

# Tunisia's "unity" government fractures as protests continue

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19 January 2011

At least five ministers and probably more have been forced to quit Tunisia's National Unity government, less than a day after it was formed, in the face of mass hostility to its domination by the party of deposed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Several opposition party members assumed junior ministerial positions, but no one was fooled that the new government was anything other than a front for the continued rule of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RDC).

Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi was one of eight ministers from the previous government, including interim President Foued Mebazaa, Interior Minister Ahmed Friaa, Foreign Minister Kamal Morjane and the defence and finance ministers. RDC people occupied all key posts, with oppositionists serving as window dressing in minor, sometimes purposely created, ministries.

But with protests continuing and focusing on the role of the RDC in the new government, three ministers from the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT)—Junior Transport Minister Anouar Ben Gueddour, minister without portfolio Abdeljelil Bedoui and Junior Labour Minister Houssine Dimassi—quit. They were followed by Health Minister Mustafa Ben Jaafar of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberty (FDLT).

Culture Minister Moufida Tlatl was "considering resigning".

Ghannouchi was already facing mounting difficulties justifying his government. Proclaiming the democratic bona fides of the former cronies of Ben Ali, he said in a radio interview, "We need to avoid a witch hunt and encourage national reconciliation... Many ministers, who were already part of the previous government under the former president, did all they could to fight for the general interest."

They have "clean hands and great competence," he added, "Thanks to their dedication they managed to reduce certain people's capacity to do harm."

A meeting of the largest opposition party, the Progressive Democratic Party led by Ahmed Najib Chebbi, the new

secretary of regional economic development, was explosive. As Chebbi sat head in hands, one party member asked, "How can the murderer be our leader today?"

By the evening, the prime minister and the interim president had both announced their belated resignation from the RDC.

These manoeuvres were made necessary by the angry protests in the capital, Tunis, as well as Sfax, Regueb, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid.

For hour after hour demonstrators defied increasing police brutality in order to register their hostility to the attempt to reconstitute the Ben Ali dictatorship without Ben Ali. The protest had begun with a few hundred people marching on the UGTT headquarters to protest its participation in the government. "No leftovers from the old regime!" demonstrators chanted. "Citizens and martyrs, the government is still the same. We will protest, we will protest, until the government collapses!"

The riot police responded with batons, shields and teargas. One protester was seen being pummelled to the ground and then kicked repeatedly. Another had his arm broken. Those trying to flee were batoned. A video has been released showing snipers repeatedly firing at protesters in the northern city of Bizerte.

The new interior minister, Ahmed Friaa of the RDC, made a public statement: "We will thank the people who fought for freedom and helped the country during the crisis, but we will also punish all the criminals who have terrorized us... Yes to democracy, yes to freedom and no to chaos."

Public commentary shows the well of anger that Ghannouchi's bogus government is attempting to quell.

"The new government is a sham. It's an insult to the revolution that claimed lives and blood," said one demonstrator.

"Nothing has changed," said teacher Mohamed Cherni, who was tortured by Ben Ali's police. "It is still the same regime as before, and so we are going to keep fighting."

"I am afraid that our revolution will be stolen from me and my people... They are the ones who oppressed the people for

22 years,” said Ines Mawdud, a 22-year-old student.

A Tunisian Facebook page reads, “The RCD, the party of dictatorship and the symbol of totalitarianism and tyranny, is still in business.”

Another Facebook page read, “The dictator has fallen but the dictatorship not yet. Tunisians have to continue their mission.”

The trade union bureaucrats and oppositionists were forced to resign, but offered neither an explanation, nor an apology for their having joined the government in the first place. The fact is that their participation had become untenable.

Earlier that day, an extraordinary meeting of the UGTT had decided not to recognise the new government. “This is in response to the demands of people on the streets,” union organiser Abid al-Briki said.

However, departure from office does not change the essential aim of these elements—to behead opposition in the working class and rescue Tunisian capitalism.

With each day that passes, the underlying social contradictions within the so-called “Jasmine Revolution” become more apparent. One of the most important observations on the mass protests in Tunisia was made by David D. Kirkpatrick in the *New York Times*. He wrote, “In the streets, the Tunisian revolution continued to evolve. It began in the hard-pressed provinces with demands for more jobs, especially for Tunisia’s soaring number of young college graduates, nearly a third of whom are estimated to be unemployed or seriously underemployed. It spread to the workers, small business owners and the coastal professional class as a revolt mainly against the flagrant corruption associated with Mr. Ben Ali’s family.

“But on Monday, the protesters in the streets appeared more working class, including some hardened, veteran dissenters abused by Mr. Ben Ali’s government.”

In contrast, he wrote, “Off the streets, some Tunisian professionals who last week had railed against Mr. Ben Ali’s government said they were excited by the new government’s prudent first steps.”

Another important feature of the protests is their readiness to defend the democratic right of the Islamist al-Nahdhar movement to operate legally, while remaining generally hostile to political Islam, which had very little influence in the largely secular opposition movement.

The government has said that Al-Nadhar’s leader, Sheik Rashid al-Ghannouchi, would not be able to return to Tunisia until an amnesty law had been approved negating a 1991 exclusion order.

The danger that such a genuinely popular insurgency might spread beyond Tunisia is the central concern of the imperialist powers and the Arab regimes alike.

So far, this has not materialised. But protesters in Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania have emulated the self-immolation protest that initially spurred on the mass protests in Tunisia.

In Egypt yesterday, a man set fire to himself in Cairo—the third in just two days, and the second that day.

One day earlier, protesters in Mauritania and Algeria set themselves alight. Four people have attempted self-immolation in Algeria since the Tunisian revolt began.

The Arab League meets today in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, with the stated purpose of discussing trade and development. Its real agenda has been set in Tunisia. Yesterday, Kuwait’s Mohammad al-Sabah told a preparatory meeting of foreign ministers, “The Arab world is witnessing today unprecedented political developments and real challenges in the sphere of Arab national security... Countries disintegrate, people conduct uprisings... and the Arab citizen asks: Can the current Arab regime meet these challenges dynamically?”

Present at the meeting was the newly appointed Tunisian Foreign Minister, Kamel Morjane. He will have made clear to his counterparts just how precarious their position has become.

To underline the scale of the crisis facing the Arab regimes, Egypt’s benchmark stock index yesterday suffered its largest fall since last May, due to an exit of foreign investors. According to Bloomberg, “Foreigners, not including Arab investors, were net sellers of 226.5 million Egyptian pounds (\$38.9 million)... ‘Overseas investors are reducing their positions because of the increased political risk stemming from what we saw in Tunisia,’ said Ahmed Alseesi, head of sales trading for Middle East and North Africa institutions at Cairo-based Acumen Securities.”

Tunisia’s bourse is no longer operational.



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