



10 YEARS SINCE ARAB SPRING HOPES LIE CRUSHED

AFP, Sidi Bouzid

Ten years since the intoxicating early days of Tunisia's revolution, dreams for a better future lie crushed, and in the rural town where it began, the mood yesterday was one of anger rather than hope.

It was in Sidi Bouzid that Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable salesman angered by police harassment, set himself alight on December 17, 2010.

His act sparked an unprecedented uprising that left some 300 dead but toppled long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, whose flight to exile in Saudi Arabia the next month sparked uprisings across the Arab world.

The North African country has been praised for its democratic progress. And it has been less affected of other Arab Spring countries like Libya, Syria and Egypt. But many Tunisians remain angry at a political class seen as corrupt and unable -- or unwilling -- to tackle the country's deep social problems and create much-needed jobs.

And rather than festivities marking the end of the dictatorship, the anniversary of Bouazizi's self-immolation sees annual protests against the post-Ben Ali regime.

Security was tight in central Tunis on Thursday, with armed police checking bags at the entrance to the iconic central boulevard of Bourguiba Avenue and drones monitoring from above.

And in central Sidi Bouzid, hundreds of people demonstrated around a sculpture of Bouazizi's handcart, shouting "work is a right, you bunch of thieves!"

"Every year we see the same angry scenes repeat themselves," said lawyer Farouk Jaziri.

"People are worse and worse off after 10 years of nothing."

Away from the main square, most Sidi Bouzid residents expressed little interest in the protest.

Analyst Hamza Meddeb said that despite Tunisia's hard-won political freedoms, "10 years on from the revolution, there's a real sense of failure."

The political class, more fragmented than ever since parliamentary elections last year, is paralysed by bitter infighting. That has prevented it from tackling urgent social and economic problems, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Tunisia suffers unemployment above 15 percent nationally, disproportionately hitting young people in the long-marginalised interior.

Salaries have been devalued by inflation, while political instability has crushed hopes for fundamental reforms.

The economic situation has pushed many others to make death-defying bids to reach Europe, and Tunisians have been one of the largest contingents of jihadists fighting in Syria's civil war.

Strikes, road blockages and protests have mushroomed in recent weeks, demanding more jobs and investment, better work conditions and improvements to crumbling public services.

"We've stopped expecting anything from the political class," said Sidi Bouzid resident Jamel Bouzidi. "We're tired of waiting."

India SC backs farmers' right to protest

AGENCIES

The weeks-long farmers' protest at the borders of Delhi must continue and the national capital cannot be blocked, the Indian Supreme Court said while hearing a series of petitions on the issue.

The court said it would refer the matter to a vacation bench and suggested that the government not take any action to implement the law till the court takes a final decision on the issue.

"We make it clear that we recognise the fundamental right to protest against a law. There is no question of balancing or curtailing it. But it should not damage anyone's life or property," said Chief Justice SA Bobde.

Justice Bobde, who said on Wednesday that the matter must be handed over to a committee, said it must have "independent members with knowledge of agriculture and hear both sides and give report on what is to be done".

Meanwhile, the "protests can continue without violence and the police will not do anything (to stop the protests)," he said.

The court however asked farmers to engage in talks to resolve the crisis.

Farmers have been demonstrating for more than three weeks against deregulation of the agriculture sector that will allow them to sell produce to buyers beyond government-regulated wholesale markets, where growers are assured a minimum price. Small growers fear the changes, part of Modi's liberalising reforms, will mean the end of price support for staples such as wheat and rice and leave them at the mercy of big business.

Six rounds of talks between government officials and farmers' union leaders have failed to resolve one of the most pressing issues facing Modi's government. The government has said while the reforms can be amended it is determined to liberalise the sector. Farmers say government must repeal the laws.



People pose for photos as snow falls in Times Square in the Manhattan borough of New York City on Wednesday. The Long Island region is expected to get between 8 inches and a foot of snow on Wednesday and Thursday in what is the first winter storm of the year. PHOTO: REUTERS

CRUNCH POST-BREXIT TRADE TALKS

EU optimistic, UK less

REUTERS, London/Brussels

The EU's chief negotiator yesterday said there had been good progress in trade talks with Britain that aim to prevent a turbulent finale to the Brexit crisis in two weeks' time.

As talks go down to the wire, optimism has risen that a deal is imminent to keep the goods trade that makes up half of annual EU-UK trade, worth nearly a trillion dollars in all, free of tariffs and quotas beyond Dec. 31.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the face of the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, must ultimately decide whether to accept the narrow deal on offer from the EU or risk the economic chaos and domestic political applause from eurosceptic supporters that walking away would trigger.

"Good progress, but last stumbling blocks remain," EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier tweeted. "We will only sign a deal protecting EU interests and principles."

Britain however sounded a more pessimistic note over the outcome, saying a "no-deal" scenario was still on the cards.

Johnson's spokesman said negotiators from both sides were working to "bridge the gaps that remain", as the EU indicated a deal was "difficult but possible" by today.

But he added: "Australian WTO (World Trade Organization) exit remains the most likely outcome still."



An EU official, who declined to be named, said disagreements over fisheries were not yet resolved, and many more minor issues still required "polishing". They said that while sealing a deal was possible by the end of the week, they "wouldn't bank on it."

The European Parliament said it could hold an emergency plenary in late December should a deal come together by Monday. If it came later, however, EU diplomats said the bloc might still put it in place from Jan 1 without lawmakers' consent.

Britain joined the EU in 1973, and formally left on Jan 31. Since then, it has been in a transition period under which rules on trade, travel and business remain unchanged, with the country remaining within the EU customs union and single market.

Cyber attack on US govt ongoing: intel agencies

Hackers linked to Russia blamed

AFP, Washington

US intelligence agencies have warned a "significant" cyber attack on several federal departments uncovered over the weekend remains ongoing as the government rushes to assess the extent of the breach.

"This is a developing situation, and while we continue to work to understand the full extent of this campaign, we know this compromise has affected networks within the federal government," the FBI, the director of national intelligence and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint statement late Wednesday.

The March attack on software created by Texas-based IT company SolarWinds -- in which hackers installed malware -- continued for months until it was discovered by cybersecurity company FireEye.

Both companies have pointed the finger at hackers linked to the Russian government.

SolarWinds said up to 18,000 customers, which included government agencies and Fortune 500 companies, had downloaded the compromised software updates, allowing hackers to spy on email exchanges.

The content the hackers sought to steal -- and how successful they were -- remains unknown at this time. The agencies have created a coordination unit and emergency talks are being held at the White House on a daily basis to discuss the government's response.



A member of the Libyan Red Crescent checks blankets in which the bodies of drowned migrant children were wrapped on the shore of Zawia, west of the Libyan capital Tripoli, on Wednesday. The bodies of four migrant children between the ages of five and ten were found on the beach, following the sinking of a boat carrying 30 people trying to reach Europe, the Libyan Red Crescent said.

PHOTO: AFP

Putin hopes for better ties with US under Biden

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir yesterday Putin said that he hopes the administration of incoming US President Joe Biden will work with Russia to resolve disagreements between their countries.

Putin told reporters at his annual end-of-year press conference that the two countries' relations had become "hostage" to US domestic politics and said he hoped that some existing problems "will be resolved under the new administration".

Putin was one of the last leaders of major world countries to congratulate Biden on winning the November US presidential elections. Biden is expected to take a tougher stand on Russia than Trump.

Biden will be the fourth US president since Putin came to power in 2000.

Digital Covid certificates may deepen inequalities

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

As Covid-19 vaccines are rolled out worldwide, a push for identity proofs and digital certificates risks excluding poorer and vulnerable groups from vaccination and the benefits that come with it, according to rights experts.

India announced guidelines this week for the first phase of vaccinations for about 300 million people, requiring eligible recipients to first register online with photo-identity documents, including the Aadhaar digital ID.

Meanwhile, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the lobby group of the world's airlines, said it would launch a digital health travel pass early next year that will include passengers' Covid-19 vaccination data.

But insisting on a digital ID to get the vaccine, or certificates as proof of having had it, could mean some people are excluded, and raises privacy and surveillance concerns, said Tom Fisher, a senior researcher at non-profit Privacy International.

"We're seeing these new measures being put in place with little concern for human rights or their discriminatory impact," he said, adding that such requirements will likely stay on long after the end of the



current pandemic, further entrenching bias.

"Linking healthcare to national IDs is deeply problematic, and the reach of a digital health pass extends far beyond the airport. There are millions around the world who lack access to these systems, often the most vulnerable," Fisher added.

Access to the vaccines is already skewed: nine out of 10 people in dozens of poor nations may not get vaccinated next year because rich countries have hoarded far more doses than they need, campaigners said last week.

Meanwhile, more technology firms are rolling out digital certificates that can be accessed on smartphones by employers, airlines and others, as proof of vaccination is sought not just to travel, but also to work or take part in other activities.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Biden to get Covid vaccine next week, Pence today

President-elect Joe Biden will get the coronavirus vaccine as soon as next week, transition officials said on Wednesday, as US authorities try to build public confidence in a measure that promises to stanch the deadly pandemic. Vice President Mike Pence will get the vaccine today, the White House said. Both men will receive the shot publicly in an effort to boost confidence in the safety of the vaccine, which will become widely available to the public next year. President Donald Trump will get the vaccine himself as soon as his medical team determines it is best, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said on Tuesday.

EU allocates 6b euros for refugees in Turkey

The EU yesterday announced that it has allocated to Turkey the full six billion euros Ankara sought in return for its hosting of Syrian refugees. After the biggest refugee crisis since World War II in 2015 saw a million people arrive in Europe, Brussels and Ankara agreed in 2016 to resolve the issue. Under the deal, Turkey pledged to accept the return of migrants arriving in Greece and do more to stop the flow in exchange for six billion euros (\$7.20 billion). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accused the EU of not fulfilling promises and says Ankara has spent \$40 billion on more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

Pakistan returns \$1b of Saudi Arabia's soft loan

Pakistan has returned \$1 billion to Saudi Arabia as a second instalment of a \$3 billion soft loan, as Islamabad reaches out to Beijing for a commercial loan to help it offset pressure to repay another \$1 billion to Riyadh next month, officials said on Wednesday. Islamabad had returned \$1 billion in July. Saudi Arabia gave Pakistan a \$3 billion loan and a \$3.2 billion oil credit facility in late 2018. After Islamabad sought Riyadh's support over alleged human rights violations by India in the disputed territory of Kashmir, Saudi Arabia has pushed Pakistan to repay the loan.

Chinese craft returns to Earth with Moon rocks

Unmanned Chinese spacecraft Chang'e-5 carrying rocks and soil from the Moon returned safely to Earth early yesterday, completing another chapter in China's effort to become a space superpower. The mission was the first in four decades to collect lunar samples, emulating the feats of the United States and the Soviet Union from the 1960s and 1970s -- and going a few steps further.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

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