

## FALLIN' DICTATORS

Lina Khatib

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Lina Khatib  
*Fallin' Dictators*, 2011  
Video, 1'35"  
Courtesy of the artist

In *Fallin' Dictators*, Lina Khatib explores the demise of the authoritarian leader through the theme of falling, both in the sense of tyrants being deposed and the yearly shedding of leaves in the autumn – the 'fall' of dictators across the region being the direct effect of the so-called Arab Spring. To date, we have seen Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, former president of Tunisia, ignominiously chased out of the country along with his flunkies and avaricious family. Muhammad Hosni Sayyid Mubarak, fourth president of Egypt from 1981 to 2011, has suffered a similar fall from grace and has been since brought before a court in Cairo accused of, according to the full list of charges released to the public: 'intentional murder, attempted killing of some demonstrators ...



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misuse of influence and deliberately wasting public funds and unlawfully making private financial gains and profits’.

More recently, the self-styled King of Kings, Muammar Gaddafi fatally found himself on the wrong end of a rebel insurgency and ended his days pleading for mercy before being dispatched to refrigerated cold storage room in Misrata, his body displayed for all and sundry to confirm that he was dead. Elsewhere, in Syria, Bashar al-Assad ruthlessly clings to power by any means necessary, including the indiscriminate killing of civilians whilst in Yemen and Bahrain, governments take ever more brutish and demented steps to hold onto power. Surely, what we are witnessing is the twilight of false idols; an effective redistribution of power in a long-suffering region.

Collected from the cities of Cairo, Tripoli, and Damascus, Khatib’s nostalgic, sepia-tinted photographs of posters, banners and revolving billboards, capture the idolatrous public images deployed by Arab dictators from a now fading era. Mubarak can be glimpsed smiling at an imaginary crowd, Gaddafi winces gnomically with a faraway look in his eyes, whilst Assad exudes a confidence that he may not be feeling presently as he watches dictator after dictator being summarily dispatched.

Grandiose claims accompany these increasingly hazy images of the past: ‘Wherever you go, happiness prevails and life is embellished’, is written across one billboard featuring a smiling Gaddafi. ‘For the sake of democracy and stability’, states another featuring Mubarak. This is indeed the rhetoric of the deluded but, we should note, it is no more vacuous than the public pronouncements we often hear in the west.

*Fallin’ Dictators* (a proposed installation that has been adapted into a digital work for Ibraaz) further disconnects reality from the images reproduced and reveals the fabric of make-believe that often accompanied these pronouncements of power. Being a slideshow viewed only through a screen, the images ensure that we are all the more distanced from the iconography portrayed. Other, more brutal images have appeared of these dictators since their demise; however, Khatib seems to be an iconoclast: she destroys the original authority of these images through the use of a sepia-like gauze that makes these images seem from another time. Of course, the legacy of Gaddafi, his henchmen, and other ousted despots will continue to have an effect on the region but that influence has been usurped and will, one day soon, become a cautionary tale for those who flirt with acquiring consummate power.

**Michelle Schultz**

## **About the author**

**Lina Khatib** is Program Manager for the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University.