

On December 17th, 2010, a young street vendor walked into the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, a city on the outskirts of the Tunisian capitol. He had come to lodge a complaint about a police officer who had humiliated him when impounding his unlicensed cart – slapped him, spit on him, and taken his gear. This was just the latest of many struggles he faced in trying to support his poor family in this country where civil society was crumbling, and the government was hopelessly corrupt. Perhaps it was no surprise that he found no help in the governor's office, but it proved to be the breaking point. Faced with the prospect of debts that, without his confiscated equipment, he could not pay, Mohamed Bouazizi drenched himself with gasoline and set himself ablaze. ^{1, 2}

In lighting the fire to end his own life, Bouazizi set up the perfect metaphor for the spate of uprisings that he ignited with his action: revolution spread like wildfire across the Middle East as though kindled by the sparks of his flame. Poetic, perhaps – yet what a tragic way to bring about change. How appalling that the only way Bouazizi could make his abuse known was to immolate himself. But there was no secure way to voice his complaints, since the government enforced a policy of “systematic repression” against those who expressed ideas opposing the regime. Just months before Bouazizi's self-immolation, Tunisia was ranked an abysmal 164 out of 178 countries on the Press Freedom Index released by Reporters without Borders; other countries impacted by the “Arab Spring” revolutions ranked on a similar level.³ Without a press free to publish materials contrary to the government line, public awareness of the abuses was stifled and the situation prolonged.

Through criticizing government policies and practices, the independent media can bring to light the problems in government, providing the catalyst to mobilize people over these injustices. Government-controlled media, however, is not always permitted to report on topics that the government finds uncomfortable, such as police aggression or political corruption. Without public acknowledgement of these issues, the government is free to continue to act as though said issues do not exist. Had there been even a local newspaper where Bouazizi could have gone to tell his story, the government officials might have been more willing to help him; instead, they turned him away, safe in their assumption that no-one important would ever hear of their actions. Across the countries of the Arab Spring, there were thousands others like Bouazizi, people more hampered than helped by their government. Imagine how different their revolutions could have been if they had simply had free presses to guard against governmental corruption and abuse. Bouazizi might not have died; the whole Arab Spring might have occurred sooner, more gradually, and in a less deadly manner. No sudden blaze of martyrdom, no conflagration of tumult and violence: instead, the crucible of the free press.

Notes:

¹ Rania Abouzeid, "Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire," Time Magazine, Time Inc., 21 Jan 2011, 12 Feb 2013, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>>.

² "Tunisia: 'I have lost my son, but I am proud of what he did,'" The Independent, independent.co.uk, 21 Feb 2011, 12 Feb 2013 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>>.

³ "2010 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, 20 Oct 2010, 12 Feb 2013, <http://www.rsf.org/IMG/CLASSEMENT_2011/GB/C_GENERAL_GB.pdf>.