**Thesis Defense**

**Human Torches: The Genesis of Self-Immolation in the Sociopolitical Context**

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Abstract:

In 2012 there was a record number of self-immolations globally. This phenomenon has been associated with the civil unrest and the collapse of regimes. Most recently, self-immolations in Tunisia sparked a revolution that led to the collapse of the Tunisian government. In the study of politics, self-immolations frequently appear merely as footnotes in the discussion of other phenomena. Where research has been previously conducted, focus has rested mainly on how it initially became a tool of contention and how it spreads. This paper seeks to understand the conditions that lead individuals to choose this method of protest. To do so, this project examines clusters of self-immolations in the Arab World during the Arab Spring, Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation of 1969, and the United States during the Vietnam War. Specifically, public statements, news articles, and suicide letters are examined. This project finds that self-immolation is likely to occur when three criteria are met: 1) there is a self-destructive individual, 2) this person is strictly and deeply attached to their society, and 3) the individual experiences intolerable conditions, or hopelessness. The implications of the genesis are important because of its potential consequences to societies and governments.

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