

North African uprisings force French foreign minister to resign

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The French minister for foreign affairs, Michèle Alliot-Marie, was forced to resign her post on Sunday, over the scandal surrounding her political and private relations with deposed Tunisian dictator Ben Ali.

President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a government reshuffle in a hastily organized, 10-minute television address, which made no reference to Alliot-Marie. Alain Juppé, the current defense minister, was named the new minister for foreign affairs. Sarkozy removed Brice Hortefeux, recently convicted for racist insults, from his post of interior minister to become special adviser to the president. Claude Guéant, ex-director general of the National Police and ex-presidential adviser, now occupies Hortefeux's post, from which Sarkozy hopes to press on with his anti-immigrant campaign as part of his racist policy to get reelected in 2012.

Sarkozy excused his government's support for the dictatorial regimes in North Africa by citing the fact that France was no exception to the support generally offered to these dictatorships by all the Western powers. He claimed that the new democracies in North Africa now need support from his initiative launched three years ago for a Mediterranean Union. He said, "These Arab revolutions open a new era in our relations with these countries ... we must not be frightened of this historic change."

He also called for an urgent meeting of the European Council of Ministers to resolve the Libyan crisis and the flow of refugees.

Alliot-Marie was also fired due to her partner Patrick Ollier's close relations with the Gaddafi regime—a policy sanctioned by the Sarkozy government. Ollier is the minister for parliamentary relations and also president of a "parliamentary friendship committee" with Libya.

It was Sarkozy who invited Gaddafi on a state visit to France in 2007, which led to the signing of lucrative military contracts. Ollier said he intended to resign his position in sympathy with Alliot-Marie but has been persuaded to remain. Sarkozy has now belatedly said that Gaddafi must go, and the French government has closed its embassy in Tripoli.

France's government and diplomacy are in disarray over the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. The revolts against Libyan leader Gaddafi and the fall of Ben Ali—two of French imperialism's closest allies—have forced Sarkozy to make a government reshuffle only three months after the last one.

The president's popularity rating has fallen to 30 percent, tying its record low.

The 64-year-old Alliot-Marie has held key ministerial posts since 1993. She has been under pressure to quit since the ouster of Ben Ali, when it was revealed that she and her family had spent their 2010 Christmas holidays in Tunisia at the start of the uprising against Ben Ali. One anonymous government minister said the situation had become "untenable".

During her stay in Tunisia, Alliot-Marie was transported on several occasions by a private jet belonging to businessman Aziz Miled, a close financial backer of Ben Ali. She was accompanied on the trip by her partner, Patrick Ollier, and her parents—who concluded property deals with Miled during their stay. The group stayed at a hotel in Tabarka owned by Miled.

President Sarkozy cynically defended Alliot-Marie's behavior, and thereby the French ruling elite's ties to the Ben Ali regime, claiming that "not a cent of public money has been embezzled".

Prime Minister François Fillon gave full support to

his foreign minister. It was later revealed that Egypt's now-deposed dictator, President Hosni Mubarak, paid for Fillon's family holiday at the end of December, in Egypt.

Alliot-Marie notoriously offered French support to put down the Tunisian uprising in a parliamentary speech on January 11—or, as she put it, offered the “know-how” of France's police forces. Large amounts of anti-riot equipment were in the process of being shipped when Ben Ali was toppled.

From that moment on, Paris has faced an escalating series of scandals in Tunisia, the former French colony where French imperialism has vast investments. The ex-minister for foreign affairs was noticeably absent last week from the first French government delegation to visit Tunisia since the uprising and would certainly have been considered persona non grata by Tunisian workers. The visit was led by Finance Minister Christine Lagarde and Minister for European Affairs Laurent Wauquiez.

The new French ambassador to Tunisia installed last week, Boris Boillon, further damaged the reputation of French imperialism when being questioned by Tunisian journalists on Alliot-Marie's support for Ben Ali. After explaining he had arrived “to lubricate the traffic between the two countries”, Boillon arrogantly denounced the questions posed as “dumb” and closed down the interviews. The lack of respect for his interviewers caused hundreds of demonstrators to gather at the French embassy, demanding Boillon's expulsion from Tunisia.

Prior to arriving as ambassador in Tunisia, Boillon was France's ambassador with the US occupation regime in Baghdad.

France's relations with North African and Middle Eastern dictators have created divisions within the government and the diplomatic corps.

Sections of the ruling elite around the bourgeois opposition Socialist Party (PS) have criticized what they called the wait-and-see approach of the current government, which has hoped its dictator allies could survive the popular revolts. Michèle Alliot-Marie declared on January 18 that “France had not seen the coming events.”

PS first secretary Martine Aubry lamented that French diplomacy “no longer exists ... and for that reason France is shrinking in the world”.

Similarly, disgruntled diplomats published an anonymous critique in *Le Monde* of President Sarkozy's foreign policy, accusing him of “short term media preoccupations”—apparently in reference to next year's presidential election. The article complained that policy on Tunisia and Egypt had been defined “without taking account of embassy analyses.”

The PS's criticisms are dishonest and politically bankrupt. The PS has underwritten the dictatorships in North Africa. Inside the so-called Socialist International, the PS was affiliated to both Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) and Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP). With its political maneuvers, the PS intends to hide these relations while posing as more skilful—and potentially more successful—representatives of the French ruling class.



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