

Antigovernment Protests Spread Across North Africa and Middle East

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As thousands continued to demonstrate in Tunisia over the weekend against the interim “national unity” government, antigovernment protests spread to Algeria, Yemen and Jordan.

State forces in Algeria and Yemen responded to the protests with deadly force. The Associated Press reported that more than a dozen people were killed in Algeria Saturday when police blocked a march on the parliament building in the capital city, Algiers. Some 300 people intending to march from the city’s Place de la Concorde to parliament were quickly blockaded by police armed with batons, tear gas and other weapons.

The opposition said at least 42 protesters were injured. Said Sadi, the head of the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), said party spokesman Mohsen Belabbes was among the injured and the leader of the party’s parliamentary group, Othmane Amazouz, had been arrested.

The Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH) warned Saturday that the blanket government ban on peaceful protest could cause a social explosion. The LADDH, the RCD, four trade unions and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) announced Friday the formation of a national movement for democracy.

Mounting public anger over unemployment and rising costs sparked protests in Algeria earlier this month that left five people dead and more than 800 injured. In the past two weeks, eight people have set themselves on fire in the country to protest unemployment, poverty, social inequality and government corruption.

The same basic conditions of unemployment and political repression that sparked the mass protests in Tunisia, forcing long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia, are fueling the demonstrations in neighboring countries in the Maghreb and further to the east.

In all of these countries, former colonies of Western imperialism and de facto economic colonies of the same powers today, mass unemployment among the youth is the most explosive social factor propelling the unrest. In Algeria, 15 million of the population of 36 million is under the age of 30.

Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world. Almost half of its population of 23 million lives on \$2 a day or less. Demonstrations held Saturday and Sunday against the 32-year-old regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh were the first such political actions in the regime’s history.

Some 2,500 demonstrated Saturday at the University of Sanaa. Police fired tear gas at the protesters and arrested around 30 of them. Protests also occurred in the southern port city of Aden. Police there fired on demonstrators, injuring four, and detained 22 others.

Military forces responded brutally to two similar protests a day earlier in four cities in the nearby southern province of Lahj, firing mortar shells that killed one woman.

Following sporadic expressions of discontent, including the self-immolation of an unemployed youth last Wednesday in the southern province of Baidah, the Yemeni government had announced reforms, including a limit on presidential terms. The protests rejected the proposals as token measures. At Sanaa University, protesters held signs declaring, "Leave before you are forced to leave."

Early Sunday, the government arrested Tawakul Karman, a prominent journalist and member of the Islamist party Isiah who had organized protests through text messages and emails. Later in the day, police in Sanaa arrested 18 other activists as they left a meeting to discuss the detention of Karman. Among those arrested were the heads of two of Yemen's largest human rights organizations.

The arrests sparked a new demonstration by several hundred people at Sanaa University. The demonstrators, chanting "release the prisoners" and holding pictures of Karman, tried to march to the General Prosecution Office. Some 50 riot police carrying batons beat them back.

In an attempt to defuse the mounting unrest, Saleh went on state television Sunday to announce plans to raise the salaries of government employees and military personnel.

In Jordan, more than 5,000 people rallied Friday in the capital city Amman and other cities after weekly prayers to protest against the regime's economic policies, demanding "bread and freedom" and the resignation of the government.

"(Prime Minister Samir) Rifai, out, out! People of Jordan will not bow!" protesters chanted as they marched from the Al-Hussein mosque in central Amman to the municipal building.

Police said some 4,000 took part in the peaceful protest in Amman, organized by the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front. Another 1,400 people demonstrated in other parts of Jordan, mainly the northern cities of Zarqa and Irbid.

The official poverty rate in Jordan is 25 percent. Officially, unemployment stands at 14 percent, but other estimates put the jobless figure as high as 30 percent.

In Tunisia, thousands protested on both Saturday and Sunday, the second and third days of an official period of mourning for those killed by Ben Ali's police. Demonstrators in Tunis on Saturday demanding the resignation of interim Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and other former cronies of the deposed dictator were joined by hundreds of police, who demanded higher wages and the right to form a union.

On Sunday, thousands of antigovernment protesters rallied outside the offices of Prime Minister Ghannouchi, demanding that he resign. They broke through security cordons to reach the doors of the building.

The crowd included hundreds who had come from the country's impoverished interior in what was called a "Caravan of Liberation." Many in the caravan were from Sidi Bouzid, the bleak town where the antigovernment uprising was sparked a month ago by the self-immolation of an unemployed college graduate. "We have come to bring down the rest of the dictatorship," said Mohammed Layani, an elderly man who was part of the caravan.

Civil servants are also refusing to work and are holding workplace protests in opposition to the interim government.

On Friday, Ghannouchi gave an interview on Tunisian state television in which he rejected calls for his resignation, promising instead to leave after the holding of new legislative and presidential elections. The constitution requires a presidential vote within 60 days, but Ghannouchi did not specify when the elections would take place.

In an attempt to placate popular unrest, the state news agency announced Sunday that Abdelaziz bin Dhia, Ben Ali's spokesman and chief adviser, and Abdallah Qallal, the speaker of parliament's upper house, had been placed under house arrest. The government also said schools and universities, shut since January 10, would begin reopening Monday and sporting events would resume soon.

However, primary school teachers said they were holding an "unlimited strike" to call on the government to resign, a spokesman for the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) told the French press agency AFP.

The UGTT is seeking to gain control of the opposition movement in order to contain it and subordinate it politically to the Tunisian bourgeoisie and US and European imperialism. Having long supported Ben Ali, the UGTT initially backed the interim government and sent representatives to serve as ministers.

Only in the face of popular opposition did the union withdraw its representatives and adopt a stance of opposition to the present government. It seeks, however, to limit the popular movement to demands for purging the government of former Ben Ali cronies, while leaving basically intact the social and political status quo.

Meanwhile, the interim government is enforcing a nighttime curfew and the army is being deployed in force in all major cities. If the ruling elite, with the aid of the UGTT, succeeds in suppressing the mass movement, talk of democratic reform will quickly give way to massive repression and a new dictatorship.

Recent commentaries in the US press reflect the hostility of the American ruling class and the Obama administration—behind hypocritical official support for democratic reform—to the popular uprising against a regime that has long functioned as an American asset.

In a column published January 18 in the right-wing Washington Times, Daniel Pipes (director of the Middle East Forum and a visiting fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution) wrote of the events in Tunisia:

"The fast, seemingly easy, and relatively bloodless coup d'état could inspire globally Islamists to sweep away their own tyrants. [Editorial note: In fact, the Islamists played virtually no role in the mass protests that ousted Ben Ali]. All four North African littoral states—Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt—fit this description, as do Syria, Jordan and Yemen to the east. That Mr. Ben Ali took

refuge in Saudi Arabia implicates that country, too. Pakistan could also fit the template...

"What Franklin D. Roosevelt allegedly said of a Latin American dictator, 'He's a bastard, but he's our bastard,' applies to Mr. Ben Ali and the other Arab strongmen, leaving US government policy in seeming disarray."

Robert D. Kaplan, representing the more moderate-to-liberal wing of American imperialism, expressed essentially the same sentiments in a column in Sunday's New York Times:

"Another thing to keep in mind: in terms of American interests and regional peace, there is plenty of peril in democracy. It was not democrats, but Arab autocrats, Anwar Sadat of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan, who made peace with Israel... And it was democracy that brought the extremists of Hamas to power in Gaza. In fact, do we really want a relatively enlightened leader like King Abdullah in Jordan undermined by widespread street demonstrations? We should be careful what we wish for in the Middle East."

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