

Thousands march against Tunisia's "unity" government

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Thousands marched again Wednesday in the center of Tunis and in other Tunisian cities demanding the ouster of ministers who had served in the regime of deposed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the dissolution of his ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party.

Five days after Ben Ali fled for Saudi Arabia in fear for his life, the Tunisian regime he left behind remains paralyzed and efforts to forge a "national unity" government have been stymied by mass opposition in the streets.

"We want a new parliament, a new constitution, a new republic!" demonstrators chanted as they marched down Bourguiba Avenue in the center of Tunis, defying a ban on public assemblies and security forces who lined the route and fired tear gas at the protest.

"This will continue every day until we get rid of the ruling party," Faydi Boni, a teacher, told the Reuters news agency. "We got rid of the dictator but not the dictatorship. We want rid of this government that shut us up for 30 years."

Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, a Ben Ali loyalist who has attempted to take the reins of government in the wake of the dictator's flight from Tunisia, was compelled to postpone the first scheduled cabinet meeting of the so-called unity government.

In the face of the continued mass resistance, four newly appointed ministers were compelled to withdraw from the government Tuesday after first agreeing to join it.

The popular hostility to the new government was immediate and intense, given that it failed to change either the prime minister or those in charge of all the other key posts, including the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, interior and finance.

Mustapha Ben Jaafar, the leader and former presidential candidate of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberty (FDLT), a bourgeois opposition party, announced that he would not assume a post as minister of health even before he could be sworn in.

Three other opposition figures who had joined the government—Anouar Ben Gueddour, junior minister for transportation and equipment; Houssine Dimassi, minister of labor; and Abdeljelil Bedoui, installed in a newly created post as "minister to the prime minister"—announced their resignations.

All three were representatives of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the sole union federation recognized under the Ben Ali regime, which used its bureaucracy to police and help repress the Tunisian working class.

UGTT secretary general Abdesslem Jerad, who in 2009 mobilized the union federation to support Ben Ali in a rigged election, said on Wednesday that the organization would not participate in a new government with "old regime" figures.

"We cannot take part in a government that includes symbols of the old regime," said Jerad after a meeting with Prime Minister Ghannouchi.

That the UGTT leader is himself just such a "symbol" will not be lost on many Tunisian workers. Clearly, the old union apparatus is carefully calibrating its actions with the aim of suffocating the mass movement and stabilizing the regime. It concluded, based on the mass mobilizations in the street, that the attempt to erect the unity government was not viable.

In a statement issued Wednesday, the UGTT said that this government "does not comply with the aspirations of the workers and the public in terms of having the forces of actual innovation away from the past practices, and in terms of the equilibriums of the number of members of former governments and the ruling party; in addition to the marginalization of the role of the UGTT representatives."

Neither Jerad nor the UGTT statement offered any explanation as to why the union apparatus tried to join the unity government in the first place.

A spokesman for the UGTT also clarified that while it was calling for the removal of all of the holdovers from the cabinet of the ousted dictator, it would make an exception in the case of Prime Minister Ghannouchi.

In a hollow attempt to dissipate mass opposition, Ghannouchi and the interim president, Mebazaa, announced on Tuesday that they were quitting Ben Ali's RCD party, which has ruled the country for decades.

While such a gesture will likely have no effect on the mass protests, the opposition leader Ben Jaffar told Reuters Wednesday that it might be enough for him to reconsider his leaving the government. A spokesman for his party said that it had "officially" pulled out of the government, but was seeking negotiations for forming an alternative administration.

Growing unease over the unfolding revolutionary events in Tunisia were expressed in the US, Europe and throughout the Arab world.

Al Jazeera Wednesday quoted Gordon Gray, the US ambassador to Tunisia, in what it said were his "first public remarks since a month of protests ended" in Ben Ali's overthrow.

Gray expressed himself with extreme caution, calling for all sides to exercise “responsibility.”

“I think what we have in Tunisia is a situation where ... this democratic expression is a work in progress,” Gray told the Arab news network. “And it’s a new phenomenon and it’s something that people are doing without very much experience.”

The non-committal character of the ambassador’s remarks reflect Washington’s uncertainty over whether it can salvage the remnants of a regime that it had backed virtually until the moment Ben Ali boarded his plane for Saudi Arabia.

In Europe, meanwhile, the head of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats at the European Parliament announced on Tuesday that Ben Ali’s RCD party had been expelled from the Socialist International under “exceptional conditions.”

The RCD had been a member since the 1970s. The international body includes the British and Australian Labor Parties, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the French Socialist Party along with social democratic parties as well as bourgeois nationalist parties around the world.

Like the Obama administration in Washington, these parties maintained fraternal ties to an organization that systematically plundered Tunisia as it was gunning down hundreds of protesters in the streets. The social-democratic grouping waited until it was clear that Ben Ali had lost power before severing relations.

In Washington, the White House reported that President Obama phoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Tuesday.

“The president raised the latest developments in Tunisia, and shared with President Mubarak that the United States is calling for calm and an end to violence, and for the interim government of Tunisia to uphold universal human rights and hold free and fair elections in order to meet the aspirations of the Tunisian people,” the White House reported in a statement.

The phone call came as Mubarak was hosting the Arab League at a summit on socioeconomic development in Sharm El-Sheikh.

In his speech to the summit, the Egyptian autocrat made no mention of the Tunisian events, stressing only that employment and economic development were issues of “Arab national security.”

The attention of the officials attending the summit was riveted on the upheavals, reflecting well-founded fears that their own repressive regimes could be next.

Kuwait’s ruling emir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, confined himself to urging Tunisia to “overcome this particular stage and achieve stability and security.”

One of the few voices to give direct expression to these fears within the Arab ruling elites was that of Arab League secretary Amr Moussa, who said, “What is happening in Tunisia in terms of the revolution is not an issue far from the issues of this summit which is economic and social development.”

Moussa warned that “the Arab citizen has entered a stage of anger that is unprecedented” and characterized Arab societies as “broken by poverty, unemployment and a general slide in indicators” and confronting “political problems that have not been resolved.”

Tunisia, he said, was a warning of “big social shocks” that would emerge in many Arab countries.

The threat that the Tunisian events may spread throughout the region have been tragically underscored by a series of incidents in which working people in neighboring countries have emulated the actions of Mohammed Bouazizi, the 26-year-old Tunisian who was fatally burned after setting himself on fire last month to protest abuse by the police and the seizure of his vegetable cart, which he used to make a living.

The action of the young worker, who like countless others in Tunisia and throughout the Arab world was unable to find regular employment, touched off the protests that spiraled into the massive uprising that brought down Ben Ali.

In Algeria, which has also seen protests over rising prices and unemployment over the past month, another three people attempted to commit suicide by self-immolation on Wednesday, the Agence France Presse news agency reported.

In a virtual repeat of the events that led to Mohammed Bouazizi’s actions, Afif Hadri, a 37-year-old Algerian worker and father of six, doused himself with gasoline in the main market of the eastern city of Oued and tried to set himself on fire before local people stopped him. Hadri had just had a confrontation with the police, who charged him with the illegal vending of food.

In a town outside of Algiers, a woman in her fifties poured gas on herself and tried to set fire to herself after being denied housing assistance. She was also stopped before committing the act.

A 35-year-old Algerian man succeeded in setting himself ablaze outside of a town hall in Dellys, outside of Algiers. Hospital officials told AFP that he was in critical condition with burns over 95 percent of his body.

And on Tuesday, an unemployed worker and father of six was hospitalized after torching himself to protest his lack of a job and housing.

In Egypt, meanwhile, an employee of the state water company tried to set himself on fire in front of the governor’s office in Cairo. It was the fourth case of attempted self-immolation in Egypt just this week. One person died from his burns on Tuesday. An unemployed father of six demanding a job and housing was also hospitalized Tuesday after setting himself on fire.



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