

WikiLeaks and Tunisia

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American foreign policy specialists have described the events in Tunisia over the past week as the “first WikiLeaks revolution.” This amounts to a grudging tribute from Washington to the impact of the courageous work of Julian Assange and his co-thinkers, who have made public thousands of documents that reveal the predations and crimes of American imperialism and the venality of its client regimes throughout the world.

WikiLeaks has made public ten cables from the US Embassy in Tunis, all signed by US Ambassador Robert Godec. Their content rebuts the lie, regularly circulated by the US government and the American media, that the documents released by WikiLeaks are inconsequential and reveal “nothing new,” or even put US diplomacy in a favorable light. Far from it: the cables contain significant exposures of the corruption of the Tunisian regime and the US “nod and a wink” approach towards torture in the country’s prisons.

They expose the fraud of Washington’s pretense of support for democracy and human rights around the world.

Seven of the cables make evaluations of the regime, commenting on the health of President Zine El Abadine Ben Ali, the corruption of his family, particularly his in-laws, the Trabelsis, and US options for shaping a post-Ben Ali Tunisia. Some highlights include:

June 23, 2008: The now-notorious dispatch headlined “Corruption in Tunisia: What’s Yours Is Mine.” It gives details of the doings, particularly of the Trabelsis—including at least ten known siblings of the first lady and their children—as well as seven siblings of Ben Ali and the president’s children through his first wife. Nearly every significant business in Tunisia involves a member of this extended family, the dispatch reports, adding, “Whether it’s cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali’s family is rumored to covet it and reportedly gets what it

wants.”

The yacht was owned by the head of the Paris office of the investment bank Lazard Frères and was seized by two Trabelsis and repainted. One of the two, Imed Trabelsi, a nephew of Ben Ali, was stabbed to death at the airport in Tunis over the weekend as he attempted to flee the country, when a crowd of anti-regime demonstrators recognized him as a member of the hated “first family.”

July 17, 2009: A dispatch headlined “A Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?” describes the regime as “sclerotic” and with no clear successor to Ben Ali. “Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities,” the US ambassador reports. With 2009 an election year, “Ben Ali is certain to be reelected by a wide margin in a process that will be neither free nor fair.”

July 27, 2009: The cable gives an account of the private dinner for Ambassador Godec and his wife at the home of Mohammed Saker El Materi, Ben Ali’s son-in-law, and his wife Nesrine, the president’s daughter. Godec describes the luxurious conditions in which the family lives, including fountains (in a desert country) and a caged tiger. He calls El Materi “demanding, vain and difficult,” his wife “naïve and clueless,” concluding: “The opulence with which El Materi and Nesrine live and their behavior make clear why they and other members of Ben Ali’s family are disliked and even hated by some Tunisians.”

The American media has reported the corruption cables, but has kept silent on three other cables released by WikiLeaks which document the direct collaboration of the US government, under both Bush and Obama, with torture in Tunisian prisons.

March 3, 2008: The cable reports the results of a three-day visit to Tunis by assistant secretary of state David Welch for talks with Ben Ali on terrorism and

other regional issues. Ben Ali promised “to cooperate with the United States without inhibitions.” This language has grisly implications, given the widespread use of torture by both Tunisian and American interrogators.

June 18, 2009: The dispatch gives an account of a discussion by the ambassador with an official of the International Committee of the Red Cross who, while bound by a confidentiality agreement after visiting Tunisian prisons, said he “would not like to be in the ambassador’s place” when it came to making a recommendation on the transfer of Guantanamo prisoners to Tunisian custody.

June 23, 2009: A cable five days later reports that the government of Tunisia is pressuring European countries not to take Tunisian detainees from Guantanamo—in order to insure they are delivered to Tunisian custody—and cites comments by the British and Canadian ambassadors that Tunisia routinely tortures prisoners.

The content of the cables demonstrates why the US government was so furious about the leaks and why it is seeking to prosecute Assange and halt WikiLeaks’ exposures. The revelations have had a definite political impact in undermining the Ben Ali regime and contributing to the mass demonstrations that ousted the dictator.

Far from the exposure of US diplomatic secrets representing no real threat to US imperialist interests, the events in Tunisia show that it can, under conditions of mounting social and political crisis and explosive class tensions in every part of the world, seriously damage Washington’s geo-strategic position.

The Internet played a major role not only in creating the political climate, but also in the organization and mobilization of the mass movement in Tunisia. Thousands of home-made videos of police repression and popular resistance have been posted on the web. The Tunisian people have used Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites to organize and direct the mobilizations against the regime.

It can be certain that the US government will react to the role of the Internet in the events in Tunisia by stepping up its efforts to censor and control the web’s political content.

This underscores the necessity for all those who defend democratic rights and oppose the crimes of

imperialism to come to the defense of Assange and WikiLeaks.



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