

Tunisian police attack anti-government protests

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In recent days Tunisian security forces have violently attacked a new wave of anti-government protests across the country.

On July 15, after Friday prayers, hundreds of anti-government protesters tried to mount a sit-in outside the prime minister's office in the Kasbah area in Tunis. They demanded a reform of the judiciary, the resignation of the interior and justice ministers, and the resignation of Interim Prime Minister Beji Caïd Essebsi. They also demanded the prosecution of officials responsible for killing protesters during the mass protests in January that toppled the Western-backed dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

According to reports, "on Friday, armored vehicles formed a tight cordon around the ministries, locked in a tense standoff with swarms of young protesters wearing bandanas and T-shirts bearing pro-democracy slogans."

The peaceful protest was met with violent repression by the security forces. They charged protesters, assaulted and beat them with batons, tear-gassing them and those who sought refuge in the Kasbah Mosque. Abdelwahab El-Heni, leader of the Al-Majd party, told AFP that "the police entered the mosque where the protesters were carrying out their sit-in and violently attacked the demonstrators."

Police also attacked journalists who were covering the sit-in in Kasbah and human rights activists. Agence France-Presse correspondent Sofiane Ben Farhat told Reporters Without Borders that "hundreds of people were deliberately targeted by the police". He said, "I heard men in uniform shout: 'the men with cameras down there, they must be attacked'."

According to AllAfrica.com, journalists from Radio

Mosaïque, Radio 6, Radio Jeunesse, Tunisna, and Al Sa'a were attacked, as well as a freelancer.

According to Amnesty International, "at least 47 protesters were reportedly arrested and taken to Bouchoucha Prison. Several detainees are said to have been injured during their arrest as the Kasbah sit-in was forcibly dispersed by Tunisian security forces using truncheons."

Ziad, a young teacher who travelled from Keliba (120 kilometers from Tunis) for the protest, said those present "came here to stage a peaceful demonstration". He added, "our demands are simple: the sacking of the interior and justice ministers, sanction against the masterminds of killings and redress for the victims."

The government's repression in the Kasbah provoked numerous angry protests in other cities this weekend. On Sunday, youth took to the street protesting government repression in the central town of Sidi Bouzid, where the first mass protests broke out in December after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. After security forces opened fire with live ammunition on protesters in front of an army compound, a 13 year-old-boy was killed. He was hit by a bullet that ricocheted from his arm into his chest.

On July 19, Amnesty International called for an independent investigation into the boy's death. Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International, said, "The security forces must answer for this tragic death. The firing of live ammunition against Sunday's protesters in Sidi Bouzid is a stark reminder of the methods used against protesters under Ben Ali".

The social unrest highlights growing popular hostility to the interim government. The masses are well aware that

the current regime consists of former Ben Ali officials and still functions to protect the interests of the corrupt Tunisian bourgeoisie and its US and European imperialist backers.

A recent poll by the Washington-based International Republican Institute (IRI) found that only 46 per cent of Tunisians believe the country's "transition to democracy" is on course—down from 79 per cent in March. It added, "Only a slim majority, 59 percent, thought that the current government was likely to address Tunisia's problems, down from 82 percent in March". Although 86 percent said they were "very likely" to cast a vote in elections for a constitutional assembly in October, 72 percent have not yet decided who they will vote for.

As in Egypt, where workers are calling for a "second revolution" against the state, the working class in Tunisia is entering into struggle not only with the old ruling party, but the pseudo-"left" parties of the official "opposition".

Far from condemning police repression, these parties—who now enjoy official positions in the so-called High Commission for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution—denounced the recent unrest. The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid condemned the protests as a "systematic plan to undermine the stability" of Tunisia.

Since Ben Ali's ouster, the interim regime has watched with dismay the growing radicalization of the Tunisian working class. Tunisia has witnessed an upsurge in strikes in numerous industries, demanding wage increases, jobs, and other social benefits.

The Africanmanager website quoted the daily *Achourouk*: "the social climate in Tunisia remains tense compared to the same period of 2010, in the sense that the number of strikes increased by 130 percent, while the number of companies hit by strikes rose to 92 percent". It added, "During the same period of 2011, the number of days lost increased by 347 percent due to the length of the duration of stoppages in companies and sectors with high employment intensity."

The interim regime, held up as a model of "democratic transition" by the Western press and pseudo-"left" parties, has proven itself incapable of resolving any of the pressing problems facing the Tunisian population. Instead, it is attempting to defend whatever it can of the old political order.

On July 15, in an Op-Ed column in the *New York Times*, titled "The Revolution Is Not Over Yet", University of Tunis professor Hamadi Redissi admitted: "The flawed and lumbering legal system has not satisfied

a population yearning for genuine justice. So far not a single dollar transferred out of the country by the Ben Ali family has found its way back to the state's coffers, not a single police officer implicated in the murders of almost 300 protesters has been convicted, and not a single member of the ruling clan that fled the country has been extradited to Tunisia—including Mr. Ben Ali. The interim government has relied on a traditional legal process headed by the same magistrates who worked for the old regime."

On unemployment, the government acknowledged that it could reach 20 percent of the workforce this year, up from 13 percent in 2010.

The interim government's response to the rising protests was to threaten to further postpone elections. Interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi said, "some sit-ins were incited by certain political parties that found out that they were not prepared for the next elections. They now fear lest this important political event would show their real size, and therefore, they resorted to disrupting the political process in any way."

He added, "the recent violence undoubtedly shows that what's happening is not just protests, but an attempt to stir confusion and chaos so that the election may not be held at its pre-scheduled date". He also blamed journalists for spreading rumors.

In fact, it is not protesters, but the interim government itself that has the legal authority to delay elections. It had already postponed elections from July 24 to October 23, saying that it would not hold elections amid mass strikes. The repeated delays of elections for political purposes underlines the fraudulent character of the "constituent process" and the interim government's supposed commitment to a "democratic transition".



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