Tunisian president launches coup amid protests against mass COVID-19 deaths

Alex Lantier
27 July 2021

On Sunday, Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed sacked the Islamist Ennahda Movement government, suspended parliament and deployed the army to guard state buildings. This followed protests called across Tunisia against joblessness and the official mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last month, anger mounted as the Delta variant devastated the country, leading to a collapse of medical care as hospitals overflowed with the sick and the dead. With nearly 19,000 deaths among a population of 11.9 million, Tunisia has suffered 1,587 confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants, the highest rate in Africa. As its economy was hit by the pandemic, moreover, unemployment surged to nearly 18 percent and over 40 percent for youth.

A decade ago, in December 2010, protests in impoverished mining areas of south Tunisia erupted after the self-immolation of a young fruit and vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi. These protests, which began totally outside the political establishment, overcame bloody repression by security forces and ultimately triggered a mass mobilization of Tunisian workers and youth that brought down President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. The next month, Egyptian workers brought down Hosni Mubarak with mass protests and a general strike.

While the Ennahda government is deeply unpopular among workers and youth, reports of Sunday's protests before Saïed's coup make clear that they were not a mass mobilization of workers and youth like the January 2011 movement. Not only were they far smaller, but they involved forces working closely with the presidency.

On Sunday, hundreds of protesters marched on the parliament in Tunis and were blocked by riot police. Several thousand attended a march in the resort town of Sousse, after which smaller groups of protesters stormed and burned Ennahda headquarters in the city. The protests in Sidi Bouzid were reportedly organized by civil society activists based on calls for "the departure of the government and the dissolution of the government." There were similar protests against Ennahda party offices in Monastir, Sfax, and El Kef, while in Sidi Bouzid and Tozeur, Ennadha offices were burned down.

While certain press reports claim that no party endorsed the movement, the Arab nationalist Popular Current party issued a statement on Saturday for protests to bring down Ennahda. It had already called on Saïed to oust the government this spring. This weekend, it appealed to Tunisia's "political parties, organizations and the elite of society to organize a popular mobilization," calling for "all national forces to mobilize massively to impose a national transition government and a short-term economic and social strategy to save the country from bankruptcy and receivership."

Saïed reacted with a coup, extra-constitutionally suspending the parliament and ordering the Tunisian army to guard the parliament and state buildings, and to oversee the response to the pandemic. The parliament was ringed with armed vehicles.

While there is legitimate anger at Ennahda among workers and youth, the strongest warnings are necessary about Saïed's actions. He has not transferred power to the workers, but to the presidency and the armed forces, which are implicated in Ennahda's reactionary policies.

The experience of the Egyptian revolution, to which events in Tunisia are closely linked, has vital lessons for the situation today. In 2013, the Egyptian army carried out a coup, backed by the middle class Tamarod ("Rebel") coalition, toppling unpopular Islamist President Mohamed Morsi. While Tamarod and its allies celebrated the coup in the streets, it led to the installation of the bloody dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, which still today detains and tortures tens of thousands of political prisoners in its vast prison system.

© World Socialist Web Site

Everything indicates that, absent a political intervention by the working class, Saïed will also set up a counterrevolutionary dictatorship.

Saïed announced draconian measures giving himself vast powers. He suspended the parliament and eliminated parliamentary immunity for all its deputies, while announcing that he would preside over prosecutors' offices that are preparing charges against parliamentarians. He also announced that he would designate all ministers personally and preside at meetings of the council of ministers. Saïed stated that he would then prepare "decrees to ensure a return to social peace."

At the same time, Saïed, a constitutional lawyer who represented the Ben Ali regime at the Arab League and in international human rights bodies, threatened any further protests against his regime. He issued a statement read out on public television, declaring: "I warn any who are thinking of resorting to weapons… and whoever shoots a bullet, the armed forces will respond with bullets."

Given the Tunisian security forces' bloody record during the 2011 uprising, this is an unambiguous threat to use force against working class protests over the COVID-19 pandemic.

Saïed's claim that he is imposing a state of emergency under Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, which he helped write, is false. Indeed, this article states: "In case of imminent peril threatening the nation's territorial integrity, security or independence and that blocks the proper functioning of the public power, the president of the Republic may take measures imposing a state of exception after consulting with the head of government and the president of the Assembly of Representatives of the People, after having informed the president of the Constitutional Court."

Legally, Saïed would have had to consult with Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and Assembly President Rached Ghannouchi, who are both Ennahda members, to invoke Article 80. However, Ghannouchi issued a public statement yesterday denying that Saïed consulted with him, calling Saïed's action "unconstitutional" and "illegal." Ghannouchi called it "a coup against the [2011] revolution and the constitution."

This exposes the reactionary hypocrisy of the imperialist powers, which all issued statements covering up Saïed's coup and calling for him to respect the constitution. Germany's *Der Spiegel* noted: "Until now, Berlin, Paris and Brussels have issued only general statements calling for respect for the constitution. And it must be hoped that there is not secretly the insane opinion that the solution—ten years after the overthrow of the dictator Ben Ali—is a new strongman."

Similarly, the General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT) bureaucracy, a longtime tool of the old Ben Ali regime, gave Saïed backhanded support, calling on him to "guarantee the constitutional legitimacy of all actions taken in these difficult times."

Saïed is not protecting the constitution, however, but trampling it underfoot. Nor is the danger of dictatorship limited to neo-colonial countries in Africa. A stark indication of this is the threats of far-right coups made by French and Spanish officers outraged at popular opposition to "herd immunity" policies, following Trump's attempted January 6 putsch on the Capitol in Washington.

Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and the danger of military dictatorship requires an international revolutionary mobilization of the working class against imperialism and for socialism. The pandemic and the policy of allowing the virus to spread pursued by the ruling class internationally have exposed the murderous disregard for human life of the capitalist class in every country. Deploying the medical technology and the social distancing measures needed to eradicate the virus requires the transferral of power to the working class internationally.

The decisive question posed today, as it was when workers first toppled Ben Ali over a decade ago, is building an international revolutionary vanguard that can lead the working class in this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site