French government in crisis over its support for Tunisian dictatorship

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy's support for Tunisian president Ben Ali has created a crisis of credibility for his government. The mass movement, which could spread to the rest of the Maghreb and the Middle East, threatens other pro-Western authoritarian regimes and poses enormous challenges to Western imperialism's economic and geopolitical interests in the region.

French businessmen own well over a thousand firms in Tunisia, the largest share of foreign-owned enterprises in that country.

For a full month, Sarkozy made no criticisms of Ben Ali's repression of mass protests against unemployment and dictatorship. Police shootings of unarmed demonstrators led to a death toll of at least 78, according to government figures.

However, Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, in a parliamentary debate on January 12 offered Ben Ali "the world-renowned know-how of France's security forces."

Hours before Ben Ali fled, on January 14, the French customs held up riot-control gear being sent to Tunisia, which included bullet-proof vests and tear-gas canisters ordered by the Tunisian police. Government spokesman François Baroin, attempting to deflect criticism of government support to Ben Ali, intimated that it was on government orders that the consignment was held up. "Ben Ali asked for help and this equipment did not leave…"

This was categorically denied by the General Administration of the Customs, which assured the *Rue89* site that the blocking of the consignment was due to a routine control by customs at Roissy airport. The site reported that "contrary to Baroin's intimations, instructions for blocking the goods were only given by the government on Monday or Tuesday [January 17 or 18], that is three or four days after the fall of Ben Ali."

The satirical weekly *le Canard Enchainé* reported that privately Prime Minister François Fillon had said that Alliot-Marie was "totally mad". He was obliged to denounce the "disproportionate" use of force by Tunisian police the day after the Alliot-Marie statement. But he responded to an editorial in *Libération* calling for Alliot-Marie's resignation by stating his full confidence in his foreign minister.

Alliot-Marie expressed no contrition and blamed the Americans, who, she said, had conspired with the Tunisian military to disown Ben Ali. The *Canard Enchaîné* quotes her saying, "America took control of the situation. … Needless to say, the Americans did not keep us informed."

Not until January 15 did Sarkozy break his silence. He refused entry into France to Ben Ali and his family and said he had ordered the blocking of "suspicious financial movements concerning Tunisian holdings in France."

A presidential communiqué avoided any criticism of the régime's repression of the protests. It called for "calm and the end to violence" and "free elections as soon as possible." It added that France offered "determined support" to the Tunisian people "in their desire for democracy"—that is, Sarkozy supported attempts to cobble together a government consisting of top Ben Ali regime officials, with a smattering of union functionaries and ex-Stalinists in minor posts.

Sarkozy's discomfort was increased by revelations that his former ally's wife Leïla Trabelsi had absconded with 1.5 tonnes of gold ingots stolen from the state bank.

Government staff have since hurriedly had to take down the photograph in French diplomatic offices depicting a friendly handshake between the two presidents on Sarkozy's official visit to Tunisia in 2008. At the time, Sarkozy told Ben Ali: "I have complete confidence in your will to continue your effort to increase the range of freedom in Tunisia."

The government fears mass protests in France against its Tunisian policy. In Paris, a large contingent of riot police is protecting the embassy of Saudi Arabia—the country to which Ben Ali fled from Tunisia.

Despite criticisms by the opposition Socialist Party and its pseudo-left allies of Sarkozy's loyalty to Ben Ali, they have been just as complicit with the regime since Ben Ali took power in 1984.

Sarkozy's minister of culture Frédéric Mitterrand, the nephew of the former French Socialist Party president François Mitterrand, received honorary Tunisian citizenship from Ben Ali in the 1990s for promoting Tunisian culture. On January 10, Sarkozy's minister, on being told that the death count of protestors was at 27, affirmed in an interview on Canal+ television: "But to say that Tunisia is a dictatorship through and through, as is often done, seems to me to be an utter exaggeration."

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The Sarkozy government's shameless support for the Ben Ali regime is undermining the credibility of its hypocritical humanitarian comments. As the regional newspaper *Est Républicain* remarked, "The haste now to go with the Jasmine Revolution is only equaled by the reluctance the day before yesterday in condemning the repression…"

Defense Minister Alain Juppé has tried to defend French imperialism by noting that France was not the only major power to support the Ben Ali dictatorship: "Every, let us say Western country ... European and American, has considered Tunisia to be a politically stable country developing economically. … Doubtless, we have all underestimated the degree of exasperation of public opinion faced with a dictatorial police state. … I would like someone to name one big American or European government which, before the events in Tunisia sought the departure of Ben Ali."

What Juppé apparently failed to notice was that his statement—that all the Western powers support "dictatorial police states" if they are politically stable and favorable to Western interests—does not excuse the French government. Rather, it is an indictment of the policy of all the major imperialist powers, both in their support for Tunisia and for other police states around the world.

In another disingenuous attempt to cover its links to the regime, government officials have claimed that France did not oppose Ben Ali out of respect for Tunisia's national sovereignty. The claim that the French government respects the principle of national sovereignty is patently absurd.

At this very moment there are some 800 French troops in Ivory Coast, prepared to intervene in the deadlocked presidential election. This is part of a large network of French military operations in Africa, including permanent military bases in strategically located Djibouti and oil-rich Gabon. The French government is also stepping up military action in Niger in defence of the French nuclear energy firm Areva's vast uranium installations in Arlit.

Most notably, 4,000 French troops are occupying Afghanistan as part of the neocolonial "war on terror," alongside the US and its allies. Besides its ongoing military operations against the Afghan people, it is therefore participating in the global network of air bases, prison camps, and torture chambers used to put down popular opposition to the occupation.

The Socialist Party (PS) is complicit in this policy. PS prime minister Lionel Jospin greeted Ben Ali in 1997 with full official protocol. His economy minister (1997-1999) Dominique Strauss-Kahn, now director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and considered likely to be named the PS's 2012 presidential candidate, was awarded the Order of the Tunisian Republic by Ben Ali.

In October 2010, after an interview with the Tunisian prime minister, Strauss-Kahn praised the "prospective vision" and the reforms adopted in Tunisia that "have enabled the country to reduce the impact of the international financial and economic crisis." In fact, the poverty and joblessness that prompted the mass protests are due very much to IMF austerity and privatization programs.

In 2008, a few months after the Tunisian regime repressed strikes and demonstrations in the southern town of Gafsa, Strauss-Kahn praised the regime's economic policies as "healthy." He added that the IMF had a "very positive" opinion of Ben Ali's policies, which are "the best model for many emerging countries to follow."

In trying to cover up its support for the Ben Ali regime, the PS is exposing the close social and political connections between European social democracy and the Tunisian dictatorship. Criticizing the Sarkozy government's handling of the Tunisian protests as a "major error," PS First Secretary Martine Aubry commented: "Since 2005 the Socialist Party has always condemned the lack of freedom in Tunisia."

This statement immediately begs the question: why did the PS make no criticisms of the Ben Ali dictatorship before 2005? Ben Ali had by that point been in power for nearly 20 years, since 1987.

Aubry's implicit claim that the PS encouraged Ben Ali to grant greater freedoms in Tunisia after 2005 is completely false, however. In fact, throughout this period the PS was formally affiliated to Ben Ali's ruling party—the *Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique* (RCD)—in the social-democratic Socialist International.

The international body includes the British and Australian Labor Parties, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the French Socialist Party, the Greek PASOK party and Spain's PSOE. The last two parties are currently in government. As they carried out massive cuts to jobs, wages, and social services after the outbreak of the European debt crisis, both PASOK and PSOE have mobilized the army to break workers' strikes. These were actions of which Ben Ali would fully approve.

On January 18—a full four days after Ben Ali fled Tunis—Martin Schulz, the leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament, announced that the Socialist International was expelling the RCD from its ranks. The *Libération* journalist Jean Quatremer reported on his blog that even so, the day before, "The Socialist group in the European parliament, chaired by Martin Schulz, had added his votes to the PPE conservative group to block any resolution on the Tunisian revolution."

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