

Summer 2012

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Recommended Citation

Angela Walker, *Foreword: From Riots to Rights*, 10 Nw. J. INT'L HUM. RTS. 191 (2012).
<http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njihr/vol10/iss4/1>

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Foreword: From Riots to Rights

Angela Walker*

¶1 It has been 17 months since 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself in paint thinner and set himself alight, taking a stand against Tunisia’s rampant corruption and unemployment. “[I]t wasn’t about his scales being confiscated,” stated his mother. “It was about his dignity.”¹ Bouazizi became a protest symbol, sparking the fire of protests that swept beyond Tunisia and set ablaze the Arab Spring.

¶2 In the face of extreme violence, people throughout the Middle East and North Africa have been demanding change. They have been demanding an end to oppression, corruption, and human rights violations. They have been demanding democracy. At the forefront of these calls for reform have been women,² youth,³ the lower class, and the power of social media. Over the course of the last year, they succeeded in toppling the long-standing rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.⁴

¶3 Today, many say that the Arab Spring has entered a “winter of discontent.”⁵ In reality this sentiment reflects only one of two narratives in the headlines. While drastically different events are taking place in Syria and Egypt, they are part and parcel of the larger human rights struggle in the region. The darker side of revolution continues to haunt Syria. A week ago, the 14-month-long uprising that began peacefully in March 2011 experienced its worst massacre to date; over 100 lives were claimed.⁶ In response, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria expelled Syrian diplomats in a coordinated effort to undermine President Bashar Assad’s regime. U.N. special envoy Kofi Annan stated just the other day in Damascus that Syria has reached a “tipping point.”⁷ To date, approximately 4,000 people have died in the conflict.⁸

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¹ Kurt Anderson, *The Protester*, TIME, Dec. 14, 2011, available at http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373,00.html.

² The role of women in shaping civil society throughout the region was recognized on the world stage last year when Tawakkol Karman, Yemeni journalist and women’s rights activist, was one of three women to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—she is the first Arab woman to win a Nobel Prize and the youngest Nobel Peace Laureate.

³ Like many of the revolutions throughout the MENA region, Syria’s revolution began with youths who took a stand for democracy and freedom. In March 2011, locals gathered in Deraa to demand the release of 14 school children who were arrested and reportedly tortured after writing on a wall the well-known slogan of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt: “The people want the downfall of the regime.” *Guide: Syria Crisis*, BBC NEWS, Apr. 9, 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13855203>.

⁴ See *Year of Rebellion: The State of Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (2012), available at <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/year-of-rebellion-the-state-of-human-rights-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

⁵ Editorial Board, *Egypt elections: a test of hard-won civic values*, THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, May 29, 2012, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2012/0529/Egypt-elections-a-test-of-hard-won-civic-values>.

⁶ *Syria at tipping point, says UN envoy Annan*, BBC News, May 29, 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18259711>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

¶4 Many look to Egypt as a beacon of hope for human rights movements throughout the region. After their own struggles against corruption and oppression, Egyptians will go to the polls later this month to select their first president after the 2011 uprising.

¶5 While the Arab democracy movements remain strong, democracy itself still has “thin roots.”⁹ Yet the Arab Spring, guided by ideals of democracy and rights, continues to struggle for fairly elected governments as well as constitutions that uphold basic rights and liberties. Democracies are not born overnight; it takes some time to get from riots to rights.

¶6 Throughout this period of change in the Middle East and North Africa, human rights have been launched to the fore of contemporary governance in the region. The wave of uprisings has called into question the meaning of human rights, democracy, and rule of law for MENA nations. In its tenth anniversary year, the *Northwestern University Journal of International Human Rights* highlights cutting edge developments concerning these issues in the field of international human rights law by publishing its second special edition *Front Lines* issue.¹⁰ *Front Lines: Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* presents three articles that examine the development of human rights in the region from three different perspectives: the construction of a regional human rights movement, corruption, and labor rights.

¶7 *The Middle East and Human Rights: Inroads Towards Charting its Own Path*, by Shadi Mokhtari, sets forth leading analysis of key trends concerning human rights in the Middle East. Professor Mokhtari discusses specifically the rise of a Middle Eastern human rights agenda, one that recasts the relationship between human rights and the West. She states, “A more nuanced treatment of the human rights paradigm, which rejects both Western appropriations of human rights and attempts by Middle Eastern governments to exploit Western appropriations, is taking shape.”¹¹ In other words, “[t]here is less and less talk of human rights being Western....”¹² Her article addresses the impact of this shifting human rights discourse on Middle Eastern governments, which have been pushed by the Arab Spring to engage with and affirm human rights norms.

¶8 The second article in this special edition is *Ideals without Illusions: Corruption and the Future of a Democratic North Africa* by Juliet Sorensen. Professor Sorensen discusses corruption as a motivating force in the Arab Spring: “Inherent in the right to democracy is that representative government be free from corruption.”¹³ She analyzes the progress that three countries affected by the Arab Spring—Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco—have made toward democracy over the course of the last year as well as instances where corruption has hindered that progress. She discusses two examples of democracies that have successfully struggled against corruption—Botswana and Hong Kong—and concludes by suggesting that Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco take further steps to reduce corruption so that democracy and rule of law may take root.¹⁴

⁹ Editorial Board, *Of riots and rights in Egypt and beyond*, THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Nov. 21, 2011, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2011/1121/Of-riots-and-rights-in-Egypt-and-beyond>.

¹⁰ The *Journal of International Human Rights*' first special edition, *Front Lines: Rule of Law in Haiti and Beyond*, is available at <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/jihr/v10/n1/>.

¹¹ Shadi Mokhtari, *The Middle East and Human Rights: Inroads Towards Charting its Own Path*, 10 NW. U. J. INT'L HUM. RTS. 194, 195 (2012).

¹² *Id.* at 196.

¹³ Juliet Sorensen, *Ideals without Illusions: Corruption and the Future of a Democratic North Africa*, 10 NW. U. J. INT'L HUM. RTS. 202, 202 (2012).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 2011.

¶9 In the final article, *Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy*, Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad provide a useful analysis of the intersection of economic policy and the labor movement within Iran. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the authors explain, the Iranian working class has suffered the consequences of an undemocratic, repressive capitalist state. Professors Nomani and Behdad point out, however, that “...no viable and sustainable democratization process can take shape without independent labor organizations and without the working class’s participation in the political arena.”¹⁵ The article analyzes the political, economic, and social obstacles facing the Iranian working class in its struggle to attain basic rights and argues ultimately for a viable social democracy to facilitate such efforts.

¶10 From three distinct yet overlapping vantage points, we hope the articles in this special edition can inform the ongoing human rights movements and debates in the Middle East and North Africa. In its 10th anniversary year, the *Journal of International Human Rights* forges onward to continue advancing the human rights discourse and community struggles for dignity and freedom around the world.

¹⁵ Farhad Nomani & Sohrab Behdad, *Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy*, 10 NW. U. J. INT’L HUM. RTS. 212, 212 (2012).