

Police open fire as protests spread in Tunisia

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Demonstrators demanding jobs clashed with security forces as protests spread across Tunisia. A social eruption on such a scale is virtually unprecedented in this highly repressive and tightly controlled North African country.

Eighteen-year-old Mohammed Amari was shot dead when police opened fire on demonstrators in Sidi Bou Zid, a town some 200 kilometres east of the capital, Tunis. The protests began there on December 17 when police confiscated the merchandise of 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, accusing him of trading illegally without a permit. He set fire to himself in protest at his treatment.

Bouazizi survived his ordeal and was taken to a burns unit in Tunis. But another young man has since committed suicide by touching a high-voltage cable. Before he died he shouted, “No to misery! No to unemployment!”

The desperation of these young men reflects the high level of unemployment in Tunisia. Officially, joblessness is 14 percent, but the real level is much higher.

More than half of all job-seekers have university degrees and half of the population is under 25 years of age. This situation has forced many young people into the informal sector, where they try to make a living by street trading. Many of those deemed to be self-employed are in dire straits.

Demonstrations have been reported in Safakes, Kairouan, Sousse, Mednin and Ben Guerdane. Security forces attacked the demonstrators in Safakes.

Union-organised protests took place in Mednin, in which protestors shouted, “We need work” and “Shame on the government.” In Kairouan, police clashed with demonstrators, leaving an unknown number injured. Many people were taken to hospitals. The number of arrests is unknown.

Reports on the demonstrations are very limited

because journalists are being excluded from the towns where protests have taken place. The government has prevented the opposition newspapers *Tareeq-al Jadid* and *Al Mawqif* from appearing because they carry reports of the protests.

Most of the coverage has come via social media such as Twitter, Facebook and You Tube. Local activist Ali Bouazizi described the continuing protests in Sidi Bou Zid. He told the *Financial Times* by phone, “There were riots until dawn on Tuesday. There is now a very heavy police presence in the town. They are on all the main streets and at government buildings. The days are usually calm, but people come out in the evenings and that’s when clashes start.”

The protests have spread to the capital. On Tuesday, lawyers demonstrated in Tunis to express their solidarity with protesters. A high school union held a demonstration outside the Ministry of Education. Security forces blocked a rally by the Tunisian Federation of Labour Unions in the town of Gafsa.

These expressions of solidarity reflect widespread sympathy with the plight of unemployed youth and growing dissatisfaction with the government of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. The president denounced the protests as “unacceptable” in a television broadcast. “The law will be applied in all firmness to punish a minority of extremists and mercenaries who resort to violence and disorder,” he warned.

Ben Ali succeeded President Habib Bourguiba in 1987. Bourguiba had ruled Tunisia since the French colony won independence in 1956. For the past 23 years, Ben Ali has ruthlessly suppressed all dissent. A US government cable published by WikiLeaks described Tunisia as a “police state,” even though Washington supports the regime.

Tunisia is officially a multi-party democracy, but Ben Ali consistently wins overwhelming majorities. In the

last election in 2009 he won 89.62 percent of the vote. Two of the three rival candidates were his supporters and the third was not allowed to put up any posters.

Human Rights Watch said the election took place in “an atmosphere of repression.” The Committee to Protect Journalists said that 97 percent of media coverage was devoted to Ben Ali. The Tunisian journalists’ union was suppressed and journalist Taufik Ben Brik was sentenced to nine years imprisonment after he published articles in the French press. *Le Monde* journalist Florence Beaugé was deported.

The protests have broken out because the economic situation in Tunisia has deteriorated as a result of a decline in trade with Europe, the country’s main trading partner and source of tourism. Tunisia is heavily reliant on tourism and agriculture. There is now stiff competition from other Maghreb countries as well as Egypt and Israel for the tourist market and declining demand from cash-strapped Europeans.

But the economic problems facing Tunisia are not of a temporary character. They reflect long-standing efforts to reorient the economy to the global market under pressure from the major imperialist powers. A structural adjustment programme is in place, under which the prices of basic commodities are no longer subsidised. State-owned enterprises have been privatized and jobs slashed.

The government has hastened to promise development in the worst affected areas and measures to increase employment. Local officials in Sidi Bou Zid have been sacked and the national government reshuffled.

Nevertheless, social tensions have reached an unsustainable pitch. Writing for the London-based daily *Asharq al Awsat*, columnist Abdulrahman al Rashed warned that the protests point to a loss of political credibility.

He reported: “The demonstrations in Tunisia are refusing to stop; these have spread throughout the cities and even reached the nation’s capital, in a clear challenge to the state. Should we be concerned about Tunisia? Or is it just another crisis over the price of bread that will be settled by certain promises being made, and military force being used? In my opinion, Tunisia’s problem is more political than economic and goes beyond the anger of the unemployed masses. This is a problem of a lack of trust in the government, and

the loss of [governmental] credibility.”

Al Rashed went on to point out that Tunisia is one of the most prosperous of Arab regimes in terms of per capita income, and one of the best educated. Noting that it has a higher growth rate than neighbouring Algeria, which possesses oil and gas reserves, he asked, “If the citizens of Tunis are dissatisfied, what can we say about the citizens of other Arab nations that are suffering from an even worse situation and reality?”



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