

New protests rock Tunisian government

By Patrick Martin
22 February 2011

Two days of anti-government protests in Tunisia have thrown the interim regime that succeeded ousted president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali into crisis. Tens of thousands of demonstrators have flocked to the center of the capital city, Tunis, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and other officials who are holdovers from dictatorship.

An estimated 40,000 protesters Sunday waved Tunisian flags and banners demanding the ouster of Ghannouchi, the convening of a constituent assembly, and an end to French interference in the former colony. They denounced Ghannouchi as a loyal satrap of Ben Ali, who had opposed the revolution that drove the ex-president into exile on January 14, and demanded the resignation of all regional officials appointed by Ben Ali and the scrapping of the constitution.

Tunisian police fired in the air in an effort to disperse the huge crowd, and military helicopters circled overhead, but to no effect, according to a Reuters report. Marchers chanted “Leave!” and “We don’t want the friends of Ben Ali!” and also raised demands for pay increases.

The previous day, 15,000 people marched in the capital city, chanting slogans against Islamic radicals who were blamed for the murder of a 34-year-old Polish priest, Marek Rybinski, found with his throat slit on Friday night. The Interior Ministry warned that mass demonstrations were forbidden under emergency laws, and protesters could be arrested.

The government condemned the murder as the work of “terrorist fascists with extremist tendencies.” However, the previously banned Islamist Ennahdha (Renaissance) party said there should be an investigation to “cast light on the real circumstances of this incident ... before making accusations.”

The large turnout for Saturday’s rally reflected both widespread opposition to Islamic fundamentalism, and concern that the government would use the threat of

Islamist terrorism as a pretext for a new crackdown on democratic rights—a tactic employed frequently by the Ben Ali regime.

Several hundred people also demonstrated outside the French embassy in Tunis Saturday, demanding recall of the new French ambassador, Boris Boillon, who had previously been posted to Iraq. The French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy is widely despised in Tunisia for its fervent support for the Ben Ali regime, which included supplying the dictatorship with weapons, including crowd control equipment, right up until the week it collapsed.

Prime Minister Ghannouchi has made a series of gestures to appease popular opposition and disguise the continuity between the Ben Ali dictatorship and his government, which consists almost entirely of officials from the old regime.

On February 18, the government approved a plan to increase the number of poor families receiving government financial support from 135,000 to 185,000, and to make the payments monthly instead of every three months.

On February 19, a general amnesty for political prisoners came into force, following a decree approved by the cabinet and signed into law by acting president Foued Mebazza. The measure applies to “all those who were imprisoned or prosecuted for crimes as a result of their political or trade union activities,” the state news agency TAP reported. Some 3,000 prisoners had already been released, and another 300 to 500 were to be freed under the latest decree, according to human rights groups.

On February 20, the Tunisian government made an official extradition request to Saudi Arabia, where Ben Ali fled with his family and a hoard of gold after weeks of popular protests. A foreign ministry statement said the action was in pursuit of “a new batch of charges against the ousted president regarding his involvement

in several serious crimes aimed at perpetrating and inciting voluntary homicide and sowing discord between the citizens of the same country by pushing them to kill one another.”

The government also sought information on Ben Ali’s health, following unconfirmed reports that the 74-year-old ex-president had fallen into a coma due to stress and was being treated in a hospital in Jeddah. The state television broadcast a report Sunday showing a large quantity of money, gold and jewels found in the library of Ben Ali’s presidential palace, a stash worth millions of dollars.

The United States, the European Union and other regional powers are seeking to prop up the Ghannouchi government, presenting it as a guarantor of stability in the same way that they supported the Ben Ali dictatorship for the past 23 years.

US Senator John McCain, the former Republican presidential candidate, met with Tunisian government officials Monday in Tunis and told Reuters that the Obama administration has offered security assistance to the interim government. “The revolution in Tunisia has been very successful and it has become a model for the region,” he said. “We stand ready to provide training to help Tunisia’s military to provide security.”

The “model” character of the Tunisian upheaval, as far as Washington is concerned, is that the former dictatorship has been replaced by a regime that is identical in every respect to its pro-American predecessor, except for the absence of Ben Ali himself. There have been no inroads against the property of either the Tunisian ruling elite or foreign capital, and the new government has promised to continue collaborating with the United States in the struggle against “terrorism.”

McCain regards this as a “model” because the United States would like to create similar regimes in Egypt and elsewhere—Mubarakism without Mubarak, in effect—to defend its financial and security interests.

Other visitors to Tunis to meet with Ben Ali’s successors included the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and the secretary general of the Council of Europe, Thorbjorn Jagland.

Elsewhere in the North Africa, five bodies were found in a bank in Morocco that burned down during anti-government protests Sunday, according to the country’s state-run news agency. The bodies were

found in the town of Al Hoceima in northern Morocco, one of the areas where the protest led to violent clashes and acts of vandalism and looting. The victims were believed to be computer technicians who were trapped in a fire.

Interior Minister Taib Cherkaoui told reporters Monday that 37,000 people had participated in peaceful protests nationwide, a far higher total than initial reports from Rabat, the capital, and Casablanca, the country’s largest city. The looting that broke out afterwards led to the burning of 24 banks, 50 shops and businesses and 66 cars, the minister said. Some 115 police were injured.

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