

Tunisian regime deploys army as protests spread 10 years after Arab Spring

Alex Lantier**18 January 2021**

Ten years after a revolutionary working class uprising toppled President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, the Tunisian regime is deploying the army against demonstrations that have erupted in dozens of cities across the country. Yesterday, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi's government arrested 632 youth in an attempt to crush protests that are spreading across the country.

Explosive anger is building in working class districts across North Africa. At the beginning of the year, Mechichi's government was facing a wave of local strikes by teachers opposing its murderous policy of enforcing in-person learning despite the spread of COVID-19. At that point, Mechichi suddenly decided to declare a four-day curfew starting on the anniversary of Ben Ali's overthrow, January 14.

This cynical and transparent manipulation of the pandemic as a pretext for repression failed to strangle mounting opposition. Unauthorized demonstrations took place in several cities including the capital, Tunis. On the night of the 14th, protesters went out in Kasserine, a largely working-class city in the southern-central district of Tunisia that was a center of the 2011 uprising against Ben Ali. Protesting the lack of jobs and of social support for the unemployed, they burned tires and faced off against the security forces.

In Siliana, the population protested against police violence after videos appeared on social media showing a policeman beating a herdsman whose sheep allegedly got inside an official building. Police fired tear gas at demonstrators, who responded by throwing stones and blocking streets with flaming tires in order to delay deployments by the security forces. On January 15, the police trade unions tried to calm the growing anger by presenting a statement of apology to the herdsman.

In the following days, protests grew and spread in working-class districts of Tunis like Ettadhamen and Al-Karm, as well as Kasserine, Sbeitla, Bizerte, Beja,

Kairouan, and Monastir. Clashes between security forces and youth were also reported in Manzel Bourguiba, Sousse, and Nabeul, as well as in other cities.

On January 17, as the Tunisian Interior Ministry announced the arrest of 242 people, Defense Ministry spokesman Mohamed Zikri confirmed that the army would be deployed against protesters in the regions of Siliana, Kasserine, Bizerte and Sousse. Army units were also sent to the center of Tunis. Zikri confirmed that the goal of the military's intervention was to prevent the population from storming key government buildings.

In a sign of growing panic in ruling circles, the General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT), the national labor union historically tied to the Ben Ali regime, issued a statement to denounce and try to demoralize the movement.

While criticizing police repression as "ineffective" and declaring the social anger of the youth to be "legitimate," the UGTT denounced the demonstrations as a criminal action. The UGTT stated that it "warned young protesters against carrying out night-time demonstrations, when there is a risk that they may be infiltrated, and denounced acts of vandalism and acts of pillage of public and private property committed over the recent days."

Yesterday, Interior Ministry spokesman Khaled Hayouni announced the arrest of 632 people, mainly aged between 15 and 25. Largely echoing the rhetoric of the UGTT, he denounced the protests: "This has nothing to do with movements with demands, which are protected by the Constitution. Such movements normally take place during the day and do not include criminal actions."

Demonstrations continued yesterday in dozens of cities across Tunisia, defying the army's threats and waves of arrests by the regime. In Tunis, one protest march headed down Habib Bourguiba Avenue, which was the site of mass protests during the uprising against Ben Ali in 2011. The protesters shouted slogans such as "No fear, no

horror, power belongs to the people!"

Press dispatches indicated large-scale clashes with police in several cities and working-class suburbs of Tunis. Police fired tear gas in large quantities against demonstrators, who retaliated by throwing stones and shooting fireworks at the security forces, often from the tops of tall apartment blocks.

These protests make clear that the political struggle launched by the overthrow of Ben Ali by the working class a decade ago continues to this day. None of the demands for greater social equality and for democratic rights that drove the uprising of the workers and youth in January 2011 have been granted.

The course of events fully vindicated the January 17, 2011, statement published by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), titled "The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution." The ICFI declared that the uprising marked "a turning point in world affairs" and opened "a new era of revolutionary upheavals." It pointed to the international class tensions that had driven the uprising and the role of WikiLeaks' revelations of Ben Ali's corruption in spurring on the revolt.

The ICFI also stressed the urgency of creating an international Trotskyist revolutionary vanguard in the working class across the Middle East and North Africa, fighting for the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism and an international socialist revolution:

Weak and dependent, tied by innumerable threads to foreign imperialism and native feudal forces, the bourgeoisie of countries such as Tunisia is a thousand times more fearful of and hostile to the revolutionary force of the working class than it is to imperialism. ... Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.

The Tunisian uprising was followed by a powerful revolutionary upsurge of the Egyptian working class that toppled Hosni Mubarak, as well as various protests across the region. However, insofar as petty-bourgeois groups like the Revolutionary Socialist (RS) in Egypt and the Popular Front in Tunisia blocked a seizure of power by the working class, the regime stabilized itself. The imperialist powers launched a wave of wars in Libya,

Syria, Ivory Coast and Mali. The Tunisian governments that followed Ben Ali were barely disguised tools of international banks and lending agencies.

The government of Mechichi—a former interior minister who still occupies that position, though ostensibly on an interim basis—is based on an unstable coalition of Islamists, liberals and former Ben Ali supporters. Perpetually teetering on the verge of state bankruptcy, it is threatened with strangulation by the major banks and is incapable of offering jobs, decent social conditions and democratic rights to the working class.

The pandemic and official "herd immunity" policies, which in Tunisia have claimed 5,570 lives and vastly intensified the social and economic crisis in the country, have exposed the bankruptcy of the social order not only in North Africa, but in Europe, North America and worldwide. It is widely sensed that the protests now unfolding in Tunisia are part of a global crisis with revolutionary implications triggered by the pandemic.

"The social, economic and health situation created by the COVID-19 crisis is favorable to such demonstrations," journalist Fateen Hafsa told the Arabic edition of the British *Independent*. He added: "January in Tunisia generally has been the historic motor of protests, from the 1952 revolution [against French colonial rule] to the 1978 confrontation with the UGTT and the events of January 2011 and the toppling of Ben Ali."

The January 6, 2021, fascist coup attempted by Donald Trump on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., is a further warning to workers not only in America, but around the world. Capitalism, rotting on its feet, undermines democracy even in the wealthiest and most powerful countries with the longest democratic traditions. For the working class around the world, the struggle to establish and defend democratic rights is today directly tied to an international struggle of the working class for socialism.



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