

How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution

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WHAT drives an ordinary man to burn himself to death?

That question has echoed across the Arab world and beyond in the weeks since a 26-year-old unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, doused himself with paint thinner and lit a match on Dec. 17, 2010. His desperate act set off street clashes that ultimately toppled the country's autocratic ruler, and inspired nearly a dozen other men to set themselves on fire across North Africa as statements of their own desperation and frustration with the authoritarian regimes in their countries. Self-immolations have taken place in Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania.

Those serial self-immolations have provoked horror and wonder, with some Arab commentators hailing the men as heroic martyrs of a new Middle Eastern revolution, even as others denounce them under headlines like "Do Not Burn Your Bodies!"

Yet burning oneself as political protest is not new. Legends of people of committing the act of self-immolation date back centuries. The first instance is said to come from Sati, one of the wives of the Hindu god Shiva. According to myths, she married against her father's wishes and then burned herself to death after her father insulted her husband. This story is often linked to the practice of *sati*, which was a custom in some parts of India where a widow would burn herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The practice was outlawed in India in 1829.

The first and most famous moment of self-immolation as a political act was that of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, who burned himself to death in Saigon during the Vietnam War in 1963. Under the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam largely advanced the agenda of the country's Catholic minority and discriminated against Buddhist monks. Afterward, four more monks and a nun set themselves ablaze protesting Diem before his regime finally fell in 1963. Rather suddenly, setting oneself on fire became a political act.

As the American presence increased in Vietnam in the mid- to late 1960s, more and more monks committed self-immolation, including thirteen in one week. It even took place in the U.S., when Norman Morrison, a 31-year-old Quaker, burned himself to death in November 1965 below Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Pentagon office in protest of the Vietnam War. One week after Morrison's action, Roger Allen LaPorte performed a similar act in New York City, in front of the United Nations building.

The grim tactic has spread across the globe.

In Europe, in protest of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Polish teacher and accountant Ryszard Siwiec committed suicide by self-immolation in Warsaw, Poland in 1968, followed by Jan Palach, a 20-year-old Czech student who burned himself to death in Prague in 1969. Palach, who was followed by Jan Zajic one month later, is remembered as a martyr of the struggle against Communism. Other individuals in Europe carried out self-immolations as a protest against communism included Romas Kalanta in 1972 in Lithuania and Pastor Oskar Brüsewitz in 1976 in East Germany.

Less well-known protesters have died in flames in Tibet, India, Turkey and elsewhere, including five Indian students who did it to protest job quotas in 1990; a Tibetan monk did it to protest the Indian police stopping an anti-Chinese hunger strike in 1998; Kurds did it to protest Turkey in 1999; and outlawed Falun Gong practitioners did it in Tiananmen Square in 2009.

Perhaps what is new about the latest self-immolations is their effectiveness. Bouazizi was 10 years old when he became the main provider for his family, selling fresh produce in the local market to support his family of eight. Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the local governor's office in Sidi Bouzid after the authorities confiscated his fruit, beat him and refused to return his property. Bouazizi had went to the provincial headquarters hoping to complain to local municipality officials, but they refused to see him. He did not die right away but lingered in the hospital till Jan. 4, 2011 before he died due to his injuries. There was so much outrage over his ordeal that even President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, the dictator, visited Bouazizi on Dec. 28 in the hospital to try to blunt the anger. But the outcry could not be suppressed.

His self-immolation set off protests about jobs in the town, which has an agriculture-based economy in one of the poorest regions of the country. These demonstrations then spread elsewhere, but the violent response of the authorities - with the police opening fire on demonstrators - appears to have exacerbated anger and ignited further protests.

Bouazizi is now seen as the instigator of a revolution that forced out President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on Jan. 14, 2011 after 23 years of authoritarian rule. Mr. Bouazizi's imitators hope to generate similar revolts in other Arab countries, where corruption and stifling autocracy have led to a similarly vast gulf between rulers and the ruled.

In the past, many people recoiled from such protesters as attention-seeking lunatics. Or the authorities were too powerful. Few people today remember Homa Darabi, the Iranian child psychiatrist who set herself on fire in a crowded Tehran square in 1994. A month earlier, a 16-year-old girl had been shot to death for wearing lipstick, and Darabi — who had lived in the United States and refused to wear the veil — had seen enough. "Death to tyranny, long live liberty, long live Iran!" she shouted, as flames engulfed her.

Yousef al-Qaradawi, a prominent and influential Egyptian cleric who lives in Qatar and has a TV show on Al Jazeera, spoke sympathetically about Mr. Bouazizi and others who

attempted suicide, saying that they were driven to it by social injustice and that the responsibility for their deaths lay with the rulers of their countries.

“People call these men brave, and mostly they don’t use the word ‘suicide’ in describing them,” said Tarik Tlaty, a Moroccan political analyst. “They don’t use the word ‘martyrs’ either. They call them ‘sacrificers,’ and they speak of an ‘uprising.’”

He is now famous throughout Tunisia and the Arab world — a legend, in fact.

A picture of Bouazizi's face has been affixed to the mosaic-tiled monument outside his town's municipal offices. The date of his self-immolation – which burned him horribly but did not kill him immediately – is painted on walls with the graffiti announcing the town as "a place of freedom". "The son of Hay al-Noor [Bouazizi's neighborhood] in Sidi Bouzid, this is the location of the revolution," reads Arabic graffiti a street away from the martyr's modest home.

"We were silent before but Mohammed showed us that we must react," says Jaber Hajlawi, an unemployed 22-year-old lawyer and one of Bouazizi's neighbors.

Many Buddhist authorities say suicide cannot be reconciled with their religious tradition. But an ascetic strain among Chinese and Korean Buddhists includes gestures of painful self-sacrifice, from the burning of fingers to self-immolation, said Robert Sharf, chairman of the Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The practice is rooted in the Lotus Sutra, a relatively late Buddhist text that speaks of a magic king who douses himself with fragrant oil and allows his body to be burned as a sacrifice.

“Full-body immolation is rarely done solely as a religious practice,” Dr. Sharf said. “It is more typically a form of political protest at the same time. For instance, it has been used repeatedly in Chinese history to protest anti-Buddhist state policies, such as the mass defrocking of priests.”

In Afghanistan, some women burn themselves to death to escape abusive marriages, a practice that seems to be on the rise recently.

It is often impossible to be sure what really motivates those who burn themselves to death.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47d6fyaOjRM&feature=player_embedded

<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/ragehomaarreport/2011/03/20113993920597144.html>



Tunisian president paid a visit to Bouazizi in hospital



Mohammed Bouazizi's mother, Manoubi, and sister Basma, 16, hold a picture of the fruit seller in their home. The lettering on the poster reads 'Mohammed Boazizi - martyr'.



Mohamed Bouazizi