Anti-government protests continue in Tunisia during official mourning period

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Protests have continued in Tunisia on the first of three days of national mourning for those who died in the uprising. It is estimated that 100 people died in a month of protests.

The interim government, led by long-time cronies of the ousted president, Zine Abidine Ben Ali, called the mourning period in a calculated attempt to defuse popular anger and get opponents of the so-called "national unity" administration off of the streets. The government's "mourning" for Ben Ali's victims is utterly hypocritical, since all of those in key posts are complicit in the weeks of repression and state violence that preceded Ben Ali's fight.

The situation in Tunisia remains tense as the interim government struggles to contain the situation. On January 20, police fired over the heads of protesters outside the headquarters of the former ruling party. Yesterday, they held back crowds that gathered at the interior ministry and outside Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi's office. The crowds chanted, "The people want the government down."

Initially, Prime Minister Ghannouchi appointed a number of oppositionists to lower positions in the government. Ahmed Ibrahim, leader of the former Stalinist Ettajdid, or "Renewal Movement," was named minister for higher education. Najib Chebbi, leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), was made development minister, and Mustafa Ben Jaafar of the Union of Freedom and Labour (FDTL) became health minister. Blogger Slim Amamou was included as youth minister.

Roughly half of the interim government consisted of figures from the opposition. But key positions such as defence, interior, finance, foreign affairs and industry went to members of the old regime, as well as the posts of prime minister and interim president.

Most of the opposition ministers have now been forced to resign in the face of the continued protests against the interim government. The main Tunisian trade union, the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union), withdrew its support for the interim government and its three ministers quit. It is now calling for a "national salvation cabinet" that excludes all those associated with Ben Ali.

Ben Jaafar followed suit, with Najib Chebbi leaving reluctantly somewhat later. Chebbi's PDP initially tried to defend its place in the government on the grounds that without members of the old regime, Tunisia would descend into chaos like Somalia. But he was unable to withstand the hostility of his own party members.

All members of the government have now resigned from the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), and the party has officially dissolved its central committee. This manoeuvre has not satisfied the protesters, who continue to demand the dissolution of the party and immediate elections.

The continued protests have thrown the spotlight on opposition parties that were proscribed under Ben Ali—the Islamist Al-Nahda, or Renaissance, and the Workers Communist Party of Tunisia (PCOT), a small organisation affiliated to the Albanian Maoist movement founded by Enver Hoxha. These organizations are playing a prominent role in the current protests. Earlier this week the interim government lifted the legal ban on the two organizations so as to enlist their aid in containing the popular movement within the confines of Tunisian capitalism.

Members of one or both of these parties could potentially head up a new government or enter a coalition with some credibility on the street.

One of the issues under discussion in the media is the absence of an organised Islamist presence in the protests that led to Ben Ali's fall. Writing in the *New York Times*, Olivier Roy asked, "Where were the Tunisian Islamists?"

Precisely because the Tunisian protest movement centred on social and class issues—unemployment, inequality, the gross corruption of the regime—and not religious or sectarian questions, the international media is now seeking to promote the Islamist opposition in order to channel the movement along religious and anti-socialist lines.

The *New York Times* on Friday carried a favourable article on Al-Nahda and one of its leaders, Ali Larayedh, under the

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headline “Opposition in Tunisia Finds Chance For Rebirth.” The article characterized Al-Nahda as promoting “a uniquely liberal version of Islamist politics” and stated, “Mr. Larayedh now basks in a singular celebrity.”

It continued: “He is one of the few remaining leaders of the only credible opposition movement in Tunisia's history. And in the aftermath of Mr. Ben Ali’s flight, that movement’s potential reincarnation is perhaps the most significant variable in Tunisia’s post-revolutionary future—yearned for by legions of working-class and rural Tunisians, viewed with just as much apprehension by the cosmopolitan coastal elite.

“In an interview in the lobby of the Africa Hotel here, Mr. Larayedh insisted that his party posed no threat to Tunisians or to tourists sipping French wine in their bikinis along the Mediterranean beaches.”

For the *New York Times* to endorse an Islamic fundamentalist so warmly might seem an anomaly in the context of the continuing “war on terror.” Thousands of Islamists have been imprisoned since Tunisia backed the US invasion of Iraq. Larayedh has spent the last 14 years in prison. The US supported Ben Ali's ruthless dictatorship for decades on the grounds that it was necessary to prevent the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the region.

The *Times*’ about-face only underscores the cynicism and hypocrisy that underlie the “war on terror,” which has always been a means of advancing US imperialist interests in the Middle East, Central Asia and throughout the world. When faced with the danger of a revolutionary movement of the working class, the *Times* and the American ruling class for which it speaks have no problem promoting Islamist forces—just as they used them in the 1980s against a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan and encouraged their growth earlier as a counterweight to secular nationalist movements in the Middle East.

The London-based *Daily Telegraph* also had praise for Al-Nadha. Journalist Damien McElroy claimed that the party has “wide core support at the country's universities.” Larayedh told the *Daily Telegraph*, “We want a government that is able to make a democracy and that means the prime minister must go.”

Najib Chebbi of the PDP has called for “moderate political Islam” to be brought into any new government. Al-Nadha's top leader, Rached Ghannouchi, who is not related to Prime Minister Ghannouchi, is planning to return to Tunisia when the threat of a life sentence is lifted.

Also excluded from the interim government was the PCOT. It has gained an unprecedented level of media exposure in recent days, including in the journals of various middle-class “left” groups.

Hamma Hammami, the leader of the PCOT, was released from prison last week and since then has become an outspoken critic of the interim government. He and his wife, Radhia Nasraoui, have been identified as human rights activists in the *New York Times*.

“This is a national government which has nothing national about it,” Hammami said, “It’s intended to conserve the old regime in power with all of its authoritarian institutions in place.”

The PCOT is promoting a nationalist line, in opposition to a socialist and internationalist perspective. It has called for a constitutional assembly to establish a democratic republic on a capitalist basis. As part of this pro-capitalist program, the PCOT and Hammami are engaged in a politically criminal effort to promote illusions in the army, portraying it as a patriotic defender of the people against Ben Ali’s police and security forces.

“Tunisia's armed forces are fighting street battles against armed members of Ben Ali's sinister 'internal security' apparatus,” Hammami wrote. “Their decision to turn against the dictator was a decisive final blow forcing his resignation.”

General Rachif Ammar, the head of the army, has so far not made any public political statement. But writing in the London-based *Independent,* Kim Sengupta noted that the general has been a key figure behind the scenes. He quoted political analyst Walid Chisti's comments on the general's role:

“He does not have to do anything, just watch and wait. He is an ambitious man but also sophisticated and he knows the political game. Ammar is a clever man and he will not miscalculate and make the wrong move.”

The French and Arab media are full of reports that Tunisian generals persuaded Ben Ali to quit, but they did so after discussions with Washington. To present the Tunisian army as a uniquely national institution that will come to the aid of Tunisian workers and the oppressed is a travesty. This army has worked closely with the US for years in North Africa. With his appeal to the military, Hammami is offering himself as a reliable collaborator for US imperialism no less than the Islamist leaders.

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