

Tunisian regime imposes curfew amid protests over coup threat

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Demonstrators gathered in the Tunisian capital, Tunis, from Thursday to Sunday to protest against the transitional government that has ruled the North African country since the fall of the Western-backed dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January.

Police reportedly charged protesters with truncheons, isolating small groups then kicking and beating them. “The police reaction is too extreme against the people,” one protester told Reuters news agency. “It is a return to the days of Ben Ali,” he added.

The CNN news network reported that military armored vehicles were also deployed near the main interior ministry building on Sunday.

The protests began after the former interior minister of Tunisia’s transition government, Farhat Rajhi, warned on Facebook on Wednesday of preparations of a “military coup” if the Islamist group Ennahda won in the July 24 election. On that date, the regime plans to hold elections for a constituent assembly to arrange the future forms of the Tunisian government. Ennahda, banned under Ben Ali, reportedly may win support in the south, where there is deep frustration with poverty and unemployment.

In a video shared on Facebook, Rajhi said: “If Ennahda takes power, there will be a coup d’état.” He added, “The people of the coast [i.e. former Ben Ali supporters in wealthier areas of the country] are not disposed to give up power and, if the elections go against them, there will be a coup d’état.”

Rajhi also claimed that the promotion of general Rachid Ammar to the rank of Chief of Staff was part of a plan for seizing power “if the Islamists win in the next elections.”

The regime in Tunis quickly rejected the statement of Rajhi, who served as interior minister from January until March 29, when he was forced from office for unstated reasons. It is believed that Rajhi had fallen afoul of the security apparatus for his limited attempts to create a new face for the repressive state.

A former magistrate, Rajhi had won some popular support in Tunisia for dismissing 45 senior interior ministry officials accused of corruption, winding down the old ruling party of Ben Ali, and reorganizing the Secret Police.

A further expression of the crackdown on dissent is the return of Tunisia’s Internet censorship agency, which had been suspended after the fall of Ben Ali. The agency has been empowered by a new censorship law, which, according to the Tunisian news web site Webdo, was recently passed in secret. The censors’ first act was to



Protesters defied a government curfew, imposed on Saturday to stamp out growing opposition to the interim regime. The curfew runs from 9pm to 5am.

Antigovernment protestors in Tunis called for the resignation of the government, with special contempt expressed against the prime minister, Beji Caid Sebti, and the interior minister, Habib Sid. Protesters also chanted slogans such as, “The people call for a new revolution” and “No fear or terror – power belongs to the people.”

Protest spread to other cities, including Sfax, Kairouan and Sousse. The curfew has been imposed in cities including Sfax, Kairouan and Métaoui, and in three towns of the central province of Gafsa after the unrest.

The regime in Tunis responded to these protests with brutal repression. Police in Tunis fired tear gas grenades into the crowd gathered on the main thoroughfare, Bourguiba Avenue. Demonstrators returned volleys of stones against police.

shut down the Facebook page that published Rajhi's statement.

The regime is also trying to silence any reporting of the crackdown on the streets of Tunis. Some 15 journalists from local and international media were detained and beaten by Tunisian police during the protests on Thursday and Friday.

Marwa Rekik, a reporter for local radio station Kalima, told *Al Jazeera* that she was assaulted by a dozen police officers while giving a live report from central Tunis. "They beat me all over with clubs and with their helmets, and I needed five stitches to my head wounds," she reported on Saturday.

The transitional regime's response to the protest is a clear warning that it will employ the most brutal methods to suppress the revolutionary struggles of the working class.

Since Ben Ali's regime fell, none of the underlying social problems confronting the masses has been solved, but the country has witnessed an explosion of strikes and workers' protests. Expressing the bourgeoisie's fears, Social Affairs Minister Mohamed Ennaceur explained: "with the sharp increase in social demands after the Revolution, the social situation has gone from bad to worse."

He told *La Presse*: "Foreign and Tunisian investors are worried since the Revolution, as the situation is still not calm. 281 institutions ceased to function in the post-revolutionary period. The number of strikes increased by 155 percent compared to 2010, and the percentage of participants was 85 percent instead of 53 percent last year. Wildcat strikes increased by 85 percent, although they were only 19 percent of the total last year. That is leaving out the sit-ins and excesses committed in work places. Thousands of people have come to demands their rights at the Ministry since the revolution."

Though Rajhi later retracted his comments—implausibly ascribing them to "political immaturity" and expressing his full confidence in the Army—they have exposed the masses' mistrust of the transitional regime. One student said, "There are already so many problems in Tunisia. The video Rajhi did was the spark that set things off. The revolution is not over."

Sonia Briki, a protestor, told Reuters: "We are here to demand the departure of this dishonest government. Everything is clear now. We want them to resign so we can have a government whose members only serve the people."

Above all, these events underline the absence of a party to lead the struggles of the working class in Tunisia. The existing parties are bankrupt and hostile to the workers.

Popular indignation over Rajhi's comments expose the fraudulent character of the reform commission set up by the transitional regime to oversee the formation of the constituent assembly. It includes the UTICA employers' federation, various human rights groups, the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Labor) union, and the official "opposition" parties like the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement.

These forces only provide a thin pseudo-democratic veneer for a

regime desperate to maintain itself in power by repressing working-class struggles. It was, from the beginning, conceived of as a way of preventing the working class from forming organs of power to challenge the old Ben Ali state machine.

The commission is headed by law professor Iadh Ben Achour, who was interviewed by the French daily *Le Monde*. Asked about his commission, he explained: "This High Commission was initially a simple political reform commission whose role was to revise the anti-democratic laws used by the old regime to oppress the country... But then a council for the protection of the revolution, with parties and organizations of civil society, was created and conceived of as a sort of tutor for the government."

This council, active in mid-March, contained representatives from the UGTT, the PDP, and Ettajdid, among others. Its name was also, however, a fraud. Far from intending to lead the masses in a revolution against the state, its members were anxious to find places in the state machine, which they promptly did by joining Ben Achour's commission.

Noting that his commission was the "synthesis" of these two commissions, Achour said that, had they remained separate, "This might have led to a crisis and in a parallelism between two power centers, one of which was institutional and the other revolutionary."

Setting up institutions that could contest the power of the Ben Ali regime was, however, the last thing on the minds of the official "opposition" parties. Instead, they joined the official "reform" commission, to provide political cover for the rightwing state machine and its schemes against the revolutionary struggles of the working class.

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