The Chronicle Review

February 8, 2011

A Fourth Wave Gathers Strength in the Middle East

By Richard Wolin

In January 1969, Jan Palach, a young philosophy student, set himself aflame in Prague's Wenceslas Square to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia five months earlier. Paradoxical though it may seem, his self-sacrifice was not intended as an act of despair. On the contrary, it was meant to inspire hope and resilience in his fellow Czechs. Decades later, Palach would be remembered as one of the inspirational precursors of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution. Today a square is named in his honor in Prague's Old Town section.

Some 41 years later, a North African youth with a computer-science degree, Mohamed Bouazizi, committed a parallel act, immolating himself in the rural town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. The immediate pretext was his harassment by local authorities, who had prevented him from making a living selling fruit and vegetables. Yet most young Tunisians understood that the real reason for his despondency was a widespread and amorphous generational hopelessness. Tunisia's resident autocrat, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, had reigned for 23 years. Youth unemployment was rampant. Prospects for upward social mobility and meaningful political reform were nonexistent. In the weeks that followed Bouazizi's death, six other Tunisians would mimic his tragic finale, as would many others throughout the Arab world.

In retrospect, Bouazizi's death was merely a catalyst. What happened next was remarkable—and, when viewed in terms of its possible long-term repercussions for political culture in the region, of world historical importance. Sizable uprisings or protests ensued in eight other North African or Middle Eastern countries: Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Sudan, Yemen, and, of course, Egypt, where, during the first week of February, hundreds of thousands of people jammed the streets of Cairo and other cities to protest Hosni Mubarak's iron-fisted 30 years of rule. Visible among the placards were signs that read: "Tunisia is the solution!"

Never before have Arab citizens taken to the streets in such numbers, and with such persistence, to vent their displeasure with the political status quo. Scholars of international relations and specialists in the region have struggled to find relevant historical parallels. One optimistic, yet plausible, point of comparison might be the wave of democratic transitions that swept Southern Europe (Greece,