

US, interim government conspire against Tunisian masses

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The interim Tunisian government has announced a ministerial reshuffle in an effort to maintain its hold on power in the face of continuing protests. The cabinet changes are aimed at distancing the government from the regime of ousted president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali through the removal of a number of ministers associated with the Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD).

The cosmetic character of the shake-up is underscored by the retention as prime minister of Mohamed Ghannouchi, prime minister under Ben Ali and long-time RCD political henchman of the former president. Ghannouchi said Thursday that 12 ministers had been replaced by "independents," leaving two holdovers from the Ben Ali regime who had not been RCD members.

The reshuffle followed the arrival in Tunis of US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman. "We have heard the voice of the Tunisian people loud and clear," Feltman said on Tunisian television.

The senior US State Department official is the real power behind the scenes. He is noted for the role he played in constructing Fouad Siniora's government, which held power in Lebanon from 2005 to 2008.

Feltman left Tunisia on Wednesday after a three-day visit, heading for Paris, where he held talks about the Tunisian situation and the new Lebanese government of Najib Mikati. France is the former colonial power in both countries.

Washington is working to suppress the Tunisian uprising, whatever statements it may make about respect for democracy. If the cabinet changes fail to achieve this objective, the US will resort to alternative tactics.

Doubtless one option being considered by Washington is the installation of a military dictatorship. Earlier this month, in the face of mass protests in Tunis and other cities, US generals communicated directly with their Tunisian counterparts and told them to withdraw their support for Ben Ali, precipitating the end of the 23-year rule of the long-time US ally.

For the most part, the Tunisian army has intervened to secure key cities and government installations but refrained from attacking demonstrators who are demanding the resignation of the interim government or the purging from it of former allies of Ben Ali, including Ghannouchi. The army is posturing as the defender of the revolution against the police and forces tied to Ben Ali.

Earlier this week, however, Gen. Rachid Ammar, head of the army, warned that if calls for the overthrow of the interim

government continued, the alternative could be a dictatorship—a danger he identified as coming from Ben Ali's former supporters. Ammar has fallen silent again, but the army remains the dominant presence in the background. Ammar may yet prove useful as a Pinochet-like figure brought in to drown the uprising in blood.

To play the military card at this point, however, when a popular uprising is spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, would be dangerous for Washington. The Obama administration and the Tunisian ruling elite are consequently relying increasingly on the formerly illegal opposition, whether Islamist or nominally left-wing, to contain the mass movement and channel it behind the bourgeoisie, promoting fatal illusions in the official promises of democratic reform.

Despite the cabinet shake-up, protesters have continued to surround the office of the prime minister, as they have done for the past four nights in defiance of the curfew. There have been repeated clashes with the police.

Among those removed in the cabinet reshuffle is Foreign Minister Kamel Morjane, to be replaced by Ahmed Ounais. It is thought that the US initially favoured Morjane as a replacement for Ben Ali, but he is too closely associated with the old regime. Feltman met with him during his visit.

The interim government has been given a face-lift, but the unpopular ministers have been replaced by lower-level functionaries from the old regime. Ounais is a career diplomat who served under Ben Ali. The interior ministry has gone to Farhat Rajhi, who, as chief prosecutor, was responsible for enforcing Ben Ali's dictatorship. A council of "wise men" has been formed that includes figures dating back to the days of Ben Ali's predecessor, Habib Bourguiba.

The main Tunisian trade union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), nevertheless welcomed the cabinet shake-up. The UGTT, which had long supported Ben Ali, initially joined the interim government that replaced him, but was forced to pull its representatives out in the face of mass popular opposition. It has since adopted a critical stance, the better to strangle the popular movement.

Expressing scepticism that the cabinet changes will be sufficient to halt the protests, Cambridge research fellow George Joffe said, "These were stalwarts in the old regime. It's not going to wash. The street won't like it."

Many demonstrators come from the most deprived areas of Tunisia and have seen their meagre livelihoods further eroded

under Ben Ali's IMF-dictated economic restructuring. The movement represents a mobilisation of the working class and the rural poor and poses a serious threat to all elements of the old regime, including the UGTT.

The latter has been part of the political regime in Tunisia since independence in 1957. Its former leader, Habib Achour, was a leading member of Bourguiba's Neo-Destour Party. He signed a social contract with the government and refused to support strikes by phosphate miners, textile workers and other sections of the working class in 1977-78. The army put these strikes down with immense brutality.

When Ben Ali came to power in 1987, with his “tranquil revolution,” he initially promised democratic reforms. But as minister of the interior he had overseen the suppression of opposition under Bourguiba and had built up a secret militia of plainclothes thugs and informers. Nonetheless, the UGTT maintained its support for the government and backed Ben Ali in the rigged presidential elections.

If the reshuffle fails to bring an end to the protests, other plans are in preparation. Tunisian government officials have told the *New York Times* that they are looking for an opposition figure to negotiate with and end the present impasse. Prime candidates are the Islamists of the Nadha Party.

The *Financial Times* was quick to interview Rachid Ghannouchi, its leader, in exile in London. His deputy, Ali Larayedh, spoke to the *New York Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. But neither man played any part in the Tunisian uprising. Nor did their party, and they cannot easily present themselves as leaders of the popular movement.

It may be that Washington and the Tunisian regime have to turn to other forces. One of the most recently formed groups is the 14th of January Movement, named after the day that Ben Ali fled. It is an alliance of Arab nationalist organisations, including the Ba'ath Movement, and self-styled left parties, including the Workers Communist Party of Tunisia (PCOT).

Its founding statement identifies as one of its main tasks “to prepare for elections of a constituent assembly.” This is a long established position of the PCOT, which declares it to be the basis for establishing “a real democratic republic in which people would enjoy freedom, social equality and national dignity.”

The same call appeared in a 1990 communiqué issued by the Tunisian National Salvation Front, which claimed to represent all opposition groups including the PCOT and Nadha.

The PCOT is a Maoist group and proclaims its loyalty to Enver Hoxha, the former leader of Albania, and to the legacy of Stalin. Its historic fondness for anti-working class, anti-socialist dictatorships is bound up with its perspective of a “two-stage” revolution, which in theory relegates any struggle for socialism to the dim and distant future and in practice opposes the struggle for socialism and subordinates the working class to the native bourgeoisie and imperialism.

Its current prominence has been provided by its ability to fill a political vacuum created by the betrayals and collapse of the pro-Moscow Tunisian Communist Party, founded in 1934 as an offshoot of the French Communist Party. It was outlawed under the pro-fascist Vichy regime.

Bourguiba declared it illegal in 1962, but legalised it in 1981. It identified itself as a national democratic organisation that sought unity between all “patriotic classes.” In 1988, it signed Ben Ali's National Pact. With the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, the party repudiated any association with communism. In 1993, it became the Movement Ettajdid (the Movement for Renewal). It has a minister in the interim government, Ahmed Ibrahim.

The PCOT was founded in 1986, as the Bourguiba regime entered the crisis that ultimately brought Ben Ali to power in 1987. Party members were arrested and imprisoned and some even died under torture. Its leader, Hamma Hammami, and his wife, Radhia Nasraoui, have become internationally known as human rights activists. They were among 17 people, mainly students, arrested and tried in 2000 for membership of the PCOT. Hammami was among those arrested as the current uprising began and has only recently been released from prison.

The 14th of January Movement's proposed “constituent assembly” is a fraud. It is conceived of as a body that would merely keep watch on the interim government. The army and the police, which both have a long record of attacking workers, would remain under the control of a government made up of members of the old regime with a sprinkling of new faces.

In fact, the army's role has always been to defend the regime. It has held back from intervening overtly against the uprising because its leadership is working closely with the US, and Washington is still attempting to construct a civilian government.

The PCOT consistently portrays the army as a defender of the revolution and a popular force acting independently of the regime. In this way it spreads the most fatal illusions and prepares the way for a bloody defeat of the working class.

The way forward for the working class and oppressed masses in Tunisia and throughout the Arab world—and the only means for securing democratic rights and putting an end to poverty and mass unemployment—is a united struggle for workers' power and socialism against both the native bourgeoisie and imperialism.



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