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WikiLeaks: An Overview, Part II

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Collage of Julian Assange, by [Artensoft](#)

As popular revolutions roil the Arab world, political analysts have scrambled to keep up. In a little over two months, the long-standing dictators of Tunisia and Egypt have been toppled, and Muammar Qaddafi, the man who ruled Libya for over 40 years, is now fighting for his very survival.

The masses have finally taken to the street, and there is hope

that freedom might yet come to a region notorious for its "democracy deficit."

But how, after so many years of political stagnation, did this dramatic turn of events come about?

Julian Assange knows the answer. The founder of WikiLeaks, a pro-transparency activist group based in Sweden, claimed in mid-February that he was the one who sparked the unrest in Tunisia, which has rippled throughout the region. After all, it was WikiLeaks that went public on December 7 with U.S. diplomatic cables detailing the rampant corruption of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (e.g., his family is called "a quasi-mafia").

Of course, Assange is no stranger to self-promotion. His group, for example, once listed Noam Chomsky as an administrator of its Facebook page—a claim rejected by the anarchist icon. But this time around, a few Western commentators agree that WikiLeaks did contribute to the Arab revolutions. This should be welcome news to Assange, whose other recent cable leak actually sabotaged the democratic movement in Zimbabwe.

Unfortunately, though, the pundits are wrong.

Before Egypt and Libya, there was the Jasmine Revolution of Tunisia. On December 17, young demonstrators protesting unemployment, poverty, and political corruption picked up support from the military and, in just four weeks, forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali into exile. Then, with the lightning speed, similar uprisings spread to other Arab countries, claiming the modern-day pharaoh Hosni Mubarak.

[Speaking to SBS Dateline](#) about the Arab revolutions, Assange boasted that "material that we published through a Lebanese newspaper, *Al Akhbar*, was significantly influential to what happened in Tunisia."

Now, to be fair, the WikiLeaks cable release did precede the Tunisian protests by a little over a week. And as events unfolded, Qaddafi—soon to face demonstrations against his own regime in neighboring Libya—blamed the pro-transparency group for stirring things up. This line was then repeated (with a few caveats) in *Foreign Policy*, where Elizabeth Dickinson argued that "[WikiLeaks pushed people over the brink](#)."

But as flattering as this interpretation is to WikiLeaks, Tunisian experts dismiss the notion that Assange sparked the mid-December revolt. "People have known about the corruption for two decades, and certainly knew much more than was in WikiLeaks," says [Taoufiq Ben-Amor](#), an Arabic Studies lecturer at

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Columbia University. "What triggered this really is a young man who set himself ablaze, and 23 years of oppression and corruption."

The young man's name was Mohamed Bouazizi. A fruit vendor from the poverty-stricken city of Sidi Bouzid, Bouazizi had his produce and electronic scale confiscated by municipal inspectors, one of whom—a woman—slapping him in the face. To protest this humiliation, Bouazizi immolated himself that very day, December 17. This fatal gesture quickly galvanized the locals, and protests spread from Sidi Bouzid to other cities.

The heavy-handed response by the police, which was caught on film, also helped inflame the situation, says [Christopher Alexander](#), a Tunisian expert at Davidson College, in North Carolina. "Al Jazeera and the social media—Twitter and Facebook—carried those images around the country, tapped into deep and broad grievances against the government, and turned what began as a localized protest into a national movement," he says.

Still, *The Guardian*—one of the five newspapers that brokered a leak-sharing deal with Assange—claims an "extraordinary WikiLeaks effect" on the revolution. As proof, the British paper [cites the observations of an unidentified activist](#), who writes the following on an opposition website: "And then, WikiLeaks reveals what everyone was whispering. And then, a young man immolates himself. And then, 20 Tunisians are killed in one day."

In other words, WikiLeaks made the rumors real, unavoidable, undeniable.

However, *The Guardian* offers no evidence that Bouazizi, the fruit vendor who set himself on fire, ever heard of WikiLeaks. Nor is it clear how many demonstrators read the leaked cables, published just days before the protests began. Reports did go up on opposition websites, says [Malika Zeghal](#), a Tunisian-born Islam scholar at Harvard University. But those sites, like that of the Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar*, could only be accessed by proxy servers due to government censorship.

It, therefore, seems unlikely that many of the demonstrators would have been aware of the WikiLeaks "scoops."

At best, the disparaging comments made by American diplomats towards President Ben Ali might have convinced an educated, politically engaged class of Tunisians that the U.S. would not rescue the regime should it face a revolt. "I think most Tunisians saw the U.S. as a strong supporter of Ben Ali," says Alexander. "These revelations suggested there might be limits to how far the U.S. would go to protect him."

This is an interesting thesis (and an ironic one, given that the WikiLeaks diplomatic disclosures are generally perceived, rightly or wrongly, as showing American collusion with—not rejection of—Third World autocracies). But Alexander admits that he has not heard any Tunisian back it up.

For her part, Zeghal is adamant: "The Tunisian revolution would have happened without WikiLeaks."

Still, if not Tunisia, Julian Assange has at least influenced politics in another African country: Zimbabwe. On December 8, *The Guardian* published another scandalous diplomatic cable obtained by WikiLeaks. This one revealed that Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Zimbabwean democratic opposition, secretly endorsed sanctions against his own nation in order to force strongman Robert Mugabe to share political power.

Needless to say, the Mugabe-led government went after Tsvangirai, who had already been arrested many times before. On December 26, the attorney general launched an inquiry of the prime minister, the charge: treason. Writing in *The Atlantic*, [Christopher Albon](#) has said that it is unlikely that Tsvangirai will be convicted, but the leaked cable is a definite setback for democratic forces in the country.

Indeed, the commission of inquiry into Tsvangirai's actions is expected to conclude its work in time for the hastily called, upcoming elections. That report will prove politically damaging to the prime minister. But Tsvangirai might also find himself arrested, yet again, and as Albon puts it in a follow-up conversation with the Carnegie Council, "It is hard to campaign from jail."

Predictably, Assange is not bragging about his role in Zimbabwe as he is with Tunisia. And coming to the defense of WikiLeaks, progressive *Salon* columnist Glenn Greenwald [has argued](#) that *The Guardian* was, in fact, to blame for the damning Tsvangirai story. "It wasn't WikiLeaks which chose that cable to be placed into the public domain, nor was it WikiLeaks which first published it," Greenwald notes.

Both points are correct. However, they do not seem very relevant to the question of moral culpability. WikiLeaks did refuse to return to the U.S. State Department the classified diplomatic cables obtained from a disgruntled soldier. Likewise, the pro-transparency group did pass the treasure trove of documents to *The Guardian* to do as it sees fit. Finally, WikiLeaks published the cable a mere hour after the British newspaper did.

Perhaps then, the most generous thing one can say about Julian Assange is that his leaks have not gotten any democrats in the Third World executed.

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