behind them, no opposition parties that could channel the largely organic mobilisations. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, taken by surprise,eventually took advantage of the vacuum even though its ideology was anathema to the vast majority of protesters with ultimately disastrous consequences.

The tendency of authoritarian regimes to crush all dissent often works all too well, with theresult that when it comes to the crunch the seething masses are rudderless. Hence, once the dust has settled, the usual suspects of ten in uniform, or at least closely af filiated with the economic elite and the military hierarchy are invariably waiting in the wings.

And it`s back to square one for those agitating for democracy and socioeconomic change.

Theextentofforeignintervention,whether from near or afar, also matters a great deal. In the past decade, Middle East`s turmoil has been exacerbated by the Saudi, Iranian, Israeli, Qatari, Turkish and Emirati role, and equally if not more by American, European and Russian machinations, to say nothing of the arms sales that fuel the conflicts.

So,is there no scope for hope? Just last year, political changes followed uprisings in Algeria and Sudan that echoed the Arab Spring. Pockets of unrest sporadically emerge here and there. But cosmetic change doesn`t count and, from an optimistic standpoint, the real thing could still be decades away. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com