

Anti-government action spreads to Djibouti

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The wave of popular protests in the Middle East and North Africa has reached the country of Djibouti. Located in the strategically important Horn of Africa, across the Bab-el-Mandeb strait from Yemen, Djibouti is home to US and French military bases.

Around 30,000 people amassed in the capital, Djibouti City, on Friday to protest against the rule of President Ismail Omar Guelleh. The demonstration far outnumbered earlier anti-government rallies held on January 28 and February 5, when crowds estimated at 2,000 to 3,000 gathered after Friday prayers.

Human Rights Watch reported that police met the February 5 gathering with teargas and rubber bullets. The president of Djibouti's League of Human Rights was arrested February 9 after he spoke to international media about the arrest of several anti-government student activists.

"We are protesting against dictatorship, bad governance, lack of democracy and dynastic succession," Ismael Guedi Hared, an opposition leader, told the *Financial Times* on Friday. According to the Al Jazeera news web site, Hared and other officials from the Union for Democratic Change, an umbrella group of three opposition parties, addressed the crowd to call for Guelleh to step down.

Hared was arrested during the protest and then released on Saturday. However, on Sunday Djibouti's authorities arrested 20 members of the opposition Union for a Democratic Alternative. An estimated 15 members of another opposition group, the Movement for Democratic Renewal, have been jailed since the earlier protests.

Guelleh has ruled the small country of around 850,000 inhabitants since 1999, while his ethnic-Somali Issa Dir clan has run Djibouti since it declared formal independence from France in 1977. The president changed the constitution last year to allow him to stand for a third six-year term this April.

Guelleh was re-elected unopposed in 2005.

During the French colonial period, the two main ethnic groups, Somalis and Afars, were pitted against each other; the Somali Issa Dir and Gadabuursi clans have monopolized political power for decades. The government and Afar rebels fought a bloody civil war in the 1990s, before Guelleh brought some Afar leaders into a power-sharing cabinet. The mass protests currently unfolding in Djibouti have so far taken an anti-government rather than an ethnic coloration.

According to reports from the AFP news agency, protesters at the mass gathering in Djibouti City held banners reading "IOG [the initials of the president] out" and "No third mandate."

The peaceful mass gathering was met by violence from police, with at least four demonstrators killed and 50 wounded. The Interior Ministry reported that a police officer had also been killed.

Protests continued Saturday, with reports of further violent clashes between the mainly young demonstrators and police. A large group of protesters has attempted to make a full-time camp in front of the Gouled sports stadium in the capital, apparently imitating the mass encampment in Cairo's Tahrir Square in Egypt. However, police have used tear gas and baton charges to clear the area.

Egypt's Ahram news agency reported that the most intense clash took place outside a hospital on Saturday, with demonstrators confronted with large numbers of heavily armored riot police. An Interior Ministry statement sent to AFP claimed, "Members of the national police were forced to resort to tear gas grenades to protect themselves from a violent and over-excited crowd."

The poor working class neighborhood of Balbala, a slum of over 200,000 inhabitants on the outskirts of the capital, has emerged as a center of opposition to the regime, with several reports of fighting between youth

and police. The average age in Djibouti is just 21, and unemployment and poverty are especially high among youth. Half the population lives below the official poverty line, and malnourishment afflicts thousands of families.

Life expectancy at birth is estimated at around 50 years. The United Nations Human Development Index, which measures life expectancy, literacy, education and health care, places Djibouti in 148th place out of 169 countries, making it one of the most deprived places on Earth.

Guelleh presides over this social powder keg with the full and active support of the former colonial power, France, and the United States—which maintains its only African military base in the country.

Djibouti’s location on the Bab-el-Mandeb waterway, which connects the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, makes it a vital choke point for shipping. Over 3 million barrels of oil are shipped through this strait every day, en route from the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal and markets in Europe and beyond.

This strategic location has made Djibouti, and the entire Horn of Africa, a valued prize for the imperialist powers since the 19th century. Paris ruled the country as French Somaliland until independence was granted in 1977. However, France has retained effective control over Djibouti’s foreign and defense policies, primarily through the presence of almost 3,000 of its Foreign Legion troops and a naval detachment.

Since launching the “war on terror” in 2001, the US has also played a major role in Djibouti. The Pentagon maintains a military base, Camp Lemonnier, in the country from which it organizes its operations in neighboring Somalia, where Washington is backing a regime fighting Islamist rebels. The US base in Djibouti also provides a strategic base for its operations across the Bab-el-Mandeb in the Arabian Peninsula, where US forces are working with the regime of Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh.



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