

Tunisian interim prime minister visits France ahead of G8 summit

Kumaran Ira
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On May 17-18, Tunisian interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi made an official visit to France where he had discussions with Prime Minister François Fillon and President Nicolas Sarkozy. It was the first such visit by a Tunisian prime minister since the dictatorship of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted in January, after a month of popular protest.

Essebsi's visit took place ahead of Tunisia's forthcoming participation in the G8 summit on May 26-27 in Deauville, in northern France. France, which holds the rotating presidency of the G8, has invited Tunisia and Egypt to participate at a session called "Arab spring," promoting it as "the democratic transition in the Arab world." On May 19, Al Arabiya reported that the G8 nations plan to provide Tunisia with \$10 billion in economic aid.

As struggles continue in North Africa and the Middle East, the great powers are attempting to strangle the revolutionary developments in the region in collaboration with the national ruling elites and the pro-government trade unions. In this context, Essebsi's visit inevitably focused on how to reassert the imperialist agenda in those regions.

Compared to the trillions lavished on bank bailouts, the financial help promised by the Western powers is quite minimal. Last month, France pledged €350 million in loans to Tunisia through the French Development Agency. In his May 19 "Arab spring" speech, US President Barack Obama announced a \$2 billion private investment fund for Egypt and Tunisia.

This was also an implicit disavowal of an appeal for \$20 to \$30 billion in support for Tunisia, issued by an international collection of economists—including Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University, French economics professor Jean-Louis Reiffers, and Olivier Pastré of the University of Paris VIII. They hoped to see funded the development of a high-tech industry, based on low wages and centered on a "technological and industrial pole" in

Tunisia.

On May 18, Sarkozy received Essebsi at the Elysée presidential palace. After meeting with the Tunisian leader, Sarkozy pledged his "very clear intention of supporting the transition in Tunisia. France backs Tunisia in all areas, including especially economic and social ones."

On May 17, Fillon met with Essebsi. Fillon told his Tunisian counterpart that "France fully supports the political transition under way in Tunisia and hopes it is fully successful."

The latter meeting reportedly focused mainly on bilateral relations. Fillon declared that France intends "to remain Tunisia's leading partner." He outlined three priorities: the rule of law, economic development and reinforcing ties with civil society—that is, the Tunisian government's links to the trade unions and various social movements and "left" protest groups. These latter organisations, some of them closely aligned with the union and state bureaucracies and promoted by France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), now provide a pseudo-democratic fig leaf for the remains of the Ben Ali machine of repression.

The issue of immigration was also one of main items discussed with Essebsi. Fillon stressed "the need for France and Tunisia to fight against illegal immigration together."

Since the outbreak of mass protest in North Africa, there has been an influx of African immigrants, mainly from Tunisia, arriving on Italian soil. Fearing that immigrants would arrive in France, the latter country has re-established border controls with Italy, in defiance of the Schengen agreement that created a borderless Europe, after Italy granted temporary residency visas to immigrants. The French government has treated Tunisian immigrants with utter hostility, recently carrying out raids against them in Paris and Marseilles.

Last week, French Interior Minister Claude Guéant visited Tunisia to discuss security and immigration issues. He proposed the setting up of a military training center in Gafsa,

the site of a major miners' strike in 2008, in which a number of workers were killed by Ben Ali's forces.

On immigration, Guéant said: "Tunisia must cooperate with France on immigration.... France opposes Tunisian immigrants coming illegally onto its territory. Because one more person in France is also more social spending, Social Security, teaching."

This comment expresses not only Guéant's hostility to Tunisian immigrants, but the French establishment's hostility to the social rights of the entire French population—the basic class axis that determines their thinly disguised hostility to revolutionary struggles in Tunisia.

The praise of Fillon and Sarkozy for a democratic transition is hypocritical and empty rhetoric. For decades, the French ruling elite backed dictatorial regimes in its former colonies in North Africa, including the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia. It also supported the ousted Egyptian dictator, Hosni Mubarak.

Until Ben Ali's departure on January 14, France withheld all criticism of his regime's widespread use of deadly force against protestors. Just three days before the Tunisian dictator's departure, France's foreign minister at the time, Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered France's "security expertise" to Ben Ali, to help his regime suppress the protests. She was subsequently forced to resign, especially after it emerged that Ben Ali's associates had offered her luxury hospitality for free at the beginning of the protests.

Speaking to French radio, Europe1, Essebsi appealed for support from the French political establishment: "Tunisia deserves engagement. She is trying to install a democratic process. All the ingredients are there." When asked about France's reaction at the start of the mass protests against the Ben Ali regime, Essebsi cynically replied, "I am a man that looks to the future. I do not know what happened before my arrival."

In fact, France is continuing the policies it pursued in Tunisia under Ben Ali, who implemented free-market measures that led to a steep increase in social inequality and unemployment, which helped provoke the mass working class resistance. With a slightly different scaffolding, French imperialism intends to maintain the same social regime so that French and international companies can exploit Tunisian workers.

An estimated 1,250 French companies, employing more than 100,000 workers, are present in Tunisia. Last month, the French business federation MEDEF had a meeting with the Tunisian employers' federation, UTICA. The meeting was primarily focused on developing French investment in Tunisia.

Since Ben Ali's ouster, events have shown the reactionary character of the interim government. Recently, the new government repressed a wave of anti-government protests throughout the country. According to reports, some 1,400 people have been arrested over the past two weeks following anti-government protests. Of those, 8 were charged with murder, 62 with assault and violence (see "Tunisian regime imposes curfew amid protests over coup threat").

During his visit, Essebsi assured French officials that the July 24 election of a constituent assembly, which is to oversee the drafting of a new constitution, would indeed take place after reports emerged suggesting the vote could be delayed due to "technical difficulties."

Reports point to growing strikes and workers' protests in recent weeks. Most recently, British Gas Group, Tunisia's largest natural gas producer, reported that protesters demanding jobs had blockaded the firm's plant in the south of the country. Tunisair was also affected by a walkout after staff at the Tunisia Catering Company organised work stoppages and sit-ins at Tunis and other airports. Tunisie Telecom has been paralysed by strike action, frightening foreign investors.

Undoubtedly, the proposal to postpone the election was made after consultations with major powers and financial markets—that is, big business interests, who fear increasing strike action across the region and uncertainty tied to the ballot.

Thus, Richard Segal, strategist at the Jefferies global securities and investment banking group, told Reuters: "Markets, however, would probably be more forgiving of a small delay and might actually prefer it." He added, "The country is not giving itself much time to hold the new elections and therefore a technical delay would be understandable."



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