A Blogger at Arab Spring's Genesis
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TUNIS — She felt the stinging fumes of tear gas billowing through the streets here nine months ago and saw police officers firing live ammunition at protesters. She watched families weeping in grief over the bloodied bodies of their loved ones left lying on the ground.

The violence could have silenced Lina Ben Mhenni with fear, but it drove her to speak louder and clearer.

“It was very dangerous to be a blogger under Ben Ali,” Ms. Ben Mhenni, a 27-year-old activist and blogger, said in a cafe here on the capital’s Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Tunisians had taken to this street and many others to rebel against the regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali just nine months ago. “Of course I had fear, but when I saw people killed by the police I forgot it and it gave me the strength to do my work,” she said.

Ms. Ben Mhenni is an example of how protesters helped break a regime’s stranglehold on the media and accelerate a revolution that brought down the 23-year dictatorship of Mr. Ben Ali and that went on to ignite much of the Arab world. It was a revolution that, in the case of Ms. Ben Mhenni, began even before the Arab Spring.

Now a teaching assistant in linguistics at Tunis University, she began the blog in 2007, the year her mother donated a kidney to her to replace the one that had failed two years before. Six months after that surgery, she competed in the World Transplant Games. (She competed again in 2009, winning two silver medals in race walking.)

She named her blog “A Tunisian Girl” and wrote about censorship, women’s rights, human rights and freedom of speech. She soon found herself at odds with the government, which blocked her site inside Tunisia. She used proxy sites to access her pages, and in April 2010, she said, the police broke into her family home. “They took my computer, my cameras, my everything,” she said. “It was clear it was them because of the way only I was targeted and the way they went after my equipment.”

But Ms. Ben Mhenni — whose father, Sadok Ben Mhenni, was a political prisoner under Mr. Ben Ali’s predecessor Habib Bourguiba — fought on.

On Dec. 17, 2010, she and other Tunisians heard about a fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid named Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his goods and his constant harassment by municipal officials and police officers. Ms. Ben Mhenni called friends in the city to see what was happening. She reported what she learned on her blog, a Facebook page and her Twitter account.
On Dec. 25, she took part in the demonstration that erupted in the capital after Mr. Bouazizi’s death, uploading articles and photographs to social media sites. At the beginning of January, she went to Sidi Bouzid, Regueb and Kasserine, where the security forces’ response to the protests had been vicious. She took photos of people killed and wounded by the police and put them all online.

It soon became clear that the protests were not going to stop. “The social movement was spontaneous,” Ms. Ben Mhenni said. “There was no political party. It was just Tunisians. People were angry.”

Mr. Ben Ali fled Tunisia on Jan. 14. Censorship was lifted and Ms. Ben Mhenni and others could write freely.

Thameur Mekki, a journalist at TeKiano.com who worked with Ms. Ben Mhenni on an earlier campaign against censorship, said: “What she did was break the media blackout that the media aligned to Ben Ali had imposed during the revolution.”

Laetitia Matiatos, head of the new media desk at Reporters Without Borders, said: “Bloggers like Lina Ben Mhenni and Astrubal of the blog Nawaat during the Tunisian uprising played an important role in spreading information across the world, using VPN and proxies.” The bloggers, she added, not only were censored by the government, they also faced intimidation, arrest and physical attacks.

Kerim Bouzouita, author of ReadWriteWorld at blogspot.com, said Twitter and Facebook were important to the revolt. As in other uprisings, protesters were able to break the media blackout by spreading video, information and commentary through the Internet and social media operations.

But it was the government itself that lifted the blockade on the two sites and ironically allowed them to thrive.

“Ben Ali banned Facebook in August 2008 because of ‘disruptive people,’ according to the regime’s speech,” Mr. Bouzouita said. “We do not know why it was uncensored, perhaps because of popular discontent and mobilization.” But he said the government also hoped to use that openness to keep tabs on those who were using Facebook and Twitter to communicate and organize.

Ms. Matiatos agreed that the move was intended to open the door for surveillance. “Facebook has been unbanned in Tunisia mostly to spy on netizens,” she said. “For example, police also logged into Facebook accounts to steal activists’ passwords and infiltrate networks of citizen-journalists.” She said she believed the security forces in Syria and other countries use the same methods.

Ms. Ben Mhenni, however, said that though such sites played a role in Tunisia’s revolution, they did not spark it: “In Tunisia at least, the role of social media has been exaggerated.”
“Maybe in Egypt the call started on social media,” she added, “but here, everything started on the ground. Mohamed Bouazizi set his body on fire and everyone started to demonstrate. Social media didn’t start the revolution. It was just a tool that helped.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 13, 2011

Thameur Mekki is a journalist at TeKiano.com. In an earlier version of this article, his first name was misspelled and his professional capacity misstated.