

Tunisian ruling elite promises national government, imposes military rule

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Tunisia's ruling elite is seeking to secure its rule in the aftermath of the popular insurgency that forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country and take refuge in Saudi Arabia. Its strategy is to hold out the promise of a national unity government while imposing de facto military rule.

Initial attempts by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, a long-time ally of Ben Ali, to assume power as interim president failed and he was replaced by parliamentary speaker Fouad Mebazaa.

Another former Ben Ali loyalist, Mebazaa immediately announced that Ghannouchi had been tasked with forming a unity government. This would include "all Tunisians without exception and exclusion," including Ben Ali's party, Mebazaa pledged.

This political fraud was endorsed by opposition leader Nejib Chebbi, who leads the Democratic Progressive Party, and Ahmed Ben Brahim, head of the former Stalinist Ettajdid (Renewal) party.

Chebbi said after meeting Ghannouchi yesterday that elections could be held under international supervision within "six or seven months."

Rached Ghannouchi, the exiled head of the illegal Tunisian Islamist party, Ennahda, also pledged to participate in a unity government. His was a democratic movement and would not pose a threat of militancy, he added.

It is possible that an example may be made of Ben Ali's immediate family and some key supporters in order to placate popular anger. The head of Ben Ali's special police force, Ali Seriati, has been arrested and charged with fomenting violence and threatening national security.

These manoeuvres prove that it is easier to get rid of a dictator than to dismantle a dictatorial regime. The army is in effective control of Tunisia. Though portrayed as the ally of the people against the pro-Ben Ali police and secret police apparatus, its guns and tanks are there to ensure that Tunisia's capitalist class is safeguarded against the threat from below. A dusk-to-dawn curfew remains in force.

There are, in addition, the militia and seemingly organised looters whom many believe to be Ben Ali's people. It is estimated that there is one police officer for every 40 adults in Tunisia.

Tanks, troops and helicopters have been employed to seal off the centre of the capital Tunis, guarding key public buildings. Army helicopters are patrolling overhead. Looters have been dragged away by the dozens. Most are people driven to desperate acts by hunger. There are reports of shops running out of food.

The continued brutality of the regime was underscored by

Saturday's deadliest incident, when fire swept through a prison in Monastir, killing 60. The authorities refused to let the prisoners out, condemning them to be burned and suffocated.

Angelique Chrisafis of the *Guardian* wrote of "hundreds of soldiers and tanks" having "locked down a deserted central Tunis." She continued: "Amid the teargas cartridges, smashed-up shops and scorched pavements lay a sea of strewn shoes: one left flip-flop, a pair of torn baseball boots, a woman's fluffy slipper, a shiny black brogue. They had been left by people fleeing as police charged them, or dragged and beat them, during the peaceful protests that toppled the region's most repressive despot."

CNN posed the question, "Are jackboots already trampling the 'Jasmine Revolution?'" CNN's Ben Wedeman continued: "At the moment it's not clear whether that movement will result in real change, or just a change at the top. The army and security forces are trying to impose order in Tunis... A dusk-to-dawn curfew is being ruthlessly enforced... The feel is very much that of a military takeover."

The aim of the Tunisian ruling elite in suppressing opposition is shared by all of the imperialist powers and the Arab regimes, which fear a revolutionary contagion spreading to the rest of the Maghreb and throughout the Middle East.

France, the former colonial ruler, has adopted a pose of support for the protests, calling on Tunisia to hold free elections as soon as possible. The United States, after days of equivocation, wheeled out President Barack Obama to applaud the "courage" of Tunisian protestors and their "brave" struggle.

Britain's *Telegraph* pointed to the hypocrisy of both governments, noting that before Ben Ali's fall, "The United States had just voted through another \$12 million in military aid [to Tunisia]. France announced it would be premature to 'hand down lessons.' The foreign minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, said the message to Tunisia should be one of 'friendship' and offered to send security forces to help 'resolve the situation.'"

The Arab League appealed for calm and urged "all political forces, representatives of Tunisian society and officials to stand together and unite to maintain the achievements of the Tunisian people and realise national peace."

Germany's *Deutsche Welle* made clear the fundamental concerns of the major powers, stating: "What happened in Tunisia is a historic event and a strong signal to the entire Arab world. It shows that populations can successfully rise against authoritarian and corrupt rulers, and that 'regime change' is possible on its

own—without internal or external military intervention, even without leadership from opposition politicians or civilian players.”

The newspaper made clear that this was not a welcome development. “Such a dynamic is only desirable to a point,” *Deutsche Welle* continued. “All the players in Tunisia have a huge responsibility that extends symbolically beyond their own country. The remaining forces of the old regime, but also the opposition, civil society and the ‘street’ all have a responsibility to initiate a transparent and orderly transfer of power.”

Business Insider was blunter, asking in its headline, “First Goes Tunisia, Next Goes...?”

The most forthright statement opposing Ben Ali’s ouster came from Tunisia’s neighbour, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. “I am very pained by what is happening in Tunisia,” he said. “Tunisia now lives in fear. Families could be raided and slaughtered in their bedrooms and the citizens in the street killed as if it was the Bolshevik or the American revolution.”

He went on to claim that protesters had been led astray by cables leaked by WikiLeaks showing the corruption of Ben Ali’s family. The cables, Gaddafi said, were “written by ambassadors in order to create chaos.”

“You have suffered a great loss,” he added. “There is none better than Zine (Ben Ali) to govern Tunisia.” The Libyan leader said he still considered Ben Ali to be the “legal president of Tunisia.”

Gaddafi’s concern is not merely platonic. His televised speech came amidst reports of protests in al-Bayda during which demonstrators against poor housing clashed with police and attacked government offices.

Tunisia’s other neighbour, Algeria, which shares a thousand-mile border, has already seen riots over unemployment and a sharp rise in the price of food staples, in the course of which five people were killed. This forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s regime to cut the cost of sugar and cooking oil. But this has not placated opposition.

On Saturday, a man died after having set himself on fire at a government building—an event echoing the self-immolation that triggered the protests in Tunisia. Mohsen Bouterfif doused himself in gasoline and ignited his body last Thursday after the mayor of the Boukhadra said he was unable to provide him with a job and a house.

The Algerian media has generally welcomed Ben Ali’s fall, with *Le Quotidien d’Oran* noting that it has given “cold sweat to our officials, terrorized as they are by the fear of the contagion effect that these events may have in Algeria.”

In Jordan, more than 5,000 people staged protests last week, in what was described as “a day of rage” against escalating food prices and unemployment. The protests in Irbid, Karak, Salt and Maan were led by Ba’athist party supporters, who demanded that Prime Minister Samir Rifai step down. Protesters chanted, “United class, united government has sucked your blood.”

Jordan responded by slashing prices and taxes on some foods and fuels this week on the orders of King Abdullah II. It has allocated £141 million in the 2011 budget to subsidise bread, reduce the price of fuel and create jobs. The Obama administration has increased its assistance package to Jordan by \$100 million for this year.

Of most concern to the world’s rulers is the danger of social discontent erupting in Egypt, the region’s giant. The regime of Hosni Mubarak has made placatory noises, declaring its respect for the “choices of the people in brotherly Tunisia,” but adding the caveat, “as it trusts in the wisdom of its Tunisian brothers in fixing the situation and avoiding the collapse of Tunisia into chaos.”

Friday saw protests in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, where demonstrators chanted, “Ben Ali, tell Mubarak a plane is waiting for him, too!” Outside the Tunisian Embassy in Zamalek, Cairo, protesters shouted, “Down, down with Hosni Mubarak!”, “Ben Ali, you fraud! Mubarak, you fraud! Gadhaffi, you fraud!” Placards read, “Revolution in Tunis, tomorrow in Egypt.”

The danger for the Tunisian masses is that the features hailed by the media as the most positive aspects of the “Jasmine Revolution”—its heterogeneous social character and lack of leadership—are its greatest weakness. In its editorial comment, the *Financial Times* presented events in Tunisia as part of a political continuum with “the eastern European revolutions of 1989.”

The *Financial Times* called for the swift formation of a government of national unity and other measures to “heal the wounds that remain open in the transition to a new order,” before insisting that “The US and the European Union have no reason to fear the consequences of Tunisia’s ‘Jasmine revolution.’”

As with the downfall of the former Stalinist states, left to the political leadership of the bourgeoisie and its parties, any replacement for Ben Ali’s regime will be just as hostile to the interests of the masses and just as firmly an ally of the imperialist powers. Everything depends upon the conscious political intervention of the Tunisian working class and the building of revolutionary parties as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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