

# Tunisia: New prime minister installed amid rising social tensions

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Three years after the revolutionary ouster of longtime dictator Zine Abedine Ben Ali, the Tunisian ruling elite is seeking to overcome its deep political and economic crisis and form a new government to intensify the anti-working class, pro-imperialist policies of the former regime.

On January 9, Ali Larayedh, prime minister of the Islamist Ennahda-led Tunisian government tendered his resignation to President Moncef Marzouki amid rioting throughout the country sparked by proposed tax hikes. He will hand over his post to Mehdi Jomaa, who had already been named as the new prime minister-designate by the so called “national dialogue” to form a new caretaker government and prepare new elections last month.

Addressing the nation on state television after his swearing-in, Jomaa announced that President Moncef Marzouki had tasked him with “forming the new government in respect to the road-map agreement and in accordance to the interim law for public authorities.”

In October, the Ennahda government and the National Salvation Front (NSF)—the main umbrella opposition coalition, stretching from stalwarts of the old Ben Ali regime, like the Nidaa Tounes party, to the “left” Popular Front (PF)—had entered into a “national dialogue” and agreed upon a “road map”. It was worked out by the so-called “quartet” initiative headed by the country’s main trade union federation, the UGTT, and the UTICA employers’ federation. It set deadlines for finishing the new constitution, nominating a new prime minister and technocratic government.

Jomaa explicitly thanked outgoing Prime Minister Laarayedh, the resigning government and all the political forces involved in the “national dialogue”.

He said, “I’d like to pay tribute to the dialogue quartet for its important role during this critical period.

I also like to thank all parties for making this a successful process... [and] salute my colleagues at the National Constituent Assembly and its president, Mr. Mustapha Ben Jaafar for their intensive efforts in ensuring the success of the transitional process on all directions and I wish them luck.”

“The new government will be composed of competent and independent figures. After making several contacts, I believe that I formed my vision for the next government. I have also begun contacting future candidates. The law gives me two weeks to form the government ... but I will my best efforts to accomplish my task in a shorter time,” said Jomaa.

Speaking to reporters later, Jomaa pledged to “overcome the obstacles and restore stability and security to Tunisia.”

All these are code words for the intensification of the anti-working class and pro-imperialist policies of the Tunisian ruling elite. Three years after the ouster of Ben Ali, amid ongoing strikes and protests, it is closing its ranks to reestablish the police state as it existed prior to the revolution and to deepen the exploitation of the working class.

Shortly before Larayedh handed in his resignation letter, the government announced tax levies, including an unpopular agricultural transportation tax. Finance minister Ilyas Fakhfakh—like Jomaa, a former official for French oil multinational Total—described the taxes “as necessary to fill yawning holes in the country’s budget”.

Fakhfakh told Reuters that Tunisia would seek the second \$500 million tranche of a \$1.7 billion loan approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last June. Reportedly, only \$150 million has been released so far. In return, the IMF is demanding deep-going austerity measures, including cuts in state

subsidies which the government has not yet dared to implement.

Since 2011, the devastating social conditions facing workers, peasants and youth have only worsened. Unemployment hovers at 17 percent, rising to 24 percent for impoverished cities like Kasserine, with 30 percent of young graduates unemployed.

Immediately after the tax hikes were announced, protests erupted against them. Protests and strikes began on January 7 and 8 in the southern and central towns of Kasserine, Thala and Gafsa. Violent confrontations took place between police and inhabitants of working class neighborhoods of Kasserine.

Several official buildings and police stations were torched in Feriana and Makanassy, in the Sidi Bouzid region, one of the epicenters of the mass working class struggles which led to the ouster of Ben Ali in early 2011.

Protests also spilled over into the capital, Tunis. On January 10, protests took place outside the government finance buildings in the poor neighborhood of Ettaddamon. Police forces dispersed the crowds with tear gas. According to Interior Ministry spokesman Mohamed Ali Aroui, nearly 50 people were arrested in clashes in suburbs of Tunis. He denounced them as “troublemakers” and “criminals”.

To curb protests and prevent them from growing into a renewed revolutionary movement against the pro-imperialist, free-market policies of Tunisia's entire ruling elite, an emergency cabinet meeting suspended the tax on January 8 and agreed on the transition from Larayedh to Jomaa.

The aim of the new government to be formed by Jomaa is to establish a better mechanism to push through the austerity measures demanded by finance capital against opposition in the working class.

Summing up the concerns of the Tunisian ruling elite and its imperialist backers, Riccardo Fabiani, North Africa analyst of the Eurasia group, said: “The protests we have seen recently show very well the problems that the current government will face and what kind of obstacles will prevent the implementation of meaningful reform.”

A crucial role in carrying out this reactionary program is played by the parties in the PF, such as the Maoist Workers Party and the Pabloite Workers Left

League (LGO). After the ouster of Ben Ali and amid the deepening unpopularity of the Ennahda party, imperialism relies ever more directly on these “left” representatives of the affluent middle class in Tunisia to defend its interests and suppress a politically independent movement of the working class.

After PF leaders reportedly met with US ambassador to Tunisia Jacob Walles on December 24 in Tunis, the PF reaffirmed its support for the “national dialogue” and the establishment of a new technocratic government.

PF spokesperson Jilani Hammami reportedly described the delay in the announcement of possible members of the new government as a waste of time. He indicated that the PF will support the new government if Jomaa does not keep Lotfi Ben Jeddou as minister of interior.

Before Mohammed Jmour, a representative of the PF in the National Constituent Assembly vowed to support the board of elections which will be tasked with overseeing the next parliamentary and presidential elections. Jmour declared that the “the board we have is the result of group consensus” and “we absolutely accept the board that was elected.”

As the PF, the major imperialist powers are backing the “national dialogue” and cynically praising it as a step towards “democracy”.

French foreign minister Laurent Fabius declared that “major progress was made in the past weeks towards the adoption of a new democratic constitution.”

The Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, praised Larayedh's resignation as “a positive step”.

He added that “after months of political deadlock and negotiations among ruling and opposition parties within the National Dialogue, the parties have selected an interim prime minister and are ratifying a new constitution that promises progressive steps on gender equality and other issues”.



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