

Tunisia prime minister resigns amid mass demonstrations

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28 February 2011

The prime minister of Tunisia, Mohammed Ghannouchi, a holdover from the hated dictatorship of ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, announced his resignation Sunday in an address on national television. He stepped down after more than a week of mass demonstrations against his government, culminating in two days of rioting in which police killed five protesters.

A few hours later, the interim president, Fouad Mebazaa, named a former minister, Beji Caid-Essebsi, as the new prime minister, and the government reiterated a promise to hold elections to replace the caretaker regime by July 15.

Both the appointment and the election pledge were aimed at mollifying the Tunisian masses, who have correctly identified the government as a continuation of the Ben Ali regime without Ben Ali. Ghannouchi had been Ben Ali's prime minister for 11 years before the Tunisian dictator fled the country on January 14, amid mass anti-government demonstrations.

Mebazaa was also a functionary of the regime, serving as the speaker of its rubber-stamp parliament. In order to find a successor to Ghannouchi without direct ties to Ben Ali, Mebazaa was forced to bring the elderly Caid-Essebsi out of retirement. The 84-year-old was a long-time functionary during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba, whom Ben Ali replaced in 1987.

In his television statement announcing his resignation, Ghannouchi cited the violence of the preceding days, which included an armed attack on the Interior Ministry building, and pitched battles between police and rock-throwing youth in downtown Tunis. "I am not ready to be the man of repression, and I will never be," he said, although he showed no qualms about repression during more than a decade as Ben Ali's chief administrator.

Popular opposition to the government has swelled over the past two weeks, as nothing has been done to provide the Tunisian masses with jobs or improvements in their living standards. Instead, the government has concentrated on reestablishing the security forces and negotiating with the representatives of various imperialist powers, particularly over security assistance, helping the Tunisian ruling elite rebuild its armed forces for use against the people.

On Sunday, February 20, more than 40,000 marched through Tunis demanding the ouster of the government. (See "New protests rock Tunisian government") Groups of protesters then set up a tent camp in the central square of the capital city, modeled on the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt.

Friday, February 25 was designated as a "Day of Rage" throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In Tunis, an estimated 100,000 people marched down the main avenue of the capital city, shouting slogans against the government and demanding Ghannouchi's ouster.

The march—an enormous turnout in a small country—went almost unreported in the international media, which has focused its attention entirely on the civil war developing in Libya next door.

Police fired in the air in an unsuccessful attempt to disperse the huge crowd, who chanted "Leave!"—the slogan of previous Tunisian protests against Ben Ali and the Egyptian movement against Mubarak—as well as "We don't want the friends of Ben Ali!"

They denounced Ghannouchi and other cronies of Ben Ali for "usurping" and "confiscating" the Tunisian revolution.

Ghannouchi's cabinet issued a statement seeking to appease the population, declaring that the government "has decided that consultations with different political

parties should not exceed mid-March ... Elections will be organized at the latest in mid-July 2011.” The statement also noted that the government has seized the assets of another 110 cronies of Ben Ali, following earlier action against 46 associates and family members.

This was combined with intensified repression. The Interior Minister banned further protests, threatening mass arrests, the first such decree since the ouster of Ben Ali. On Saturday, police and troops equipped with tanks used tear gas to disperse crowds of youth who sought to continue the protests. This provoked an armed attack on the ministry headquarters the following day. Over 200 people have been arrested in the capital since Friday.

After the speech announcing Ghannouchi’s resignation, cheering crowds gathered in the streets of the capital. One man, who identified himself to Reuters only as Ahmed, said, “We’re very happy, but it is not enough. We want to see nothing more of this government.”

The web site Stratfor Global Consulting, which has close ties to the US intelligence apparatus, cautioned, “The hope is that, with this concession, street protests will calm down and this will allow the government to get to the task of preparing elections. But the risk is that it will embolden the opposition forces to demand more concessions.”

Both the official state-run trade union organization UGTT and the Islamist group Ennahda hailed the resignation of Ghannouchi. The UGTT had initially agreed to serve in Ghannouchi’s cabinet, but was forced to pull out its three ministers in the face of mass hostility to a “new” regime led by the same faces as the old.

The nomination of a prime minister who is not directly implicated in the crimes of Ben Ali could serve as a pretext for both the unions and the Islamists to take their place in a government whose purpose is to guarantee the interests of the Tunisian bourgeois elite and the multinational corporations.

Last Monday, February 21, Ghannouchi met with two high-level US visitors, senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman. McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, declared, “The revolution in Tunisia has been very successful and it has become a model for the region,” adding, speaking

for the Obama administration, “We stand ready to provide training to help Tunisia’s military to provide security.”

What McCain was hailing as a “model” was a “revolution” that left the existing prime minister in office and the entire state machinery intact, and merely sent the president packing. He was expressing the hope, on the part of US imperialism, that similar cosmetic shifts can be passed off as revolutions in the other US-dominated dictatorships and sheikdoms throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Only six days later, however, McCain’s “model” has resigned—albeit to be replaced by another proven servant of the imperialist powers and enemy of the Tunisian working people.



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