

Tunisian president flees the country

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President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has fled Tunisia. A state of emergency has been declared. The army has taken control of the airport, and gatherings of more than three people have been banned. An announcement on state television warned that anyone refusing to obey military orders would be shot. As night fell, the country was once again under curfew, after a day in which the police opened fire on peaceful protesters outside the Ministry of the Interior.

The day began with thousands of protestors marching along Avenue Bourguiba in central Tunis and gathering outside the ministry to demand the immediate resignation of Ben Ali. They chanted, “No to Ben Ali, the uprising continues.”

This was the first time in almost a quarter of a century that such a demonstration had taken place in the capital of Tunisia. The demonstrations followed the president’s television address on Thursday night, in which he promised to stand down at the next election in 2014 and ordered police to stop shooting down the protestors.

The demonstration had been called by the Tunisian General Workers Union, the UGTT, as part of a token two-hour general strike. Riot police and army units initially tried to prevent the demonstrators from approaching the ministry, but eventually withdrew to surround the building, while snipers took up positions on nearby rooftops.

“The interior ministry is a ministry of terror,” the crowd numbering tens of thousands shouted.

The interior ministry is an object of particular hatred, because it is regarded as being at the centre of the crackdown that has killed 23 people, according to official reports, and probably many more. It has long been associated with allegations of torture.

It is estimated that there is one policeman for every 40 citizens in Tunisia, and that two thirds of those are plain-clothes officers. Throughout Ben Ali’s 23-year rule, he has maintained a climate of fear through this repressive machinery.

Initially, there was a celebratory atmosphere in the demonstration, which included lawyers in their robes, doctors, university teachers and former political prisoners. Protestors sang the national anthem and shook hands with soldiers. Plain-clothes police were present but did not interfere with the demonstrators or journalists. Blocked Internet sites such as YouTube had become available again overnight.

In the space of an hour, the atmosphere changed dramatically.

By mid-afternoon police reinforcements arrived, and they began to attack the demonstrators with tear gas grenades. There were reports that shots were fired.

What had been until then a noisy but entirely non-violent demonstration broke up in panic. Women and children fled in terror, only to find that the riot police pursued them into the side streets and fired more gas at them. Police pursued unarmed protestors, hitting out with batons and kicking them as they lay on the floor. Some protestors were chased onto rooftops. Reporters on the spot spoke of running battles. The *Guardian*’s Paris correspondent Angelique Chrisafis, who was among the crowds, said on Twitter, “This is turning very, very bad.”

Shortly afterwards, the government news agency announced that Ben Ali had sacked his entire government and declared a state of emergency. The announcement said that there would be early elections in six months’ time. Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi was to form a new interim government and take charge of the elections.

Within hours, however, Ghannouchi announced that he was assuming presidential powers because the president was “temporarily indisposed.” A state of emergency was still in force, and there was no more talk of elections.

“It is forbidden for more than three persons to gather on the public highway,” the official statement said. “The police and the army are authorised to fire on any suspect person who has not obeyed orders or fled without the possibility of being stopped.”

It is rumoured that Ben Ali may be in Malta, en-route to Paris. Several members of his family fled yesterday. Their beachfront mansions were ransacked by looters after demonstrators overwhelmed police in the resort of Hammamet.

Thousands of foreign tourists have been evacuated by their tour companies, and governments have warned against travel to Tunisia. Air France, the main scheduled carrier to Tunisia, has suspended flights.

Ghannouchi is a close ally of Ben Ali and has been his prime minister since 1999. He has taken over under a provision within the constitution that allows the prime minister to assume power if the president is unable to carry out his duties. France, the former colonial power in Tunisia, was quick to recognise the “constitutional transition”.

Ghannouchi’s move has something of the character of a coup. The role of the army is not yet clear. *Al Jazeera* reports

that the army is moving towards the capital to take charge of the situation. There is criticism of the police and the interior ministry for inflaming the situation.

Events are still unfolding, but Ghannouchi's bid for power and the army's move on Tunis can only be interpreted as a bid to protect the interests of the ruling elite. Whether or not the first family, whose looting of the country is one of the causes of the uprising, emerges with its wealth intact, other elements in the regime are determined to survive. To do so, they may need to bring oppositionists into the government. Foreign Minister Kamel Morjane told the French radio station Europe1 this morning that a national unity government was a possibility.

"I think it's doable and I think it's quite normal even," he said.

He praised Mohammed Nejjib Chebbi, leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Chebbi was barred from standing in the last presidential election and so retains a certain popular credibility.

Chebbi described Ghannouchi's seizure of power as "regime change". Speaking to i-Tele, he said, "This is a crucial moment. There is a change of regime under way. Now it's the succession. It must lead to profound reforms, to reform the law and let the people choose."

Chebbi represents the legal opposition that has long accommodated itself to the repressive regime of Ben Ali. This makes Hamma Hammami, leader of the still-illegal Workers' Communist Party of Tunisia (PCOT), a potential key player. PCOT is an Albanian Maoist party aligned with the Workers Communist Party of France (PCOF) and an avowed admirer of Stalin's tyranny and that of Enver Hoxha. He has also called for a government of national unity. Arrested three days ago, Ghannouchi has now released him.

Hammami has been repeatedly arrested and tortured by the regime. His wife, the lawyer Radhia Nasraoui, and their children have been persistently harassed and interrogated. Hammami has been prominent in the coverage of the Western media. The *New York Times* named the couple as oppositionists. Their participation in any national unity government would be utilised to lend it false credentials as a decisive break with the old regime.

In reality, talk of a national unity government does not indicate any slackening of state repression. On Thursday night, Ben Ali had appeared to be in a conciliatory mood on state television—speaking in Tunisian dialect and assuring his audience that he understood the Tunisian people. But even as he spoke, more protestors were being shot. Video footage posted on YouTube showed dead and wounded young men being brought into l'Hôpital Kheirredine in the working class Tunis suburb of Le Kram.

Under the state of emergency, the police and army will have even greater freedom to terrorise the population. The departure of Ben Ali and Ghannouchi's assumption of power does not change the fundamental character of a state that has, ever since

independence, defended the interests of the local bourgeoisie and global capitalism.

The young protestors that have taken to the streets night after night in the face of brutal police actions should not put their faith in a government of national unity. They need to organise themselves independently of the existing parties, even those that proclaim their left credentials, and the trade unions, which reluctantly called the march to the interior ministry to put themselves at the head of a movement largely composed of unemployed youth that was getting out of control.

Already, the uprising in Tunisia is having an impact in the Middle East. Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Jordan on Friday calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Samir Rifai and demanding lower prices on essential food and fuel. "Jordan is not only for the rich. Bread is a red line. Beware of our starvation and fury," one banner read.

A major reason for Ben Ali's sudden departure is pressure from the United States and France, which fear that unless the movement in Tunisia is halted it will spread to other countries.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, columnist Gideon Rachman warned, "Tunisia is a small country—but right now it is anything but insignificant."

The Tunisian protests, he wrote, are on the front pages of every Arab newspaper, and every Arab country faces similar political dilemmas. He pointed to the street protests that have already broken out in Algeria. "It is the fate of the big strategic countries—Egypt and Saudi Arabia—that will be most worrying their western allies."

What is required is an independent movement based on a socialist programme and a struggle for a workers' government. Such a movement must immediately establish links with workers and the rural poor in other North African and Middle Eastern countries and with workers in Europe and the rest of the world. This struggle can be carried forward only through the building of a Trotskyist party, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, based on the perspective of permanent revolution.



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