

French government embarrassed by its ties to North African dictatorships

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The mass protests in North Africa against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled his country on January 14, are shaking the French government. For the time being, attention has focused on Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who like many French politicians enjoyed close ties to the Tunisian regime.

Alliot-Marie and her husband Patrick Ollier—also a government minister—enjoyed a free ride in Tunisian multi-millionaire Aziz Milad’s private jet and stayed at his luxury hotel over the Christmas holidays, as protests against Ben Ali continued. Milad’s jet was chartered by Karthago Airlines, owned by Ben Ali’s brother-in-law, Belhassen Trabelsi. Trabelsi is now the subject of an international arrest warrant.

While Alliot-Marie enjoyed Milad’s hospitality, Ben Ali’s police were gunning down workers and youth protesting unemployment, poverty, and the Ben Ali dictatorship. At least 218 were killed, according to government figures.

On January 11, once she was back on the job, Alliot-Marie proposed to send French riot police to help suppress Tunisian protestors.

Alliot-Marie’s actions symbolized all too clearly the collusion between Paris and the dictatorship in Tunisia, a former French colony. Alliot-Marie compounded her problems by making clumsy attempts to shift attention from her ties to the Ben Ali regime.

She claimed that Milad had been a victim of Ben Ali. In fact, as *Le Nouvel Observateur* noted, Milad was “one of the organisers of Ben Ali’s 2004 presidential

campaign, and [a signatory] of a motion of support for the candidacy of the former strongman for the presidential elections due in 2014.”

Alliot-Marie also tried to appeal to anti-Americanism, ludicrously blaming Washington for Ben Ali’s overthrow: “America took control of the situation ... Needless to say, the Americans did not keep us informed.” Such comments clearly suggested that her main objection to the state of affairs was that Ben Ali was no longer in power.

Under questioning by deputies at the National Assembly, she demonstrated her ignorance about the protests and about Mohamed Bouazizi—the young fruit vendor whose self-immolation on December 17 triggered the mass protests against Ben Ali. She got the date of his death wrong, claiming instead: “The suicide took place, I think, at the end of my stay. That’s what I remember.”

More brazenly still, she asserted: “There was no repression at that time.” She later attacked those who criticized her, claiming they were waging a “campaign of denigration.”

Members of the PS and of its pseudo-“left” satellites like the New Anti-Capitalist Party have demanded her departure. PS deputy Pierre Moscovici said, “France’s foreign policy cannot be represented by Madame Alliot-Marie.”

Another PS deputy, Olivier Dussopt, told the government: “Your minister of Foreign Affairs is disqualified. Be responsible and appoint another spokesperson for our partners.”

While Alliot-Marie's defense of Ben Ali is particularly shameless, attempts to rescue the French ruling class's reputation by forcing her to depart are entirely cynical.

Prime Minister François Fillon has opposed calls for Alliot-Marie to resign, and President Nicolas Sarkozy has kept silent on the matter. However—amid recent reports that Fillon himself was a guest of the Egyptian regime for his Christmas vacation—pressure may continue to rise.

The policy of support for Ben Ali was shared not only by the entire French government, but by the PS as well, reflecting French imperialism's strategic interests in North Africa.

France has sought to develop its former North African colonies as sources of energy and cheap labor (see "France: Continental offers €137-a-month jobs in Tunisia"). Any serious struggle against France's support for North African dictatorships must take as its political basis a socialist struggle against imperialism.

The support given to Ben Ali by the French government is well-documented. On January 8 and 12, seven tons of teargas, batons and other police equipment ordered from French firms by the Tunisian police, were cleared for export by the ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Foreign Affairs.

Fillon confirmed the event in a letter sent on February 2 to Jean-Marc Ayrault, the leader of the opposition Socialist Party (PS) group in the National Assembly. The consignment was intercepted by the French customs a few hours before Ben Ali's departure. The official order to customs to block this material came from Alliot-Marie, but only on January 18.

As for the PS, the *Dauphine Libéré* pointed out that the mentor of the leadership of the Socialist Party, President François Mitterrand, enjoyed "sumptuous holidays... in Egypt at the invitation of Mubarak." More recently, the Plural Left government of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) maintained good relations with North African dictators.

It was formally affiliated to both the Egyptian and the Tunisian ruling parties inside the social-democratic Socialist International. The international body only expelled the Tunisian Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) in January, and Egypt's National Democratic Party (NDP) on February 5.



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