

# Police crackdown in Tunisia meets resistance

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Tunisian police used tear gas against protesters gathered outside the office of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi on Monday morning. The demonstrators had defied the curfew and camped out peacefully all night, calling for the interim government to go because it is dominated by associates of the ousted president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

“Out of the fourteen members of the interim cabinet, eleven of them are the president’s people. This is not democracy,” a demonstrator told reporters.

The protest has been going on outside the prime minister’s office for days. But it has now been swelled by reinforcements from rural areas and small inland towns, including Sidi Bouzid. It was there that the self-immolation of unemployed college graduate Mohammed Bouazizi provoked the protests that brought down the president. These are the areas most severely hit by joblessness and poverty. They get little benefit from the tourism industry, which is the mainstay of the economy.

For several days, the police have refrained from tear gassing, beating or arresting protesters. Members of the police force have even taken part in demonstrations. But Monday saw a marked shift in tactics in a sign that the government is determined to hold on to power and resist popular calls for its resignation. The police would not have returned to their customary brutal methods without orders from the top.

Police erected razor wire barriers to prevent some 1,000 demonstrators from joining up with those inside the government compound. “Why don’t they let us break the barriers and join our brothers? Why do they say they will allow us the right to protest then stop us? Are they afraid the government will really be shaken? It seems that Ben Ali’s regime is back,” one protester said.

In response to the police action, protesters threw stones at a black limousine, apparently carrying a minister, when it arrived at the compound. Some windows in the finance ministry were broken. There are reports police cars were set on fire.

“We will stay here until the government resigns and runs away like Ben Ali,” a 22-year-old student named Othmene told the media.

Meanwhile, teachers have begun a strike, ensuring that students will remain on the streets. The government had planned to reopen schools and universities on Monday, so that young people would have to return to their studies.

Clearly concerned about the continuing protests in Tunisia

and the threat they will spread, French President Nicholas Sarkozy gave a press conference. He said that he had asked French Prime Minister Francois Fillon to put together an emergency aid package for Tunisia. This should be done “as quickly as possible,” he said

He was, Sarkozy said, concerned about events unfolding in North Africa, “especially in Algeria”. Algeria is France’s other former colony in the region.

Yesterday police put down a protest in the capital, Algiers. The demonstrators were calling for greater political freedom. Dozens were injured by the riot police, and numerous arrests were made.

The crackdowns in Tunisia and Algeria are a further indication of the closely integrated character of this region. There is a renewed determination on the part of the oppressive regimes that control North Africa to stem the tide of protest.

France undoubtedly played a behind-the-scenes part in the ruthless suppression of legitimate protests in Algeria and the return to repression in Tunisia. Just three days before Ben Ali fled, French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered Ben Ali “the world-renowned know-how of France’s security forces”.

Only on January 14, the day Ben Ali fled, did the French government block a shipment of riot-control gear being sent to Tunisia, including bullet-proof vests and tear-gas canisters, which was already at the airport.

Sarkozy attempted to repair some of the damage done to France’s international reputation by the sudden fall of Ben Ali. He admitted that France had underestimated the anger of the Tunisian people. But he refused to make any apology for the support, which his government had offered the Tunisian dictator until the moment that Ben Ali fell. He said that it was an “exaggeration” to say that France had remained silent as the death toll mounted.

This was Sarkozy’s first formal press conference for three years, a clear indication that he has no intention of letting popular protests weaken France’s influence in North Africa, or of allowing the United States to dominate the region unopposed. Alliot-Marie has declared that the current French ambassador will be replaced and that she will visit Tunisia in the near future.

France is supporting an interim government that is no less reactionary than that of Ben Ali. Despite Ghannouchi’s claim

that the government has released all political prisoners, it has not done so. More than a thousand are thought to remain in Mornaguia prison. Relatives have gathered outside Borj Lamary prison demanding the release of the political prisoners held there.

A bus carrying 20 men left Borj Lamary last week. But relatives say that many more remain. One mother said that her son had been arrested under anti-terrorism laws. "They sentenced him to five years and they have tortured him and tortured him almost to death," she said.

Working class youths have been rounded up in poor areas and detained under the anti-terror laws. Tunisia became a closer ally of the US because of its support for the "war on terror". The consequence has been that thousands of young men have been arrested and often convicted on hearsay evidence or as a result of confessions made under torture.

"What happens is a plain clothes security official prays with them at the mosque and when they come out after prayers, they put them in cars and take them to jail and no one hears of them after that," one man explained.

Monday's attack on protesters indicates that the Tunisian uprising has reached a turning point. Within the space of a week, the interim government has been discredited. Even the UGTT union, which supported Ben Ali, has had to withdraw its support for the interim government and insist that union affiliated ministers resign.

Initially, the Tunisian ruling elite hoped that the protests would lose momentum and the population would be satisfied with a few cosmetic changes. Instead, some of the most deprived layers of Tunisian society have shown their determination to continue the uprising. Protesters came in from the rural districts and small towns waving photographs of their dead relatives. The impact of the world financial crisis has produced a response among these social layers that will not easily be stopped.

This change in the social makeup of the demonstrations was reflected in the intervention of the head of the Tunisian army, General Rachid Ammar. Until now he has remained silent. His first statement on the uprising was a threat of dictatorship.

"Our revolution, your revolution, the revolution of the young, risks being lost... There are forces that are calling for a void, a power vacuum. The void brings terror, which brings dictatorship."

He called on the protesters to leave the government compound "to let this government work, this government or another one."

The UGTT and other opposition organisations have repeatedly portrayed the army and Rachid Ammar in particular as an ally. They have appealed to him on the basis of the supposed shared national interests of the demonstrators and the military. That is why he can speak of "our revolution" and lay claim to a part in a movement to which he is implacably opposed. His only role has been to tell Ben Ali that it was time

to go when the US military told him to do so because the situation was unsustainable. He then allowed Ben Ali and his family to leave the country with 1.5 tonnes of gold bars worth \$56 million and a stash of foreign currency.

Ben Ali's departure for Saudi Arabia was the price the rest of the Tunisian bourgeoisie were prepared to pay so that they could retain power. The interim government, behind which the army stands, is the mechanism by which they hoped to ride out the protests and construct a new regime that will inevitably be just as repressive as its predecessor.

The ruling class in Tunisia and France are determined that the uprising cannot be allowed to continue and that order, of the most authoritarian kind, must be restored. They fear that unless this uprising is brought to a halt it will spread. The demonstration in Algeria, although small, was a sign that this process is already beginning. In Yemen, demonstrations have broken out on the university campuses. Even Sudan has seen protests.

In Egypt, a "day of revolution" is planned for today. The Egyptian stock market has fallen, as has the currency on world markets. Extra battalions of riot police have been stationed outside the Tunisian embassy in Cairo in preparation.

The Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organisation, and one of the largest groups opposed to the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, has refused to take part in the demonstrations. They called for elections and for the emergency laws, which have been in force since 1967, to be removed.

"Working on these demands will protect Egypt from a grand public uprising that will be greater than what happened in Tunisia," it stated.

The Brotherhood is a banned organisation in Egypt, and its members are routinely harassed, arrested and tortured by the security forces. But in their immediate response to the planned demonstration, they reveal their hostility to a genuinely popular uprising. They are entirely correct to suppose that such an uprising in Egypt, with its many-millioned working class, would be on a much bigger scale than that in Tunisia.

The popular uprising of the Tunisian and Arab masses needs an international socialist leadership, which reflects the interests of the working class and rejects all appeals to national unity and the national interest. The workers of Tunisia, North Africa and the Middle East will not find the kind of intransigent leadership they require in any other organisation than the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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