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THE BURNING MAN OF TUNISIA

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi left his home in the countryside and walked twenty minutes into the town of Sidi Bouzid. Just as he did every day, Mohamed passed by groups of unemployed young men on the roadside, idling in plastic chairs and quietly smoking. When he reached the market, he stopped to set out his produce stand.

Mohamed was well liked in town. Sometimes he gave away free food to poor families. They called him Basboosa, which meant “sweet cake.”^a Yet Basboosa could scarcely afford his generosity, which made him more popular than it did rich.

Basboosa did not have an easy life. His father had died of a heart attack when his son was three. His mother toiled in the fields as a day laborer. As one of seven siblings, Basboosa started working odd jobs at the age of ten to support his family. Eventually he had to drop out of high school to work full-time.

Although he tried to join the army, and also applied to a number of other, more-promising jobs, Basboosa was rejected each time. At twenty-six, he barely managed to make ends meet by selling fruits and vegetables on the street. Basboosa’s produce cart grossed the equivalent of five dollars a day, making him the breadwinner of the nine souls in his home. With these meager earnings, he dreamed of saving enough to buy a truck for his business.

On top of all this, Basboosa faced constant harassment from local authorities. There was no law that required Basboosa to have a license to sell his produce on the street, but that didn’t stop the local police. They would routinely ask Basboosa for his license, just as a pretext to impose a “fine.” Basboosa knew what this was: a shakedown. And sometimes the sum the police demanded amounted to a full day’s earnings. Sometimes, too, the police simply confiscated all of his wares on a whim. This was infuriating and degrading, of course, but what could Basboosa do? This, alas, was the normal price of doing business in Sidi Bouzid.

Still, on this particular Friday, Basboosa had reached the end of his rope. The global economic crisis had sent food prices soaring, and he had just been forced to take out a \$200 loan just to buy his produce. In every cell of his body, Basboosa burned with resentment.

At 10:30 a.m. that morning, a municipal inspector named Faïda Hamdy approached Basboosa's cart to shake him down for a "fine." The amount she demanded was the equivalent of seven dollars, but to Basboosa it was pure blood money. And he refused to pay. This was a stunning act of defiance. The operative rule in town was that nobody ever said "no" to Hamdy; her father was a local police officer. But Basboosa no longer cared. He had no money—and he had stomached enough. When he refused to pay, a shocked Inspector Hamdy insulted Basboosa's dead father. Then she slapped him across the face, spat on him, and overturned his cart. Two of her aides proceeded to seize his electronic scale and beat him to the ground.

Basboosa was stunned and humiliated, but he was far from defeated. Immediately he marched to the governor's office to denounce the abuse. When officials there refused to even hear his complaint, Basboosa threatened to set himself on fire, right then and there. And he wasn't bluffing. A short time later, he returned to that spot with paint thinner to use as an accelerant. One way or another, he would have his say. Then, true to his word, right there in front of government headquarters, Basboosa doused his body with the thinner and set himself alight.

Help did not come quickly. By the time an ambulance could take Basboosa to the local medical clinic, the flames had burnt 90 percent of his body, and the heat had incinerated his lips and charred his clothes right into his body. Incapable of treating him, the clinic transferred the young man to the city of Sfax, eighty-four miles to the east.

Basboosa set more than himself on fire. Even though protesting was banned in Tunisia, angry demonstrations spread within hours through the town of Sidi Bouzid. Police tried to crush the protesters with violence, but their tactics backfired. By the following day, full-blown riots had broken out. While there were no conventional media to cover the unrest, the townspeople captured the violence with cameras and cellphones and uploaded images of police brutality onto Facebook and YouTube. That, in turn, gave birth to an Internet campaign to support Basboosa and the protesters in Sidi Bouzid. The "fire" was spreading.

Soon the country's lawyers' union went on strike and sent three hundred members to rally at the government palace in Tunis. In an attempt to defuse the crisis, the government had the severely burnt Basboosa transferred to a hospital in the capital, and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali personally went to visit

him at the trauma center. The president even promised the Bouazizi family that he'd be sent to France for treatment, and the government also offered a \$15 million economic-aid package to pacify Sidi Bouzid. None of that worked; the civil unrest continued to escalate.

Basboosa's example soon inspired others. Lahseen Naji, a protestor in his twenties, railing against "hunger and joblessness," climbed up an electricity pylon and electrocuted himself. Then Ramzi Al-Abboudi, a desperate man overwhelmed by micro-credit debt, publicly committed suicide. As the protests swelled, the international hacker group "Anonymous" shut down over a dozen websites of the Tunisian government. This helped shine the global spotlight on Tunisia and its corrupt regime.

But it didn't come fast enough for Basboosa: he died from his wounds the following day. To millions of Tunisians, though, he died a hero, and in a final tribute, more than five thousand people attended his funeral procession.

Still, the final triumph belonged to the humble produce vendor. The protests against President Ben Ali and his repressive regime did not subside; they grew—with the popular anger this time serving as the accelerant. As the demonstrations spread across the country, their focus shifted from the injustice in Sidi Bouzid to the gaping economic disparities in Tunisia. The unbearable unemployment rate contrasted sharply with the opulent lifestyle of the elite. An especially intense hatred centered around the family of Tunisia's first lady, Leila Trabelsi, whom a lecturer at the University of Exeter had once called an "Imelda Marcos incarnate. But instead of shoes, Madame Leila collects villas, real estate and bank accounts."¹

Protestors then directed their rage at the tight restrictions on media and political freedoms, which President Ben Ali had smothered during his twenty-three years in power. The resentments ran deep. His security forces had persecuted the socialists, on the left; on the right, they had driven Islamist leaders into exile. Ben Ali's government also had forbidden the wearing of headscarves in public institutions. He called the hijab a "sectarian dress," perhaps pejoratively referring to the Qur'an's mandate (33:59) that women draw a garment over their heads so as to avoid harassment.

The end was not pretty. With a mass of people now shouting for him to step down, President Ben Ali and his imperious wife Leila were forced to flee Tunisia on January 14, 2011. France denied them asylum while they were in midair. Ultimately, the Ben Ali family was granted exile in Saudi Arabia, one of only four states in the world that does not even claim to be a democracy. Within only weeks of Ben Ali's ouster, his people gained several freedoms; the new government in Tunisia relaxed dress codes and legalized three banned political parties.

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The story of Basboosa does not end there. Scarcely a day after the overthrow of Ben Ali, a man in Algeria set himself on fire when a local mayor refused to meet to discuss his unemployment. Then a second Algerian self-immolated . . . and a third. Arab men set themselves on fire in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Syria, Morocco, and Iraq.

Following the flames, protests broke out in each of these countries. In addition, a wave of civil unrest rolled across Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Oman, Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, Sudan, Western Sahara, Iran, and Pakistan. Echoing the “Twitter Revolution” of the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests, the young organizers of the “Arab Spring” used social media to declare “days of rage.” Like Basboosa’s Tunisia, many of these other states were suffering from massive unemployment, government corruption, and long-entrenched dictatorships.

By early February 2011, the fire had spread to Egypt. The regime in Cairo attempted to counter immense demonstrations by disabling access to the Internet—and also by unleashing brutal violence on the protestors. In only eighteen days, however, President Hosni Mubarak had arrived at the point where he had no choice but to end his thirty years in power. And within the year, the country at the heart of the Arab world had its first free elections in three generations. In fact, the ensuing parliamentary and presidential races were the most genuinely reflective polls of the popular will in the civilization’s five-thousand-year history.^b

Next, armed conflict erupted in Libya, which the notorious Col. Muammar Gaddafi had ruled for forty-one years. Eight months and thirty thousand casualties into the Libyan Civil War, rebel soldiers fished a terrified Gaddafi out of a drainage pipe and lynched him in a frenzy of gunshots, beatings, and stabbing. A thoroughly dead dictator then went on display in an industrial freezer. Libyans flocked from hundreds of miles away to see the corpse with their own eyes.

The underlying currents driving the Arab Spring then reached Syria and the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian people rose up, Assad responded with ruthless killings, and the situation spiraled into civil war. When the Arab Spring arrived in Yemen, President Saleh negotiated his resignation in exchange for immunity from prosecution—after suffering severe injuries from a bomb attack on his compound. To escape the rising tide, the leaders of Sudan and Iraq announced their decisions not to seek re-election, and the kings of Jordan and Morocco implemented legal reforms in the hope holding on to power.

In one of the world’s most authoritarian regions, the increasing force of the public voice is eroding the power of autocrats. The appearance of free elec-

tions in several countries represents one step toward democracy, although the outcomes have been decidedly less liberal and secular than many optimistic Western pundits had expected. And it remains to be seen whether countries like Egypt will develop the other elements of democracy (protecting minority rights, balancing powers, respecting term limits, and so forth). But whatever the future holds, one thing is clear: public opinion will impact the political destiny of the Middle East more than ever before. Dictating just isn't what it used to be.

And where did all this start? Many observers traced the roots of the Arab Spring right back to Mohamed Bouazizi. The news program *60 Minutes* was one of many that attributed the entire transformation of the Middle East to, in their words, "the desperate act of one single man . . . a poor fruit vendor who decided that he just wasn't going to take it anymore."

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The story of Basboosa illustrates one of the key tenets of this book: that there are certain hot-button realms inside the human psyche that lie just below the surface, realms which even government leaders often fail to perceive. And we ignore them at our own peril. Inspector Hamdy tripped right over one of these hidden triggers, and in doing so, she lit the match that set an entire region ablaze.

In the pages ahead, we are going to dig deep into the personality traits that divide us into left and right, helping lock and load these hidden triggers. We will discover how these universal character traits make some people prone to conform, and others prone to rebel. Likewise, we will learn why some people have conservative dispositions, while others are liberal. As the underlying science here becomes clear, we will understand what was ticking inside Basboosa on that fateful day that drove him to commit the ultimate protest. What was it, specifically? An unbearable sense of indignation.

Yes, it was precisely Basboosa's moral *rejection of inequality* that activated one of these universal hot buttons residing within him, and within so many of his compatriots. And this is why his story resonated with a critical mass of people in the Middle East, for whom Basboosa symbolized the humble, well-meaning common man systematically abused by government fiat and corruption.

Now, the story of Basboosa might seem rather remote to many American readers. But the same hidden trigger at play in the Middle East underlies the concurrent transformation of the political landscape in the United States. As the Arab Spring was unfolding, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement emerged on the far left of the US spectrum. The demonstrators in New York shouting, "We are the 99 percent!" were railing not against Middle Eastern dictators, but rather

against bankers and large corporations. And yet the same issue that ignited the Arab Spring had inspired and galvanized their movement: a moral rejection of economic and social *inequality*.

Despite the fact that the Occupiers claimed to represent 99 percent of the population, the American public was evenly split in favor of (35 percent) and against (36 percent) their cause. This division didn't simply pit the haves against the have-nots; rather, it polarized America based on people's *attitudes* toward inequality. And these attitudes stemmed from the *personality differences* at the core of partisanship: Democrats were almost five times more likely than Republicans to support the Occupy Movement.²

At the same time, the Tea Party emerged on the far right of the American political spectrum. This movement's central aims included reducing taxes and government spending (especially on social programs, like Obamacare). Its underlying ideology opposed expensive government interventions designed to force an equality of outcomes. Tea Partiers were instead committed to incentives based on market forces, regardless of the social and economic inequalities that result from free competition. Compared with the Occupiers, adherents of the Tea Party had a much higher *tolerance of inequality*.

Still, as a group, the Tea Partiers' ideology didn't come primarily from the self-interest of big fish at the top of the food chain; in terms of their income bracket, employment status, educational background, race, gender, and age, Tea Partiers were quite similar to the general population. Rather, their tolerance of inequality reflected a *personality disposition* that lies at the heart of political partisanship. That's why Republicans were over six times more likely than Democrats to support the Tea Party.³

Attitudes toward inequality are only one group of hot-button traits that separate people on the left from people on the right. In the coming chapters, we will also examine the two other clusters of measurable personality traits that give rise to political orientations across space and time. One emerges from opposing attitudes toward tribalism, and the other concerns differing perceptions of human nature.

Step by step, we will unearth the evolutionary roots of these three personality clusters, to learn why a left-right political divide runs through every country on earth. And the excavation begins in the next chapter. In this age of public opinion, it is high time we understand at a much deeper level why we love and hate in such different ways.