

Mass protests against austerity, unemployment shake Tunisia

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Tunisia has erupted over the past three days in demonstrations and violent clashes with security forces. Workers and youth have taken to the streets in at least 18 different towns in protest against a 2018 austerity budget that will only exacerbate prevailing conditions of mass unemployment, poverty and social inequality in the North African nation.

The Interior Ministry acknowledged that a 55-year-old man was killed during a protest on Monday in the town of Tebourba, about 20 miles outside of the capital of Tunis, and five other people there were wounded. There were conflicting reports over the cause of death, with some protesters saying the man had been run down by a police vehicle, while the authorities claimed he had been overcome by tear gas.

In a number of areas, the army has been called out to back up local security forces and protect government buildings and banks.

In the town of Nefza, in the north of the country, protesters set fire to both the police station and the local government's department of finance office.

Elsewhere, protesters have blocked main roads with boulders and burning tires. Police have arrested scores of demonstrators and attacked crowds with tear gas and live ammunition. Protesters have fought back throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at the police.

The eruption of mass social upheaval comes just over seven years after the self-immolation of the 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi triggered a sweeping revolt that brought down the Western-backed dictatorship of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Hundreds of demonstrators marched in Sidi Bouzid, the town where Bouazizi took his life in protest over police harassment and unemployment. They carried banners with slogans denouncing rising prices and the lack of jobs.

This new nationwide eruption of social struggle demonstrates, once again, that none of the grievances that drove the working class into revolutionary struggle seven years ago, first against Ben Ali's regime, and then against the US-backed Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, have been resolved.

In both countries, elements of the old regimes managed to reconsolidate power in the interests of the native ruling elites

and international capital. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, manifestations of the so-called "Arab Spring" were brutally crushed by military force. Meanwhile the region has been devastated by wars waged by the imperialist powers from Libya, to Syria, Yemen, Mali and beyond, all with the aim of reasserting their control.

The spark that ignited the latest uprising was the announcement of a 2018 austerity budget that hikes fuel prices, increases taxes and slaps new customs duties on imported products, all of which spell a further punishing attack on the living standards of Tunisian working people.

The annual inflation rate had already risen to 6.4 percent in December. Unemployment meanwhile stands at over 15 percent, with more than a third of all younger workers without jobs.

The economic "reforms" are being imposed by the government of Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi to meet the conditions demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the European Union in return for loans that have gone largely to paying off the country's debts to the international banks.

Meanwhile, a rising trade deficit has driven down the value of Tunisia's currency, the dinar, increasing the cost of debt service payments and decreasing the buying power of the Tunisian population.

The unrest appears to have erupted spontaneously. On both social media and in graffiti appearing on walls in Tunis and elsewhere, the slogan "What are we waiting for?" has been associated with the protests.

"This government, like every government after Ben Ali, only gives promises and has done nothing. People are angry and poverty is rising," Imen Mhamdi, a 27-year-old university graduate who works in a Tunisian factory, told *Al Jazeera*.

Mhamdi, who participated in the demonstrations in the coastal city Sousse, told the news agency that Tunisian youth have "lost faith" in all political parties. "I'm not feeling a lot of hope, but we are saying no," she said.

A student in Sousse, Mouna Ali, told *Al Jazeera* that the government's austerity measures represented "a catastrophe for the middle class," adding, "The Tunisian government needs to understand that Tunisian society is fed up. It is suffocating in misery, in poverty, in unemployment."

Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed responded to the nationwide protests with a law-and-order speech, declaring Tuesday that “the only recourse against looters of public and private properties and their backers is to enforce the law.” The statement was issued to the press in conjunction with the prime minister’s unannounced visit to an elite military unit at the southern garrison town of Remada, near the Libyan border.

Earlier, Chahed told a radio station that “we didn’t see protests, but instead people breaking things, stealing and attacking Tunisians.”

The Tunisian daily *Le Temps* published an extremely worried article on the protest movement expressing the mood within the privileged layers of Tunisian society as somewhere between “a state of paranoia and general panic.”

La Presse, meanwhile, ran an editorial under the headline “Democracy and the rule of law” essentially backing a crackdown on the protests, while insisting that “Tunisians must be spared a social explosion” and arguing that the country will be “able to negotiate the economic transition as skillfully as they have succeeded with the democratic revolution.”

In addition to the militarized crackdown on the protests, the Tunisian ruling elite is relying upon the corrupt union bureaucracy of the UGTT, long a pillar of the Ben Ali dictatorship, and the Popular Front, a middle-class “left” grouping that helped bring the current government to power, to stifle the revolt from below.

Hamma Hammami, a key leader of the Popular Front, issued a statement claiming that the group supported the protests, while deploring “acts of violence and vandalism.” He called upon all political parties to unite around a policy aimed at “putting an end to people’s anger.”

It is significant that the center of the protests has not been Tunis, the country’s capital and the stronghold of these political institutions dominated by the more privileged layers of the middle class, but rather the impoverished towns of the interior.

In this, as in the austerity measures and social inequality that sparked the protest movement, there are powerful echoes in the upheavals in Tunisia of the mass protests that recently swept Iran. In both countries, layers of unemployed youth and impoverished workers rose up to challenge the existing regimes.

Meanwhile, similar protests have broken out in the African nation of Sudan against the autocratic regime of Omar al-Bashir, which announced sharp price increases for flour, resulting in a doubling of the price of bread overnight.

Protests that began in the southeastern city of Sennar on Saturday quickly spread, reaching the capital Khartoum and many towns throughout the south. In Geneina, the capital of West Darfour, one student died under unclear circumstances when the security forces intervened to disperse a protest, and at least five other demonstrators were wounded. A fourth day of protests was reported in Khartoum Monday, with the police

firing tear gas into crowds.

The austerity measures are being imposed at the behest of the IMF, which has urged Khartoum to float its currency to encourage foreign investment. This followed the decision by the US to lift 20-year-old sanctions on the country in October.

What is clearly emerging across a region that has been overshadowed by imperialist war and the deliberate fomenting of sectarian conflict is a powerful resurgence of the class struggle.

The tumultuous events in the Middle East and North Africa are joined by growing signs of class conflict internationally, including strikes by pharmaceutical and municipal workers in Israel, the wildcat action by Ford workers in Romania, strikes by metalworkers in Germany, actions by rail workers in the UK and confrontations between French workers in auto and other industries and the government of Emmanuel Macron.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated at the outset of the new year: “For several decades, and especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the resistance of the working class to capitalist exploitation has been suppressed. But the essential contradictions of the capitalist system—between a globally interdependent economy and the archaic bourgeois nation-state system; between a worldwide network of social production, involving the labor of billions of human beings, and private ownership of the means of production; and between the essential needs of mass society and the selfish interests of individual capitalist money-making—are now rapidly approaching the point where the further suppression of mass working class opposition to capitalism is impossible.”

Events in the first several days of the new year have already provided powerful confirmation of this perspective.



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