

Tunisian regime seeks emergency powers against mass protests

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Yesterday the Tunisian parliament's lower house voted 177 to 16 to grant emergency powers to Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, the head of the Tunisian regime since President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced to flee by mass protests on January 14. The Senate is expected to vote on the bill Wednesday, at which point it can be ratified by interim president Fouad Mebazza.

Ghannouchi, a top finance official under Ben Ali who helped design privatization policies that benefited Tunisia's financial elite, applauded the bill. He said, "Tunisia has a real need of rule by decree to remove dangers. There are people who want Tunisia to go backwards, but we must honor our martyrs who fought for liberty."

As lawmakers debated the bill, hundreds of demonstrators massed outside to demand the dissolution of the parliament—which was not dissolved after Ben Ali fled. Ben Ali's ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), still holds 80 percent of the seats in the parliament.

Ghannouchi's move to obtain emergency powers came amid continuing popular protests and street fighting between the population and the Tunisian dictatorship's police forces. After four people were killed and a dozen injured in clashes with police in El Kef on Saturday—as the population demanded the departure of a corrupt police chief—the El Kef police station was torched Sunday. Another demonstrator was killed.

In Kebili, in southern Tunisia, one youth died after he was hit by a teargas canister amid clashes with security forces.

A national march to Sidi Bouzid—the city where the self-immolation of fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi triggered the protests—gathered 7,000 people.

Strikes are also continuing against the regime. On February 4, *Le Monde* reported strikes in a number of industrial sectors—by mass transit workers, Tunis Air temp workers, and state media employees. However, it wrote, "overall the economic machine has restarted, especially at the Radès port in Tunis, which controls 70 percent of the country's export-import trade."

Under these conditions, the regime has not yet dared to carry out mass repression against the population. The emergency powers vote, however, clearly signals the type of policy the Tunisian regime plans to eventually pursue. It is not trying to reform itself, but to exploit Ben Ali's departure to buy time, strengthening its repressive powers to prepare for conditions in which it believes it can move decisively against the working class.

This decision is not only an exposure of the Tunisian dictatorship, but of policies of the United States and other imperialist powers throughout North Africa. They are replying to mass protests in Egypt by claiming that the regime of Hosni Mubarak will make a "democratic transition," transforming the country by eventually arranging for Mubarak to give up his post.

As the Tunisian example shows, however, simply changing who is dictator at the top does not transform the regime. In fact, only overthrowing the dictatorship and replacing it by a state based directly on independent organizations of the working class and pursuing socialist policies can provide a democratic way forward for the masses.

While top government officials and pro-regime papers cynically praise the revolution, the state is trying to disorient and draw down popular opposition.

The regime is handing out blood money to its victims. It will pay €10,300 to the family of someone killed by the state during the protests, and €1,546 to the

wounded. As of February 1, the UN had counted 219 killed and 510 wounded.

Above all, the regime is cynically trumpeting various measures carried out to defend its own interests as measures to undermine the RCD. Amid a mass demonstration demanding the resignation of the entire transitional government, a January 28 cabinet reshuffle removed Kamel Morjane, another hated RCD figure close to Ben Ali, as foreign minister. Ahmed Ounais, a high-ranking official and former ambassador trained in France—the former colonial power in Tunisia—took his place.

Morjane said that he was leaving “so that the popular revolution can bear fruit.”

The Ghannouchi regime has the support of Tunisia’s trade union bureaucracy in this maneuver. The General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) called off a strike it had announced for that day, announcing that it wanted Ghannouchi to remain in power. It declined to participate in Ghannouchi’s government, however.

The Tunisian establishment press has taken to praising various ministers of the regime as progressive figures. In *Le Temps*, columnist Khaled Guezmir applauded Interior Minister Farhat Rajhi—a magistrate being promoted as a “left” figure—for moving his office from the old French colonial ministry to newer quarters and evading questions on state wiretapping. Guezmir cynically praised Rajhi, who is apparently appearing frequently on television, as “a minister from whom one expects only the best.”

Yesterday it was announced that the RCD would cease to operate. The Tunisian daily, *La Presse*, explained: “Given the state of extreme emergency and with the objective of preserving the superior interests of the fatherland, the interior minister has decided to suspend yesterday the activities of the RCD, and all meetings or rallies of its members, and to close all facilities belonging to this party or that it manages, in the expectation that a request for its dissolution will be placed with the competent judicial authorities.”

Such a “dissolution” is completely worthless, and designed to protect the RCD from the protesters far more than the other way around. It amounts to asking people to believe that leading members of the RCD—like Ghannouchi, as he demands emergency powers—are honestly attempting to dissolve the historic instruments of their own rule.

The reason that the machinery of the Ben Ali regime has continued to function after the departure of its leader, as the press peddles these cynical lies, is not that the regime is popular or that the press’s arguments are convincing. It is mainly because no force in Tunisia had a consciously prepared plan to lead the working class in the overthrow the Ben Ali dictatorship.

This confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in its statement “The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution”: “The crucial question of revolutionary program and leadership remains unresolved. Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.”



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