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The Guardian

Algerian protesters clash with police as Egypt fervour spreads

400 arrested as officers enforce no-protest ban in Algiers

2/12/2011

Algerian police have beaten back around 2,000 demonstrators who tried to rally in central Algiers as aftershocks from the Egyptian revolution rumbled throughout the Middle East.

Demonstrations in Algiers quickly turned to running clashes with police who had been ordered by the government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to enforce a protests ban. Police took up positions throughout the centre of the city hours after the tumultuous scenes in Cairo, which are likely to have significant ramifications across the region.

Even before Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had stepped down, the 12-year regime of Bouteflika had been considered to be under most threat from the popular uprisings now galvanising the Arab states. Wedged alongside Tunisia, where President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was ousted 30 days ago, and near Egypt, which fell on Friday, the unstable nation has many of the characteristics of both – a disenfranchised youth and rising prices of basic goods, such as sugar and cooking oil.

It also shares a large, pervasive security presence, authoritarian rule and a general sense that citizens are not benefiting from its wealth and resources.

Late in the afternoon, protesters briefly broke a cordon and officials say that 400 were arrested by police – who vastly outnumbered them. Most were then released.

The demonstrations were organised, as they were in Yemen, nearly 3,000 miles away, where at least 5,000 people, mainly youths, rallied in the capital, Sana'a to call for Egypt-style reform.

In Sana'a, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who took office around the same time as Mubarak and has enjoyed largely unchecked power ever since, called an emergency meeting of his security chiefs and senior ministers hours after the 82-year-old Egyptian leader left Cairo.

Saleh has allowed demonstrations to take place for the past four weeks and has said he would not stand again as president when his current term expires in 2013. Protesters in Sana'a and the coastal city of Aden railed against food prices and poor services. But, as was the case elsewhere, lack of accountability in government was also a dominant theme.

Governments across the region have made a string of concessions as the events in Tunisia and Egypt unfolded, electrifying citizens who had become conditioned to the status quo of soaring prices, few job opportunities and almost no accountability among officials who enjoy far greater privileges than them.

In Jordan, King Abdullah is yet to form a new government after sacking the prime minister and his ministers in late January – a move widely believed to have been inspired by the risk that the revolts may soon be felt there. Weekly demonstrations against prices and services have taken place since early December – before the Tunisian uprising – and have focused on broadly similar themes of disenfranchisement and limited means to bring about change.

Jordanians have historically seen the monarchy as benevolent and have not subjected it to the same degree of scrutiny as elected officials. However, there is a growing inclination among the country's young to see the legitimacy of the kingdom as conditional, not absolute.

King Abdullah last week struck a deal with Jordan's opposition, in which he promised urgent political and economic reform, which would give the Muslim Brotherhood and a leftist bloc a greater say in state affairs.

"Any type of reform will help Jordan not reach the levels of Egypt," said the secretary general of the Islamic Action Front (Muslim Brotherhood), Zaki bin Irsheid. "But what happened in Tunis and then Egypt has surprised everyone. No one expected that.

"A lot of people are comparing the French revolution to the Tunisian revolution. It changed Europe and this will change the Middle East."

In Algeria and Jordan, youth comprise a large percentage of the population and feel more disadvantaged than the middle classes that stirred the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. More than 70% of Jordanians are aged under 30.

"There has been an awakening of political awareness among the young who have been waiting for solutions that have never come and are not really in the menu now," said one senior western official. "They are saying: 'Why should we carry on like this?'"

"There is a cronyist, lethargic, complacent political oligarchy that is resistant to reform. Government ministers are hamstrung by a system underneath them that doesn't do what they say. The body politic is not responding."

Syria, too, has been moved to respond. The Ba'athist state took the surprise step of unblocking the social media sites Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and YouTube, all of which had been used during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, has offered around \$400m (£250m) in heating fuel subsidies to the country's lower income earners.

The effects of the revolution have also been felt in Iraq, where the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has said he will not stand for a third term. Maliki has ordered three mega-generators to be installed in Baghdad to deal with the city's chronic electricity shortages.

"He is terrified about electricity," said one senior Iraqi official. "He is convinced that with the zeal alive in the region now, it will bring his government down if he doesn't fix it."