

The Arab Spring and the discourse of desperation: shifting from an authoritarian discourse to a democratic one

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This paper examines the themes and structures of the last three speeches by President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia before they were forced out of office. The paper compares and contrasts the substance and structure of the speeches and the strategies used to address the public unrest that swept the streets of Tunisian and Egyptian cities in December 2010, and January and February 2011. The paper puts these themes in their social and cultural contexts, with a focus on the lexicon used, to see if there is any shift in terms of language use. The paper concludes that, as the pressure on them mounted, the presidents used different strategies and language in each speech to address the level of unrest. The paper also concludes that both former presidents adopted the same discourse patterns and strategies in dealing with the unrest. However, there is a difference in their speeches in the use of dialect as a medium of communication with the public.

Background

Before we embark on the analysis of Mubarak's and Ben Ali's last three speeches while in power, it would be useful to give a brief background on the political profile of both former presidents in order to contextualize their last speeches.

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled Tunisia for 23 years and under his presidency the country saw economic development, stability and some prosperity due to the robust economic program he established in his early years of office¹. He came to power on November 7, 1987 after toppling ageing President Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless coup. His initially liberal approach to politics and the economy made him a popular face inside and outside Tunisia (Murphy 1999). His crackdown on the Islamist Ennahdha party won him allies among liberal elites and Western governments, who saw him "as an effective bulwark against Islamist extremism"². According to Murphy (1999), the Islamist opposition "had been subjected to a ruthless campaign of annihilation, along with leftist and trade union

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opposition to the regime” (Murphy 1999: 6). During his rule he gave special attention to education and women’s rights. Politically, he scrapped the title “president for life” and initially restricted the presidency to three terms (he later changed the constitution so that he could serve a fourth term). On the social front, he reformed the welfare system and created a special fund for the poor and needy. His discourse emphasized equality and prosperity for all. While his social reform was popular among Tunisians, on the political front there was little progress. The opposition was stifled and the media was fully controlled and monitored.

Human right organisations accused him of detaining hundreds of prisoners, notably members of Ennahdha³. His rule came to an end when young Tunisians took to the streets in protest at widespread unemployment, corruption and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The protests gained strength, and despite his attempts to subdue the uprising, Ben Ali was left with no option but to flee the country to Saudi Arabia. Within weeks Egyptians, inspired by the Tunisian example, came out on the streets too and after 18 days of confrontation, the Egyptian army took control and Mubarak went into retirement.

Mubarak came into power in 1981 on the assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Cautious and unimaginative, he provided stability coupled with political stagnation. Under the influence of his son Gamal and economic liberals close to Gamal, the economy began to grow rapidly from about 2004 but growth also increased the gap between rich and poor. The protesters that came out on the streets from January 25 accused the regime of corruption, brutality and political repression. Like Ben Ali, despite numerous attempts to subdue the protests, Mubarak failed to convince the protesters that his offers of reform were sincere.

Before they stepped down, both presidents tried hard to win the masses over to their promises of reform, but to no avail. Despite their attempts to use the discourse of unity, patriotism and change, their discourses were regarded as deceptive and lacking credibility. Like communist regimes in 1989, ‘the lexical substitution in political discourse’ (Bourmeyster 1998: 71) was considered too little too late. They promised ‘democracy’, ‘freedom of expression’, ‘prosperity’ and ‘liberty’ in order to appease protesters who had broken the barrier of fear, but their poor records for fulfilling previous promises undermined their chances of success.

As will be clear from the analysis of both Ben Ali and Mubarak’s last speeches in power, there was a major shift in the genre of discourse and in the way this discourse was produced. It no longer embodied the hegemonic tone and lexis that were designed to portray these regimes as powerful, knowledgeable and after all immune from criticism.

2 <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/spotlight/tunisia/2011/01/201111502648916419.html>

Retrieved 28th April 2011

3 <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/spotlight/tunisia/2011/01/201111502648916419.html>

Retrieved 28th April 2011

Instead they adopted a new lexicon, drafted to respond to the voices of the masses in the street. These shifts in the production of discourse reflect a major shift in the political context, a shift from a discourse of despotism to a democratic one. A striking feature in both cases is the gradual concessions reflected in the discourse and lexicon. Under enormous pressure from huge demonstrations, the two regimes found themselves obliged to give in to the protesters' demands, making concessions that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. The following sections will analyse their speeches by looking at the themes, strategies and language employed in response to the uprisings.

Methodology

The analysis centers on the speeches Ben Ali and Mubarak gave after the eruption of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia. The analysis will compare and contrast the strategies used in these speeches, the substance and the language, as well as the structure of these speeches. A textual analysis will be adopted to examine the shift in language and discourse of Ben Ali and Mubarak throughout the duration of the protests.

The strategy of blame and denial.

An examination of the first speech by each president indicates that both used the strategy of blame and denial, rejecting criticism and pointing fingers at others. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak blamed external forces for the unrest, insinuating that some of the protests were driven by foreign agents whose aim was to undermine Egypt and Tunisia.

Extract 1

حتى نفرق بين هذه العصابات والمجموعات من المنحرفين

Until we isolate these gangs and groups of delinquents... (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 2

أحداث وراءها أيد لم تتورع عن توريط أبناننا من التلاميذ والشباب العاطل فيها. أباد تحت على الشعب والخروج إلى الشارع بنشر شعارات اليأس الكاذبة

Incidents [have been] committed at the instigation of parties who have not hesitated to implicate students and unemployed youth in them. These parties are inciting riots in the streets by propagating false slogans of despair. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 3

استغلهم من سعى لإشاعة الفوضى واللجوء إلى العنف والمواجهة وفي القبض على الشرعية
الدستورية والانقضاء عليها

(...) they were quickly exploited by those who sought to spread chaos, resort to violence and confrontation, and violate and attack constitutional legitimacy (Mubarak speech: 1 February, 2011)

As the above extracts demonstrate, both Ben Ali and Mubarak laid the blame on a minority of protesters who were seen to be manipulated by foreign agents working against the country's interests, in the belief that Arabs would rally behind their governments against any foreign intervention. The 'perpetrators' are referred to anonymously and described as violent mobs. (Extracts 1 & 2).

When this strategy failed and the protesters showed no signs of backing down, the presidents tried blaming Islamists for the unrest – an approach designed in part to maintain Western support by magnifying the Islamist threat (Extract 4). While Ben Ali was very explicit in referring to Islamists, Mubarak used vaguer terminology in the knowledge that his audience would read it as a reference to the Muslim Brotherhood and others (Extracts 5 & 6). This strategy failed in the face of overwhelming evidence that the Islamist element in the protest movements was relatively small. Both also tried to appeal to the domestic 'law and order' lobby, emphasizing the danger of chaos.

Extract 4

مناوئون مأجورون ضمانتهم على كف أطراف التطرف والإرهاب التي تسيرها من الخارج أطراف
لا تكن الخير لبلد حريص على العمل والمثابرة

Hostile elements in the pay of foreigners, who have sold their souls to extremism and terrorism, manipulated from outside the country by parties who do not wish well to a country determined to persevere and work. (Ben Ali's speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 5

قوى سياسية سعت الى التصعيد وصب الزيت على النار استهدفت امن الوطن واستقراره بأعمال
إثارة وتحريض وسلب ونهب وإشعال للحرائق وقطع للطرق واعتداء على مرافق الدولة و
الممتلكات العامة

(Those protests were transformed from a noble and civilised phenomenon of practising freedom of expression to unfortunate clashes, mobilised and controlled) by political forces that wanted to pour oil on the fire. They targeted the nation's security and stability through acts of provocation and incitement, theft and looting, arson, blocking roads and attacking state facilities and public property.(Mubarak speech: 1 February, 2011)

Extract 6

ثم تابعت محاولات البعض لاعتلاء موجة هذه التظاهرات والمتاجرة بشعاراته

I have followed attempts by some to ride the wave of these demonstrations and exploit the slogans.

(Mubarak speech: 29 January, 2011)

Extracts 4, 5 and 6 contain references to a minority of protesters said to be behind the unrest. This minority is described as a dangerous mob that threatens national unity and security. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak criticised those behind the protests, but failed to refer to the reasons behind these uprisings. Both regimes denied at the beginning of the unrest the economic grievances that had brought millions to the street. Their narrative was that great economic and political reform was already under way, and that the protesters had other motives and hidden agendas (Extract 6). The following extract shows Ben Ali's emphasis on the achievements of his government in employment and education, and the regime's efforts to address the issue of unemployment.

Extract 7

والجميع يعلم كم نبذل من جهود للتشغيل، التشغيل الذي جعلنا منه دوماً أوكد أولوياتنا. والجميع يعلم كم هي كبيرة عنايتنا بحاملي الشهادات العليا الذين كما قلت نعتز بأعدادهم المتكاثرة ونعمل على رفع التحدي الذي تطرحه هذه الأعداد لأن خياراتنا التربوية من ثوابت مشروعنا الحضاري

Everyone knows how hard we have tried on employment, which we have always made our priority. Everyone knows how much attention we have paid to graduates. As I said, we are proud of their increasing numbers and we are working to meet the challenge that these numbers pose, because our educational choices are an intrinsic part of our project for civilization. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

However, as the protesters calling for the downfall of the regimes grew both in number and confidence, the pressure mounted, leading to more concessions. This was reflected in the type of discourse and the language employed by both former presidents. The demonstrators are no longer referred to as troublemakers mobilised by external forces,

but as legitimate protesters who have legitimate rights and concerns. This shift in the political position led to a shift in the political discourse.

Extract 8

وأنا فهمتكم، فهمت الجميع: البطال، والمحتاج والسياسي والي طالب مزيد من الحريات، فهمتكم، فهمتكم الكل.

I understand you all: the jobless, the needy, the political and all those who are calling for more freedom. I understand you, I understand you all. (Ben Ali's speech: 13 January, 2011)

Despite their attempts to appease the population, there was still no sign that protests would subside. Both the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes reviewed their strategies. They shifted from a strategy of defiance and blame to a strategy of acknowledging reality. Both presidents recognized that the status quo was unsustainable and that change was inevitable (Extract 9). The blame this time falls on their ministers, who were accused of incompetence and corruption. To shift the focus from their own incompetence and corruption, both former presidents dismissed their cabinets and promised to form new ones, in the hope that this would calm down the protesters. This move did nothing but fuel the protests further.

Extract 9

نكلمكم لأن الوضع يفرض تغيير عميق.. تغيير عميق وشامل

I am addressing you because the situation dictates deep change, deep and comprehensive change. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

In Extract 9, Ben Ali did not refer to 'islah' (reform), but rather to 'taghyir' (change). His change of rhetoric is a clear indication of his acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation and the enormous challenge that the widespread protests posed for his regime and government. There is here a stark contrast between the discourse of his first and last speech. In the first speech he was very cautious and defiant, but in his last speech he appeared more flexible in his approach, adopting democratic terms such as 'change', 'democracy', 'liberty' and 'freedom'.

Both Ben Ali and Mubarak admitted that economic reforms were needed in order to eradicate the unemployment and poverty ingrained in society. While stressing that good

progress had been made economically, they admitted that more work and effort were needed to improve the economy.

Extract 10

ونحب نأكد أن العديد من الأمور لم تجر كما حبيتها تكون، وخصوصاً في مجالي الديمقراطية والحريات، وغلطوني أحياناً بحجب الحقائق وسيحاسبون.

I would like to affirm that many things didn't take place the way I would have wished, especially in the areas of democracy and freedoms. They misled me sometimes by hiding the facts, and they will be held accountable for that. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 11

ولذا أجدد لكم، وبكل وضوح، راني باش نعمل على دعم الديمقراطية وتفعيل التعددية. نعم على دعم الديمقراطية وتفعيل التعددية.

So I clearly repeat that I will work to promote democracy and pluralism; yes, to promote democracy and pluralism. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 12

أنا مقتنع تمام الاقتناع بصدق نواياكم وتحرككم وأن مطالبكم هي عادلة ومشروعة، والأخطاء موجودة في أي نظام ودولة، ولكن المهم الاعتراف بها ومحاسبة مرتكبيها، وأنا كرئيس جمهورية لا أجد حرجاً في الاستماع الى شباب بلادي

I am fully convinced that your intentions and your actions are honest, and that your demands are just and legitimate. Mistakes happen in any system or state but what is important is to recognize them and hold those responsible to account. As the president of the republic, I am not embarrassed to listen to the young people of my country. (Mubarak speech: 11 February, 2011)

In the case of Ben Ali, there is a clear reference in his last speech that he has been misled about the situation in his country, and he promised to bring those responsible for this to justice (Extract 10). His repetition of the word 'sayuhasabun' (they will be held accountable) reflects his discontent with his inner circle. However, the reader is left with little information as to who will be held accountable and who is going to hold them accountable. Ben Ali has tried here to align himself with the public against his own advisers and cabinet. But, the discontent in the streets of Tunis was directed at Ben Ali first and foremost. This was evident in the slogans chanted, such as 'dégage' (leave). Although Ben Ali's speeches focused on the economic situation and the way to improve

the lives of the Tunisian people, they also mentioned political and social reforms. What is interesting here is the use of a new discourse; the discourse of democracy and social reform. In Ben Ali's last speech he promised complete freedom of speech and access to the Internet; a complete change in his discourse, from a discourse of censorship to a discourse of freedom and liberty (Extracts 10 & 11).

What is striking about Ben Ali's speeches, especially his last speech, is the prevalence of repetition. One could not help noticing repeated words and phrases throughout his speeches. His repetition of the lexical item 'ukallimukum' (I speak to you) is very revealing. It conveys a sense of friendliness and informality. He has chosen this lexical item over 'ukhatibukum' (I address you) to bridge the formal gap between him and the rest of the population. His use of repetition is designed to convince the Tunisian people of his message (Rieschild 2006: 21; Johnstone (1991). Al-Khafaji (2005: 16) pointed out that excessive repetition is designed to appeal to the reader and 'attract their attention'. However, there is some confusion between the use of the first person plural pronoun and the use of the first person singular pronoun in Ben Ali's last speech. The use of the 'we' form suggests a formal setting where those in authority receive respect. By using the 'royal we', he has deliberately asserted his authority as a president who can still be respected. However, in other parts of the speech he uses the first person singular pronoun, 'ana' (I), to appear less formal and approachable. This suggests some confusion in his state of mind.

Defending the self

Both Ben Ali and Mubarak also found time to defend their individual records and their service to their respective countries, emphasizing their patriotism and sacrifice in an attempt to persuade their audience to let them stay in power in dignity, as in the following extracts:

Extract 13

حزني وألمي كبيران لأنني مضيت أكثر من 50 سنة من عمري في خدمة تونس في مختلف المواقع:
من الجيش الوطني إلى المسؤوليات المختلفة و 23 سنة على رأس الدولة، كل يوم من حياتي كان
وما زال لخدمة البلاد

I am deeply saddened because I have spent more than 50 years of my life in the service of Tunisia in various positions: from the national army, to various responsibilities and 23 years as head of state. Every day of my life was and will always be devoted to the service of my country. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 14

اننى لم أكن يوما طالب سلطة أو جاه ويعلم الشعب الظروف العصيبة التي تحملت فيها المسؤولية وما قدمته للوطن حربا وسلاما كما أنني رجل من أبناء قواتنا المسلحة وليس من طبعي خيانة الأمانة أو التخلي عن الواجب والمسؤولية

I have never wanted power or prestige, and the people know the difficult circumstances in which I shouldered the responsibility and what I have given to the country in war and in peace. I am also a man of the armed forces, and it is not in my nature to betray a trust or abandon duty or responsibility. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

Extract 15

إن حسنى مبارك الذي يتحدث إليكم اليوم يعتز بما قضاه من سنين طويلة في خدمة مصر وشعبها إن هذا الوطن العزيز هو وطني مثلما هو وطن كل مصري ومصرية فيه عشت و حاربت من اجله ودافعت عن أرضه وسيادته

Hosni Mubarak who speaks to you today is proud of the long years he spent in the service of Egypt and its people. This dear nation is my country, as it is the country of all Egyptians, here I have lived and fought for its sake and defended its territory and its sovereignty. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

Extract 16

لقد شهدت حروب هذا البلد، وعشت أيام الانتكاس وأيام النصر والتحرير، وكانت أسعد أيام حياتي عندما رفعت علم مصر فوق سيناء

I witnessed this country's wars. I lived through days of defeat, days of victory and liberation, and the happiest day of my life was when the flag of Egypt was raised over Sinai. (Mubarak speech: 11 February, 2011)

By repeating their achievements and records in government, they tried to remind the young generation behind the uprising of the services they had performed for their countries, again in the hope of winning sympathy and persuading people to call off their protests.

Another strategy both presidents adopted was to make promises that they would not stand for re-election (Extracts 17 & 18).

Extract 17

ونحب نكرر هنا، وخلافا لما أدعاه البعض، أني تعهدت يوم السابع من نوفمبر بأن لا رئاسة مدى الحياة، لا رئاسة مدى الحياة، ولذلك فإني أجدد الشكر لكل من ناشدني للترشح لسنة 2014 ، ولكني أرفض المساس بشرط السن للترشح لرئاسة الجمهورية

I would like to reiterate here, contrary to what some claim, that I pledged on November 7, 1987 that there would be no lifetime presidency, no lifetime presidency. So I again thank those who called on me to stand in 2014 but I refuse to touch the age condition for candidates for the presidency of the republic. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 18

وأقول بكل صدق وبصرف النظر عن الظرف الراهن انى لم أكن انتوى الترشح لفترة رئاسية جديدة وقد قضيت ما يكفى من العمر في خدمة مصر وشعبها

I will say with all honesty -- and regardless of this particular situation -- that I did not intend to seek a new term as president, because I have spent enough of my life in serving Egypt and its people. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

In both cases this was interpreted as an appeal to the public to let them complete their tenure, but this, again, fell on deaf ears, and the demonstrations continued.

Both Ben Ali and Mubarak addressed their discourse to two audiences; the domestic audience and the external audience. The focus on economic, social and political reforms was designed to persuade both audiences that they were listening and were willing to act on the demands of the protesters. For the external audience - mainly Western

governments - the two regimes tried to show that they were making an effort to address domestic issues. But, what is interesting is the focus in an explicit manner on the extremist groups who, according to both regimes, were behind the unrest. This could be considered as a scare tactic to reinforce Western support for both regimes.

Unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak in his last speeches did however make an explicit criticism of Western interference in his country's affairs. This may have been a strategy to shift the focus from his greater domestic problems, or may have reflected genuine frustration with the continuing calls for his resignation by Western governments.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) vs Dialect

At the linguistic level, the main feature of the discourse was Ben Ali's use of colloquial Tunisian rather than Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in parts of his last speech as president, in contrast to Mubarak's invariable use of MSA throughout. By switching to dialect, Ben Ali may have been trying to appeal to a wider section of the Tunisian society, especially those less educated people who could not easily follow his speech in MSA. He may also have wanted to remind his own people that he is a Tunisian and try to bridge the social gap between himself and the wider Tunisian public. The use of dialect could also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the middle class people taking part in the protests. The following are examples of his switch from MSA to Tunisian dialect.

Extract 19

نكلمكم بلغة كل التونسيين والتونسيات

I speak to you in the language of all Tunisians. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 20

العنف ما هوش متاعنا ولا هو من سلوكننا

Violence has never been part of our custom, or part of our behavior. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 21

أولادنا اليوم في الدار، وموش في المدرسة، وهذا حرام وعيب لأن أصبحنا خائفين عليهم من
عنف مجموعات سطو ونهب واعتداء على الأشخاص

Our children are at home today, not at school. This is immoral and unacceptable, because we are afraid for their safety, from the violence perpetrated by groups of bandits from looting and attacks against persons. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 22

نؤكد يزي من اللجوء للكرطوش الحي، الكرطوش موش مقبول، ما عندوش مبرر إلا لا قدر الله حد
يحاول يفك سلاحك ويهجم عليك بالنار

I say stop using live ammunition. Live ammunition is not acceptable, and not justifiable unless, God forbid, anyone tries to snatch your weapon and opens fire at you (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Although Ben Ali is used to delivering his speeches to the nation in MSA, his switch to dialect could be said to be dictated by the social and cultural change exemplified in the widespread unrest (Hudson 1980: 57). The use of Tunisian dialect conveys Ben Ali's 'attitude towards his audience' (Paradis 1978: 2). He tries to convey sympathy with his people and his acknowledgement of the special circumstances. According to Scotten and Ury (1977), speakers may switch from one language to another for a variety of reasons, sometimes to redefine the interaction as appropriate to a different social arena. In the case of Ben Ali, the social arena includes uneducated and illiterate people who may not be well-versed in MSA.

As for Mubarak, he consistently used MSA throughout his speeches. By doing so, he focused on those educated middle-class people said to be behind the revolution. Another interpretation could be related to his desire to maintain the prestige of leadership with a good command of prestigious language. It should be said here that throughout his speeches Mubarak performed that role well, apart from a few grammatical mistakes in his last speech. The use of gesture is another difference between the two former presidents. While Ben Ali used hand gestures to illustrate his speech, Mubarak delivered his speech without any such gestures. He appeared calm and composed while delivering his

speeches and his intonation reflected a sense of defiance, unlike Ben Ali, whose speech reflected a state of nervousness.

However, in terms of the structure and strategy, both former presidents followed the following pattern in the sequence of speeches:

Blame and denial

Acknowledging reality

Emphasis on individual achievements

Pledge of drastic reform and change

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a detailed analysis of the type of discourse used by the former presidents of Egypt and Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali, in their last weeks in power. The paper compares and contrasts the main themes and strategies they used in addressing the uprisings that swept their countries. The analysis shows that they followed similar strategies, passing through a series of stages as earlier strategies failed. The language they used shaped and was shaped by those strategies. The one contrast is in the realm of register: while all Mubarak's speeches were delivered in MSA, Ben Ali in his final speech switched between MSA and Tunisian dialect. Another aspect that was quite prevalent in Ben Ali's speeches is repetition of the same phrases and words, while Mubarak seems to repeat themes rather than phrases or single words.

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