

In the People's Hands

When America's founding fathers convened in 1787 to form the new nation's constitution, two factions emerged among them: the Federalists, who favored a stronger central government, and the Democratic-Republicans, who favored a stronger state government which gave the people more power. The finished Constitution, then, can be viewed as a series of compromises between the two. Still, controversies remained. As the Constitutional Convention was coming to a close, Benjamin Franklin, a Federalist, gave a speech in which he declared that "Much of the Strength and Efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing Happiness to the People depends on Opinion, on the general Opinion of the Goodness of that Government as well as of the Wisdom and Integrity of its Governors." The nature of government necessitates the truth of this quotation, which rings clear through the modern-day; civilians in any unjust society outnumber government officials, and thus, when civilians challenge the government, the fate of the government lies in the people's hands.

In the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution (2010-2011) the self-immolation of a man in protest against the repressive government snowballed into a nationwide movement that would ultimately force the dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to resign. At first, the protests were a reaction to high unemployment, though with the people bound against the government, they quickly challenged Ben Ali's dictatorship. Though Ben Ali attempted to ease the protesters, appearing on television and promising reform, it was too late; the people's anger effectively erased the power that he and his regime had. Thus, the people of Tunisia validated Franklin's quotation; Ben Ali, who had been ruling since 1987, was ousted just twenty-eight days after the protests began, not through a bloody rebellion or military coup, but through the sheer numbers and discontent of the people.

That same year, Tunisia had its first free election since Ben Ali seized power and is now considered a model for democratization.

Furthermore, distrusted governments know and fear the might of the people. In August of 2020, an excess of ammonium nitrate caused an explosion in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. In the aftermath of the blast, government officials, including many members of parliament and the entire cabinet, resigned from their positions fearing a popular uprising. As documented by Al Jazeera, one demonstrator stated the goal of the protestors was to “destroy and kill” the government; later, the minister of the interior admitted publicly that her resignation was due to “the people’s demand for change” (Regencia et al.). The governors knew that they had already lost their legitimacy; if they did not resign, the people would force them out.

Despite these examples, it may be argued that with new developments in censorship technology, a government can more easily prevent its citizens from gaining the upper hand over its rulers. Such occurred in China in 2021, when an audio chat app called Clubhouse gained popularity in the country, with users from multiple ethnic groups (including Chinese-diaspora) discussing topics such as Tiananmen Square and COVID-19. On February 8, 2021, users reported that they could no longer access the app, and the word “Clubhouse” was banned on Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. Chinese who had been listening to the opinions and experiences of others lost their chance in an instant; one of hundreds of China’s widespread censorship efforts to prevent any threats to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This example of government repression seems to refute Franklin’s words; a government in the twenty-first century can increasingly control its population’s opinions (and its happiness thereby) through the censorship and control of modern technology. But other examples suggest the contrary. Despite Clubhouse’s ban, many Chinese citizens continued using the app by way of a VPN, or virtual

private network; despite Tunisia's extensive internet censorship prior to the Jasmine Revolution, the protests were largely ignited and organized through social media, mainly Facebook. Though a government may restrict its citizens' internet access, the truly determined, outspoken reformers will find a way around it.

Two hundred and thirty-three years have passed since the closing of the Constitutional Convention, and numerous countries have democratized since, from France in the 1790s to Tunisia in the 2010s. Throughout all of these revolutions, violent or otherwise, Franklin's words endure. Governments are rebuilt, reelected, rebelled against, all by the people who outnumber them. The success of these reforms inspires and encourages those living under unjust governments to do the same in their own countries, perpetuating the cycle, creating a freer world for everyone.

Works Cited

- Azhari, Timour. "Beirut Blast: Tracing the Explosives That Tore the Capital Apart." *Al Jazeera*, 5 Aug. 2020,
www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/5/beirut-blast-tracing-the-explosives-that-tore-the-capital-apart. Accessed 19 Feb. 2022.
- "Benjamin Franklin: Closing Speech to the Constitutional Convention (1787)." *American Government*, ABC-CLIO, 2022,
americangovernment.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/210392.
- China's Information Isolation, New Censorship Rules, Transnational Repression (February 2021)*. Freedom House, Feb. 2021. *Freedom House*,
freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin/2021/chinas-information-isolation-new-censorship-rules-transnational. Accessed 20 Feb. 2022.
- Kennedy, David M., et al. "Building the New Nation." *The American Pageant: A History of the American People*, 14th ed., Boston, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010, pp. 186-90.
- Regencia, Ted, et al. "Second Day of Protests as Anger Over Beirut Explosion Grows: Live." *Al Jazeera*, 9 Aug. 2020,
www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/9/second-day-of-protests-as-anger-over-beirut-explosion-grows-live. Accessed 18 Feb. 2022.
- Sadian, John Carlo Gil M. *The Arab Spring--One Year Later*. CenSEI, 13 Feb. 2012. The CenSEI Report 6. *Scribd.com*,
www.scribd.com/doc/90470593/The-CenSEI-Report-Vol-2-No-6-February-13-19-2012#outer_page_23. Accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

Saidin, Mohd Irwan Syazli. "Rethinking the 'Arab Spring': The Root Causes of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and Egyptian January 25 Revolution." *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, vol. 13, June 2018, pp. 70-74. PDF.