

Mohamed Bouazizi: What has become of the man who sparked the Arab Spring – martyr or memory?



17 December 2020 marks a decade on from the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, an act which ignited a revolution that came to engulf North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. But for those who survived the Arab Spring, has life improved or did Bouazizi die in vain?

The final straw

According to Ali Bouazizi, Mohamed's cousin, 17 December 2010 would have been just like any other day if the local press and people hadn't been there, going on to [say](#): "The fact they decided to stop being afraid of the government changed everything."

On the day of his death Mohamed was going about his usual routine as a fruit seller. Everyday he would take his cart to the whole sale market at midnight to buy his daily wears, which he would then sell from dawn until dusk.

But on the morning of 17 December, police confiscated Mohamed's scales because he was working illegally without a permit. After refusing to appease the corrupt officers with a bribe, as he usually was forced to do, he went to complain to the governor at the provincial office in Sidi Bouzid - but the official refused to see him.

This was the straw which broke the camel's back, "Nobody wanted to listen to him," [recalled](#) Ali. So, in act of sheer desperation and protest against his condition, he set himself alight.

The making of history

Mohamed was a likable character who was popular with the local community. His charm and sense of humour had earned him the nickname 'Basboosa' (*basboosa* is a type of sweet cake made of semolina) that roughly translates to "someone who makes jokes" according to Ali. Hence, when people heard of the tragic nature of his death there was uproar, inspiring locals to overcome their fear of retribution from [Ben Ali](#)'s notorious institutions of repression.

Mohamed's cousin managed to film the gathering crowd and its transition from a group of concerned individuals into a growing number of protesters.

"At first, they were only a handful of family members and close friends", Ali said, "Other people were watching from a distance," he went on. But then dozens, "perhaps hundreds" joined and eventually forced their way into the building where Mohamed had sought help.

Later, Ali tentatively uploaded the video to Facebook which was then widely shared. By evening, the images were broadcasted on local news channels, eventually finding their way via social media into the global spotlight to become the catalyst for [a phenomenal event](#).

Wasted blood

At Mohamed's funeral his mother is [filmed praying](#) by his grave with other aggrieved family members. Her words are hopeful but also laced with an uncertainty and fear that her son might have died in vain, praying, "God willing your blood wasn't wasted Mohamed," she goes on in hope, "You are my son and you have opened the door. You died a martyr."

However, a recent [Guardian-YouGov Poll](#) suggests that the ensuing revolution has done more harm than good, claiming, "A majority in nine countries across the Arab world feel they are living in significantly more unequal societies than before the Arab Spring."

The poll, which was conducted using 5,275 participants across genders and ages, also suggests that feelings of hopelessness and disenfranchisement that initially helped fuel the revolution have only increased - even if "most people do not regret the protest movements".

In some of the countries which joined the leaders of the Jasmine Revolution in their protests, many people do not even possess feelings of nostalgia nor a remanence of the hope which Mohamed had inspired 10 years ago. Instead, a sense of being worse off plagues most of the population who were asked. Unsurprisingly these sentiments were highest in Syria (75% of

respondents), Yemen (73%) and Libya (60%), where protests mutated into nationwide violence, tearing each country apart.

The price of freedom

Although the Arab Spring has not lived up to all its promise, there are signs that Mohamed's death has given some the opportunity for progress.

In Tunisia democracy has been established making it a success story - even if it is the only one to have come out of the Arab Spring. And although the fledgling parliament seems to be at a "[beginner's level](#)", with some forsaking the duties of the politician by working for their own interests and exploiting inexperienced voters to garner support, there is at least a foundation for the construction of a more egalitarian political reality.

[Yasser Jradi](#), a musician famous for writing one of the anthems of the revolution – Dima Dima, reflecting on the broader context of the revolution seems optimistic about the future: "After 23 years of destruction under Ben Ali's rule, it takes a year or so to destroy and rebuild a house," reinforcing his point he goes on to say, "Reconstruction takes a long time...I see many positive things. There are many new associations in civil society, young people are more politically aware and contributing to society. The situation is chaotic but there are good signs."

More than a memory

The musician's optimism is arguably reflective of [a trend](#) amongst the youngest generation of adults - those who will inherit Arab societies with less memory of life before the revolution - and whose formative years were imbued with the initial sense of hope which Mohamed's death provided.

Ali (Mohamed's cousin) takes a similar outlook, and calls for patience in light of the fact that not much has changed economically, as [unemployment](#) remains high and the presence of [corruption](#) persists. This is because on a social level freedom of expression and of the press has improved significantly in Tunisia.

In turn, this new liberty has enabled the establishment of new movements such as 'Haraka 17 décembre' (17 December Movement) - symbolically launched a decade on from the fateful day - that furthers the change for which Mohamed died, whilst also embodying the reality Ali and many others are still fighting for.

Through the actions of those who sympathise with his plight, Mohamed's memory is being kept alive as his death continues to inspire those who hope to create a better life than the one he sacrificed. Thus, his act of martyrdom has become more than mere memory, transformed into an indispensable aspect of Tunisia's collective consciousness which fights for a future free from oppression.