

Arab activists hope Tunisia events inspire change

BY HADEEL AL-SHALCHI (Associated Press)

Originally Published: Friday, January 14, 2011

Updated: Saturday, January 15, 2011



CAIRO (AP) — Celebrations over the Tunisian president's ouster spread Saturday as the popular uprising raised hopes throughout the Arab world that it could inspire pressures for reforms across a region dominated by authoritative regimes.

But while Middle East leaders may face bolder calls for change — such as chants against Egypt's Hosni Mubarak — the chances for other ruling systems to crumble quickly in domino-style fashion appear slim.

Many states with deep political rifts, such as Egypt and Iran, maintain vast security forces heavily vested in the status quo and have shown no signs of breaking ranks to join protesters. Still, the stunning rebellion in Tunisia against the 23-year rule of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali sent an unmistakable message to other leaders that no hold on power is guaranteed.

"Now the bell is ringing and it should be a reminder to other leaders that people are fed up," said political analyst Labib Kamhawi in Jordan, where more than 5,000 people joined rallies on Friday to protest rising prices and demand the prime minister's ouster.

"They need political freedoms and serious economic reforms, that there must be an end to corruption and nepotism," he added.

Dozens of demonstrators rallied outside the Tunisian embassies Saturday in Cairo and Amman, Jordan.

Meanwhile, thousands of messages congratulating the Tunisian people flooded the Internet on Twitter, Facebook and blogs, and many people replaced their profile pictures with red Tunisian flags.

Egyptian activists opposed to President Hosni Mubarak's three-decade regime danced outside the Tunisian Embassy in Cairo as the news broke on Friday, chanting "Ben Ali, tell Mubarak a plane is waiting for him too!"

Mubarak, 82, faces mounting dissatisfaction over the lack of democratic reform and frequent protests over economic woes in the country, a key U.S. ally.

Egyptian human rights activist Hossam Bahgat said he was glued to the news watching the fall of the Tunisian government and hoped that his countrymen could do the same someday.

"I feel like we are a giant step closer to our own liberation," he told The Associated Press. "What's significant about Tunisia is that literally days ago the regime seemed unshakable, and then eventually democracy prevailed without a single Western state lifting a finger."

Bahgat said the events in Tunisia would boost the confidence of opposition members in a region where leaders often rule for life.

"What happened in Tunisia ... will give unimaginable momentum to the cause for change in Egypt," he said.

News of Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia was splashed on the front pages of all Cairo dailies on Saturday without editorial comment, while the mass-circulation Akhbar al-Youm tried to promote the government's performance on the economy with a dose of patriotism.

"Egypt is on the ascent," declared the paper's banner headline of a new story praising the government's policies on servicing foreign debt and the growth of money held in social insurance and pension funds.

In Iran, government-run media also reported the Tunisian uprising without any analysis or references to the massive protests after disputed elections last year.

Sudanese opposition leader Mariam al-Sadek said she had mixed feelings about the Tunisian riots: excitement the president was overthrown but sadness that her people haven't done the same.

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted on an international indictment for war crimes in the western region of Darfur, faces the division of his country after a vote for southern independence, a rebellion in the west and east, and internal opposition.

"What caused this in Tunisia is so little compared to what we are going through," al-Sadek said. "Our country is being divided; our sovereignty is lost and we are humiliated, and this is happening in Tunisia ... I feel ashamed."

Jordanians also held separate protests Friday in several cities over rising prices for fuel and foodstuffs, although King Abdullah II slashed some prices and taxes earlier this week to try to stanch the public anger and ease the burden on the poor.

About 200 people, some wearing Tunisian flags as capes, huddled together on Paris' Place des Invalides after being directed away from the nearby Tunisian Embassy.

French police closed off the street where the embassy was located to foot and car traffic.

Haitham Nasri, a 21-year-old university student from the southern city of Sfax in Tunisia who has lived in Paris for two years, said Friday was a day of celebration but warned the mobilization could continue.

"It's like halftime in an important football match, when the home team is up 1-0. We're happy with our performance so far but are regrouping for the second half. We've won the battle but not the war yet," said Nasri, who was wrapped in the red-and-white Tunisian flag.

Mohammed Abdel-Qudous, a veteran Egyptian opposition activist, predicted the ripples from Tunisia to be felt soon in Egypt.

"Egypt is a candidate to be the next Tunisia because conditions in the two countries are very similar," he said. "It is a question of time, nothing more."

Associated Press writer Sarah El Deeb in Khartoum, Sudan; Jenny Barchfield in Paris; Dale Gavlak and Jamal Halaby in Amman, Jordan; Hamza Hendawi in Cairo and Ali Akbar Dareini in Tehran, Iran, contributed to this report.