Two weeks of protests in Tunisia

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Recent disturbances in Tunisia have been described by the French newspaper *Le Monde* as "the first warning shots aimed at President Ben Ali".

The first popular protests since the “bread riots” of 1984 began when the professional drivers (taxi-drivers and long-distance cab and lorry drivers) staged a three-day strike in the capital Tunis, against the introduction of new, stricter licences, which they fear will give the police even greater reason to stop, search and intimidate them.

Most worrying for the government is the combination of forces that have been drawn into the protests. The drivers strike was followed by demonstrations of high school and college students, supported by unemployed youth and other sections of the population. They have taken place in the disadvantaged areas in the outskirts of some large cities and in many surrounding small towns—Zarzis, Gabes, El Hamma, Chenini, Medenine, Jerba, Ben Gardane, Kebili, Douz, Medhila, Moulares, Gafsa, Jebeniana, Sfax, Kasserine and Beja.

A news blackout by the Tunisian media has made it difficult to assess the full extent and details of the protests. But they are believed to have been mounted by students in opposition to the introduction of stricter rules on examinations, and rumours of impending price rises by as much as 50 percent in the cost of bread and other essential items. This caused unemployed youths and other workers to join the demonstrations, which continued for up to 10 days.

Protesters attacked many symbols of government, including public institution buildings. Workers employed by British Gas, which is treating natural gas in the city of Sfax, joined the demonstrations following the announcement of job cuts.

The protests were only halted by a massive clampdown by the police, who arrested hundreds of youth, many of them at night. Most were later released, though there are thought to be around 70 who have been charged with public order offences.

Le Monde comments: “As long as the challenge to power came from an isolated group of intellectuals, human rights organisations or the foreign press, those in power could keep control over those social forces which could more seriously challenge their hegemony: political parties, unions, the press and legal system. But this is no longer the case.”

The Tunisian middle class has until now accepted the government's economic austerity programmes, in return for promises of higher standards of living in the future. This partly rests on a belief that the economy will benefit from the free trade agreement recently signed with the European Union. Confidence in the government is fast disappearing, however, as many of the previously better-off find themselves deeply in debt or even bankrupt owing to rises in the cost of essentials like gas, water, electricity and transport above the official government inflation rate of 2.7 percent.

Worrying also for the government was that some of the demonstrators chanted slogans sympathetic to neighbouring Libya and its head of state, Colonel Gadaffi. Much of the disturbances were focused in the southern region of Tunisia, which borders Libya. For seven years this region had enjoyed a considerable amount of trade (both legal and extra legal) with Libya.

The Tunisian government is carrying out a privatisation programme, but until now the majority of the companies sold off have been small enterprises and hotels and the government has been criticised by a number of international financial institutions. In May 1998 European aid was agreed in return for the speedup of privatisation. Fethi Mardassi, the international cooperation minister, last year announced the sale of around 50 major companies including several large textile and cement factories.

The *Mahgreb Weekly Monitor* reports that “as the sale of these companies is imminent, their privatisation

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is the subject of resistance among the companies' employees who fear an inevitable downsizing during the companies' restructuring phase prior to the sale and during a second phase, once new owners are selected." The official employment rate of 17 percent is widely believed to be an underestimate, following years of austerity measures imposed by the regime.

The increased exploitation of oil by the Western powers in the Caucasus region of the former USSR has led to plans for a new pipeline to transport the oil. The US in particular sees the Mediterranean as the "safest" route out for the oil, making it an evermore strategically important region. The North African countries bordering the Mediterranean have in consequence become more politically important for the West.

Tunisia has long been seen as one of the more stable countries of North Africa and amenable to Western demands. France, Germany and Italy are major trading partners of Tunisia. The European Union signed an association agreement with Tunisia in March 1998, ushering in a new industrial free-trade area between the two parties. It is President Ben Ali's hope that Tunisia will eventually be allowed to join the EU. President Jacques Chirac of France (the former colonial power) has stated, "France will stand by the new Tunisia. This nation is well on its way to democratisation and a market economy. We can be counted on as a partner in that process."

For its part, the US sees Tunisia as an important mediator in its relations with the Arab world. Tunisia has cordial relations with Syria and Lebanon and most importantly, it has never broken off relations with Iraq and Libya. This allows the US to maintain some sort of contact with these embargoed nations, until sanctions are lifted. There are unconfirmed reports of secret talks having taken place in Tunis between US officials and those of Libya and Iraq.

Tunisia has also recently developed its ties with Israel, and since 1982 it has been seen as a home for the Palestine Liberation Organisation. It is therefore potentially important in the resolution of the hostilities in the Middle East. The US has been impressed with the way Tunisia has handled the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, which it has suppressed within its borders. The US sees fundamentalism as a major destabilising problem within the region, threatening the prospect of a pro-Western oriented Mahgreb Union—comprising Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya—which it is keen to resurrect.

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