

Middle East realignment: the Arab upheaval

by Augustus Richard Norton



Jan. 18, 2011: Police form a line in front of demonstrators in downtown Tunis, Tunisia. The protesters are holding a sign urging the police to back down. (HOLLY PICKETT/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX)

THE YEAR 2011 proved extraordinary in the Arab world. Assumptions about the weak appetite for freedom in Muslim societies was discredited as three veteran dictators — Tunisia’s Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi — were toppled by popular movements. The fate of autocrats in Syria and Yemen hung in the balance. In other states, notably Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, sitting regimes have been shaken but applications of repression and largesse permit the rulers to continue to reign. In Jordan, Morocco and Oman, skillful political maneuvering has tempered demands for reform. In Iraq and Algeria, the living memory of years of trauma and carnage has dampened the appetite for confrontation and protest.

The Arab world seems to be entering a new historical phase, one in which the contours of political power may be reshaped as more governments face cries for accountability and responsiveness to citizens’ demands. Never in the modern history of the Middle East have so many millions

demanded the dismantling of their autocratic regimes with such unanimity, perseverance, persistence and peacefulness.

The great political upheaval that began when fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi set himself alight in a desperate quest for dignity in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, on December 17, 2010, is likely to continue for some time to come. Since December 2010, thousands of demonstrators have gone to the streets and squares of towns and cities across the Arab

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