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How a slap sparked Tunisia's revolution

Bob Simon reports on the protests that ousted a repressive government and spread to other nations
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(CBSNews) The wave of revolutions sweeping the Arab world started in a forgotten town in the flatlands of Tunisia. It was an unlikely place for history to be made. But so was Tunisia itself, the smallest country in North Africa, strategically irrelevant, with no oil and not much of an army.

It has been an oasis of tranquility in this tumultuous part of the world, famous for its beaches, its couscous and its wonderful weather. But there was a dark side to paradise: for 23 years, Tunisia was ruled by a corrupt and ruthless dictator named Zine Ben Ali, who filled his prisons with anyone who spoke out against him.

He's gone now. A month ago, he left the country, quickly. In one of the most astonishing episodes of our time, he was overthrown by a popular uprising sparked by the desperate act of one simple man. If the Middle East is being transformed before our eyes today, it all began when a poor fruit vendor decided he just wasn't going to take it anymore.

Sidi Bouzid, a town of 40,000, doesn't get so much as a mention in the Tunisian guidebooks. Tourists don't come to the town. On the morning of Dec. 17, 26-yr.-old Mohammed Bouazizi was selling fruit from a cart as he did every day to support his family. He didn't have a license. But very few of the vendors did.

A municipal official, a woman, came by and confiscated his scale. It was worth \$100 and Bouazizi knew he'd have to pay a bribe to get it back. This had happened to him before. But this time, he got mad. He complained and the woman slapped him. One slap in the face, and that's how the revolution began.

He ran, screaming, to the government office in the center of town. He wanted his scale back. That's all. But they wouldn't let him in. He went to a gas station, filled up a canister and went back to the government building. His friend Jamil, another fruit vendor, went with him. Jamil says Bouazizi stood in the middle of traffic, poured gas over himself and cried out, "How do you expect me to make a living?"

Then he lit a match. He barely survived.

Bouazizi's mother says her son wasn't political in any way. He just wanted to continue making his \$10 a day and send his sisters away to college. But that slap was one indignity too many. It was illegal to demonstrate in Tunisia, but hundreds came from all over town to protest. Nothing like that had ever happened before in Sidi Bouzid.

"The symbol by just burning himself, using his body as a way to express that anger and need for dignity touched a lot of Tunisians," Zied Mhirsi told "60 Minutes" correspondent Bob Simon.

Mhirsi is a doctor and radio show host who was active in the uprising. He worked with us on our story.

"Do you think this revolution would have happened now if it hadn't been for Bouazizi?" Simon asked.

"I don't think so," Mhirsi replied, shaking his head.

The anger spread to other towns in the interior of the country, where unemployment among university graduates was approaching 50 percent. The dictator Ben Ali did the only thing he knew how to do: he turned to his police.

"The turning point, the real one here was the real bullets. Tunisia is one of the most peaceful countries you can ever think of. Tunisia, people don't have guns. Even robbers don't have guns. And then here we have the ruler, the government asking its police to shoot its own people using snipers, shooting people with real bullets in their heads," Mhirsi explained.

Hundreds of protesters were killed, but you wouldn't have heard anything about it on the state-run media. Twenty percent of Tunisians, however, are on Facebook, and Facebook had pictures.

Asked how Facebook was used to spread word of the unrest, Mhirsi said, "Facebook was the only video-sharing platform that was available to Tunisians. And seeing videos of people shot with real bullets in their heads on Facebook was shocking to many Tunisians."

Tunisia had been a battleground before, but that was a long time ago. Hannibal, Carthaginians, Romans have all been there and all have left their mark.

At the Kasserine Pass, the U.S. Army fought its first major battle against the Germans in World War II and left nearly 3,000 soldiers behind in a cemetery few Americans even know about.

Until last month, Ben Ali's Tunisia was calm. That's because the police state he created worked, as political activist Sihem Ben Sedrine discovered when she spoke out against Ben Ali and was arrested.

"They put me face to...the ground, and it's a very big man. And he started jumping on my neck, on, on my head, on my everywhere. And he was jumping on me," she told Simon.

Asked if he wanted her to say something, she said, "No, no, no nothing. It's just a punishment. You do not have the right to say no to Ben Ali."

After her release, the police took to dumping sewage at her front door and sabotaging her car.

"They cut the front brakes," she explained. "Twice. I had accident because the brakes were cut."

The repression was complimented by corruption. That was the specialty of Ben Ali's second wife, who was 20 years his junior and brought her extended family into the presidential palace, turning the seat of government into a mafia command post.

Mustapha Kamel Nabli was once a minister in Ben Ali's cabinet, then went into exile. He's back now as the governor of Tunisia's Central Bank.

"How much money do you think the Ben Ali family took for themselves over the years?" Simon asked.

"It's significant. I think it's in the billions of dollars," Nabli said.

The Ben Alis blanketed the country with luxury villas. They kicked people out of any other homes they liked. Investors, businessmen couldn't do anything without giving the family a piece of the action.

"You haven't used the word 'bribe,'" Simon pointed out.

"Oh, it's worse than a bribe," Nabli said. "I mean it's blunt corruption."

The 74-year-old Ben Ali saw himself as president for life. And he didn't want people to recognize that he wasn't getting any younger - he dyed his hair.

"Mubarak had dyed hair, pure black. What is it about these dictators in the Middle East and their dyed hair?" Simon asked.

"Those dictators try to look the way they looked when they took power, so they make people forget the amount of time they spent ruling them," Zied Mhirsi said.

Ben Ali was taken aback by the outbreak of unrest. He tried to calm people down with a PR campaign that was nothing short of grotesque. He went to a Tunis hospital with his entourage and paid a bedside visit to the fruit vendor Bouazizi, who was barely alive.

"That picture was shocking. You could see nothing of Bouazizi. He was surrounded by band-aids like a mummy. Obviously, he was in a coma. And then you have all these politicians coming inside the room," Mhirsi told Simon.

Bouazizi died Jan. 4. Word went out on Facebook to take to the streets. The message was received. On Jan. 14, tens of thousands brought the nation's capital, Tunis, to a halt. Now the world started paying attention.

"Degage" - get out - they shouted at Ben Ali.

Zied Mhirsi was there. "Oh it was fantastic to be there on that day. There was everybody, young, poor, rich, educated, women, men, every part of the Tunisian society was represented in that demonstration that asked Ben Ali to get out," he remembered.

The protesters thought it was entirely possible that Ben Ali would order the army to fire on them. But they didn't budge. To their astonishment, it was Ben Ali who panicked. He fled the country and went to Saudi Arabia.

"I think like the majority of the Tunisian people, we were in disbelief. We were, like, 'He's gone.' It was just crazy. He left in his plane and he's gone. Took us some time to realize it, I think. So, yeah, we were free then," Mhirsi said.

It was the first time an Arab dictator had been toppled by his own people.

It didn't take long before the homes belonging to his extended family were torched and looted. Today, they're tourist attractions, but not for foreigners - for Tunisians themselves, a testament to what they've accomplished.

There used to be pictures of Ben Ali everywhere. They're gone now, almost. There's graffiti all over Tunis thanking Facebook for the revolution. But more than anything else, it was the revolt of the young.

"And it's your generation that went out and threw out this dictator," Simon said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm getting the impression that you're enjoying this."

"So much. So much," Mhirsi replied.

Today, Tunisia's small army is keeping the peace. Elections are due to be held in six months. Meanwhile, there's something called an interim government. And the new Secretary of State for Youth and Sport is 33-yr.-old Slim Amamou. He was one of the protesters. Now, he's really learning about democracy.

"I have every day demonstrations in front of my office, and sometimes even in my office," Amamou told Simon.

"You were one of the protesters. And now the protesters are protesting against you," Simon remarked.

Bourguiba Avenue, Tunis' Champs-Elysees, once the place to see and be seen, has become the place to speak and be heard.

Everybody wants something: the unemployed want jobs, students want everyone from the old government sent packing, the tourist industry wants to see people back on those beaches, and the West wants Tunisians to behave themselves.

"You know that a lot of big countries in the world are worried that it's going to get chaotic here. What do you say?" Simon asked Mhirsi.

"Oh, no, no, no, no. Definitely not. This country now is just on the verge of becoming a developed one. Of joining the northern part of the frontier. The Mediterranean frontier. And I can tell we're going to become like Portugal in a couple of years," Mhirsi said.

"And your wine will be as good as Portuguese wine?" Simon asked.

"We've been making wine for 3,000 years. So, our wine is already better, I would say," Mhirsi replied.

And Tunisians say they're proud to have been the pioneers of revolution in the region.

"Every other autocratic leader in the Middle East is quivering and it's all because of a fruit vendor in a small town in central Tunisia," Simon remarked.

"It's like the little push you put on, like, a card game and then the whole castle just falls apart. That little energy was from Bouazizi," Mhirsi said.

Two weeks ago, more than 1,000 people from the capital made a pilgrimage to Sidi Bouzid, the fruit vender's home. They called it the "Caravan of Thanks"

They wanted to pay tribute to the man and the unlikely town where it all began. People said they were experiencing the deepest joy of their lives. There's nothing like a revolution. But the mother of the revolution didn't come to the parade. She stayed at home, grieving for her son. Her only mementos: two posters on a white wall.

Way out in Tunisia's hard scrabble countryside, there's a cemetery. A Tunisian flag and a grey cement block mark Mohammed Bouazizi's resting place. It's precarious to make predictions in this part of the world. But here's one: before long, there will be monuments honoring him all over the country.

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