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How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution

By ROBERT F. WORTH

WHAT drives an ordinary man to burn himself to death?

That question has echoed across the Arab world and beyond in the weeks since an unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, doused himself with paint thinner and lit a match on Dec. 17. His desperate act set off street clashes that ultimately toppled the country's autocratic ruler, and inspired nearly a dozen other men to set themselves on fire in Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania.

Those serial self-immolations have provoked horror and wonder, with some Arab commentators hailing the men as heroic martyrs of a new Middle Eastern revolution, even as others denounce them under headlines like "Do Not Burn Your Bodies!"

Yet burning oneself as political protest is not new. Many Americans remember the gruesome images of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, burning himself to death in Saigon during the Vietnam War in 1963, his body eerily still and composed amid the flames. Many other monks followed his example as the war intensified. In Europe, Jan Palach, a 20-year-old Czech who burned himself to death in Prague in 1969 a few months after the Soviet invasion of his country, is remembered as a martyr of the struggle against Communism. Less well-known protesters have died in flames in Tibet, India, Turkey and elsewhere. In China, Buddhists have set themselves alight for at least 1,600 years.

Perhaps what is new about the latest self-immolations is their effectiveness. Mr. Bouazizi, a fruit vendor, set himself on fire in front of the local governor's office after the authorities confiscated his fruit, beat him and refused to return his property. He is now seen as the instigator of a revolution that forced out President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years of authoritarian rule. Mr. Bouazizi's imitators hope to generate similar revolts in other Arab countries, where corruption and stifling autocracy have led to a similarly vast gulf between rulers and the ruled.

In the past, many people recoiled from such protesters as attention-seeking lunatics. Or the authorities were too powerful. Few people today remember Homa Darabi, the Iranian child psychiatrist who set herself on fire in a crowded Tehran square in 1994. A month earlier, a 16-year-old girl had been shot to death for wearing lipstick, and Darabi — who had lived in the United States and refused to wear the veil — had seen enough. "Death to tyranny, long live liberty, long live Iran!" she shouted, as flames engulfed her. Iran's official attitudes toward women's rights have scarcely changed.

One striking feature of the passionate discussion about Mr. Bouazizi and his imitators — at least for Westerners — is the relative absence of religion. Most Americans are used to hearing about Muslim suicide bombers who are impelled in part by the promise of

salvation. The recent Arab self-immolators appear to have been motivated more by anger and despair at their social and economic plight.

Even some clerics have kept the debate on a secular level. Yousef al-Qaradawi, for instance, a prominent and influential Egyptian cleric who lives in Qatar and has a TV show on Al Jazeera, spoke sympathetically about Mr. Bouazizi and others who attempted suicide, saying that they were driven to it by social injustice and that the responsibility for their deaths lay with the rulers of their countries.

“People call these men brave, and mostly they don’t use the word ‘suicide’ in describing them,” said Tarik Tlaty, a Moroccan political analyst. “They don’t use the word ‘martyrs’ either. They call them ‘sacrificers,’ and they speak of an ‘uprising.’ It is not a religious language.”

Others, including many clerics, disagree. Al Azhar, the Cairo university that is the oldest and most prestigious center of learning in the Sunni Muslim world, issued a fatwa last week reaffirming that suicide violates Islam even when it is carried out as a social or political protest.

A similar debate has often taken place among Buddhists over self-immolation. Many Buddhist authorities say suicide cannot be reconciled with their religious tradition. But an ascetic strain among Chinese and Korean Buddhists includes gestures of painful self-sacrifice, from the burning of fingers to self-immolation, said Robert Sharf, chairman of the Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The practice is rooted in the Lotus Sutra, a relatively late Buddhist text that speaks of a magic king who douses himself with fragrant oil and allows his body to be burned as a sacrifice.

“Full-body immolation is rarely done solely as a religious practice,” Dr. Sharf said. “It is more typically a form of political protest at the same time. For instance, it has been used repeatedly in Chinese history to protest anti-Buddhist state policies, such as the mass defrocking of priests.”

In Afghanistan, some women burn themselves to death to escape abusive marriages, a practice that seems to be on the rise recently. Although these deaths are not intended as social protests, they are often seen in the West as implicit critiques of Afghan society.

It is often impossible to be sure what really motivates those who burn themselves to death. There is debate, for instance, about how Thich Quang Duc viewed his self-immolation in 1963, a protest that was related to the South Vietnamese government’s treatment of Buddhist monks and may have been at least partly religious in nature. In other cases, politics may be a cover for personal despair or rage against a loved one.

Whatever the motive, suicide sometimes spreads like a disease, especially when heavily covered in the media. David P. Phillips, a sociologist at the University of California at San Diego, published a 1974 study documenting spikes in the number of suicides after well-publicized cases. He called it “the Werther effect,” after the rash of suicides that

followed the 1774 publication of "The Sorrows of Young Werther," the novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe whose romantic hero kills himself.

"One thing is strongly suggested by the academic studies: People are more likely to copy suicides if they see that they have results, or get wide attention," Dr. Phillips said.

Tunisia has provided grim evidence for that. And Mr. Bouazizi may yet provoke more fiery deaths across the Middle East if the revolution he helped spark is seen as successful