

More news of ties to North African dictators roils French ruling elite

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Amid revolutionary struggles across North Africa and the Middle East that have already toppled dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, details continue to emerge of the corrupt ties between these dictators and leading French politicians. These revelations are embarrassing the French political establishment, including the main bourgeois “left” opposition party, the Parti Socialiste (PS).

In early February, the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* revealed that Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, her partner, and her parents spent their Christmas holiday in Tunisia during the social unrest. On this trip, they enjoyed the hospitality of Aziz Miled, a wealthy businessman with close personal ties to ousted Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Alliot-Marie’s party were provided with the use of Miled’s private jet and a stay at his luxury hotel. (See “French government embarrassed by its ties to North African dictatorships”)

Alliot-Marie’s family enjoyed hospitality and business deals in the midst of an intensifying social revolt, brutally repressed by the Ben Ali regime, during which some 200 people were killed. When the social revolt escalated against the regime, Alliot-Marie offered the “know-how” of France’s police forces to help quell the social uprising.

Shortly after this revelation, it was French Prime Minister François Fillon’s turn to face criticism over his Christmas holiday in Egypt, offered by now-ousted President Hosni Mubarak. (See “French prime minister faces scandal over all-expenses paid Egyptian vacation”)

Fillon’s subsequent attempts to explain his ties to Mubarak only underscored the profound historical

connections between Paris and the Arab dictatorships. While on visit to Saudi Arabia, the prime minister said: “It’s a question of relations between France and Egypt. [Former presidents] François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy have all repeatedly responded to invitations from President Mubarak.”

Another revelation pointed out that French Minister of Economic Affairs Christine Lagarde was offered one week’s hospitality in 2008 by the Egyptian minister of foreign trade, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, one of the richest men in the country. He offered her and her children a private trip by jet to Sharm el Sheikh and then to Luxor, where she was the guest of the minister of tourism.

Last week, *Le Canard Enchaîné* further revealed that Alliot-Marie’s trip to Tunisia was part of a business deal between her parents and Aziz Miled, a family friend with whom they have had business dealings for some time. According to the weekly publication, “Alliot-Marie’s parents, Bernard Marie and Renée, had bought shares in a property company owned by Miled, in an amount worth 325,000 euros.”

Speaking on the French radio station Europe 1, Alliot-Marie’s father Bernard Marie said they had “turned to a friend named Mr. Miled, whom I have known for some time and whom we had already visited. He also came to see me, in the same jet.”

These revelations, however, have exposed the calculated ambiguities in Alliot-Marie’s initial explanations of her Tunisian trip. She said, “Arriving on Christmas in Tunis, I met a friend going to Tabarka, my final destination, who in effect proposed that I could travel with him, because he had room.”

Le Canard published excerpts from the municipal register of the city of Tabarka, where the transaction took place between her parents and Aziz Miled. The *Médiapart* news site reported that their luxury hospitality in Tabarka was offered by Miled. It also reported that Alliot-Marie had used Miled's private jet not two, but four times.

Ben Ali's family used the same aircraft when they fled the country on January 14.

Earlier, Alliot-Marie maintained that she had "no close contact" with Tunisian regime. She claimed that she had been in Tunisia on "vacation, like millions of French people", and that during her vacation, she was "no longer a minister".

However, *Médiapart* reported that she had a telephone conversation with Ben Ali during her trip. This revelation was later confirmed by the French foreign ministry, Quai d'Orsay. Despite these revelations, the French ruling conservative government has defended her and has opposed calls for her resignation.

When Alliot-Marie's travel scandal broke out, the bourgeois "left" opposition PS made cynical calls for her resignation. However, new reports show that the deposed African dictators had ties not only with Alliot-Marie and Fillon, but also with high-ranking members of the PS.

Last week, *Le Canard* revealed that there had been a closer link between Aziz Miled and the former PS justice minister, Elisabeth Guigou, and her husband Jean-Louis, who established the think tank IPEMED (Institute for Economic Perspectives in the Mediterranean World) in 2006.

According to *Le Canard*, Aziz Miled is vice-chairman of the supervisory board elected in 2009 and one of the financial backers of IPEMED. IPEMED welcomed his election and wrote, "The election as vice-president of Mr. Aziz Miled, the first man to represent the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, is a significant tribute to the role played by Tunisia under the leadership of President Ben Ali."

Las Thursday, soon after this revelation, Guigou announced that she was resigning as co-chair of the Committee for Political Oversight of IPEMED. This

group includes a number of high-ranking officials—largely though not exclusively drawn from European social-democratic circles—including former Italian premier Romano Prodi, former Spanish prime minister Felipe González, former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, Lebanese economist Georges Corm, former French prime minister Alain Juppé, and former US Clinton administration adviser Robert Malley.

The supervisory board of IPEMED includes representatives of major French industries and banks that finance the think tank, such as Gerard Mestrallet (GDF Suez) and Anne Lauvergeon (nuclear firm Areva). It is also reported that the Mabrouk group—led by Mohamed Ali, Ismail and Marwan Mabrouk—also funds the think tank. Mabrouk is married to Cyrine Ben Ali, the daughter of the former Tunisian president.

Guigou argued, "This think tank organizes seminars, colloquia, but has no commercial, industrial or financial activities."

Nonetheless, the task of IPEMED and other such organizations is to study how French and global investors can continue to exploit cheap labor and energy resources throughout North Africa. As long as dictatorial regimes remained in power, the French ruling class did not bother discussing violations of human rights.

A WikiLeaks cable from the US embassy in Tunis dated April 30, 2009 states that "during his visit to Tunisia, French Prime Minister [François Fillon] made fewer public statements on democracy and human rights. When Fillon was pinged on these issues during a press conference, he said that France 'doesn't give lessons' on human rights, and that the world 'asks more of Tunisia' because it is more developed and more 'similar to us'. He added that human rights problems 'arise pretty much in every country in the world' and that democratization is 'a continuous process'."



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