

Tunisia Forms Unity Government Dominated by Ruling Party

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The National Unity Government announced by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi is a coming together of all factions of Tunisia's ruling elite against the working class, students and small farmers.

The government has been hastily assembled by Ghannouchi, a key ally of deposed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, under a supposed mandate given him by another Ben Ali loyalist, interim President Fouad Mebazaa, the former parliamentary speaker.

The government is dominated by the top leadership of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RDC). The former defence, foreign, interior and finance ministers all keep their posts. Ghannouchi stays on as prime minister—a post he has held since 1999.

These are only the most prominent faces. A Guardian editorial noted: "Other familiar faces were still around, too. One of them stood to the left of the prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, as he announced he was taking over as temporary ruler (only to be overruled later by the constitutional court). He was Abdallah Kallel, a former interior minister wanted by a Swiss court on charges of torture and human rights violations. He is currently president of the chamber of councillors."

Ghannouchi made a few reform pledges to distance his unity government from Ben Ali, promising that all political parties would be allowed to operate freely, political prisoners would be released, and media censorship would be ended with the abolition of Tunisia's information ministry.

He is relying above all on the bourgeois opposition parties to paint the RDC-dominated executive in democratic hues.

Three prominent opposition figures were named as low-ranking ministers. Najib Chebbie, founder of the Progressive Democratic Party, was named development minister. Ahmed Ibrahim of the former Stalinist Ettajdid party is to become minister of higher education. Mustafa Ben Jaafar of the Union of Freedom and Labour was chosen as the new health minister.

Immediately after the announcement, Ahmed Bouazzi of the Progressive Democratic Party insisted to the BBC, "It's not realistic to dissolve the ruling party... We can go forward with this government, and can even go again into the streets if it is not working."

As a further demonstration of loyalty to the old order, the Maoist Workers Communist Party of Tunisia and the Islamist al-Nahdhar were both excluded from the new government.

Al-Nadhar's leader, Sheik Rashid al-Ghannouchi, nevertheless commented, "If we were invited in the future to take part in the government, we would consider the offer."

The shape of the government is an insult to all those who took to the streets to see Ben Ali deposed. Even as the haggling and horse-trading was taking place behind closed doors, protesters demanding an end to the RDC's dictatorship were being attacked.

In Tunis, demonstrators gathered around the RDC headquarters to protest the formation of an interim government including RDC ministers. "With our blood and our soul we are ready to sacrifice ourselves for the martyrs," they chanted. "Out with the RCD! Out with the party of the dictatorship!"

When they moved on the Interior Ministry building, riot police fired shots into the air and used water cannon and tear gas against the crowd. Rallies were also staged in Sidi Bouzid, central Tunisia, and the nearby town of Regueb.

The police and security forces are under the direct control of the RDC leadership. The military reportedly stood by while the attack in Tunis was mounted. The previous night, the police were involved in gun battles with the military, which had already sworn its loyalty to the new government.

Time magazine reported that the army was "attempting to root out thousands of well-armed militia loyal to the ousted dictator." The magazine cited reports that "3,000 of the 6,200 of Ben Ali's well-armed Presidential Guard [were] still not arrested."

Tensions were high Sunday night, particularly after the arrest of the former head of the presidential security force, Ali Seriati. But on Monday, following the announcement of the new government, the military gave the security forces carte blanche to deal with opposition protests. This was in line with Ghannouchi's declaration that for the new government, "Our priority is security."

Al Ahram, a newspaper funded by the Egyptian government, commented that the inclusion of the opposition was a necessary rectification of a political error by Ben Ali. It wrote that Ali's "biggest mistake" was "neutralising the opposition in Tunisia to the extent that when riots began... there was no head to talk to or with whom to make a deal to end the demonstrations."

Ending the demonstrations is the task to which the Progressive Democratic Party, Ettajdid and the Union of Freedom and Labour have been assigned. The Tunisian ruling elite can count upon the support of all the imperialist powers, whose words of support for democratic protest are worthless.

The above-cited Guardian editorial noted of Tunisia's former colonial rulers: "The prize for brazen hypocrisy goes to President Nicolas Sarkozy, who declared, through clenched teeth, that France stood shoulder to shoulder with the Tunisian people. Do, please, forget the speech his foreign minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, made in the National Assembly, shortly after the authorities in Tunis announced the deaths of 21 civilians killed by police bullets. The one in which she offered Tunisia the help of the French riot police."

The rest of the European Union and the US are just as culpable. A significant factor in catalyzing simmering anger against the Ben Ali regime was the exposure by WikiLeaks of US

cables supporting the rule of the “First Family” despite acknowledgments of the extent of its corruption.

Faced with the fall of Washington’s former ally, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Sunday urged the new government to quickly re-establish order and praised its “willingness to work with Tunisians across the political spectrum.” The US would “stand with Tunisia,” she pledged.

There is little chance that the democratic platitudes of Ghannouchi and Mebazaa will placate anyone and even less that the dominant position of the RDC will go unopposed.

The Independent cited Habib Jerjir of the Regional Workers’ Union of Tunis, who indicated how the new government will be viewed on the street. “It [the RCD] left by the back door and is coming back through the window,” he said. “We can’t have militias in the streets and in the government.”

Tunisia remains as politically unstable and socially polarized as before. The same is true of the rest of the Maghreb and the broader Middle East.

The potential fallout from the Tunisian events continues to exercise the Arab regimes, which preside over countries where poverty and unemployment are equally endemic. A man set himself on fire outside the Egyptian parliament building in Cairo on Monday, in an echo of the action by 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi that became the focus of popular anger in Tunisia. There have been at last four such incidents in Algeria and one in Mauritania.

The central issue posed before workers and youth is the need to adopt the revolutionary strategy of permanent revolution, first elaborated by Leon Trotsky. The bourgeois regimes in Africa, the Middle East and throughout the so-called “developing” world are inextricably tied to the major imperialist powers. They function as both direct exploiters and local gendarme for the major global corporations and investors, whose predatory demands mean the impoverishment of the workers and poor peasants. There can be no “democratic renewal” under any faction of the national bourgeoisie.

Only an independent political struggle by the working class for socialism, rallying all of the oppressed sections of society, offers a way forward.

With their constant invocation of the danger of revolutionary “contagion,” the ruling elites themselves acknowledge that the popular movement in Tunisia is part of the broader struggle of the working class in the Middle East and around the world. The working class cannot confine itself to a national perspective. The struggle in Tunisia must be consciously linked to the struggles of workers and oppressed people in the advanced capitalist countries as well as the former colonial countries. The critical question in forging an international revolutionary movement against globally organised capital is the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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