

Riots Shake Tunisia and Algeria

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Police repression of mass protests in Tunisia and Algeria last week has led to the deaths of over a dozen people, with hundreds injured. There was rioting against food price increases and state subsidy cuts across Algeria, amid ongoing demonstrations in Tunisia against unemployment and the regime of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The Algerian protests reflect deepening mass opposition to the free-market policies of the army-backed regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, of the National Liberation Front (FLN). Prices of essential, state-subsidized food items including flour, cooking oil, and sugar have doubled in the past few months in Algeria. World market prices are rising, and the state has tried to pass part of the price increase through to grocers and consumers.

More broadly, the protests reflect mass anger at terrible social conditions in Algeria. According to the International Monetary Fund, 75 percent of the Algerian population is under 25; they face a 30 percent unemployment rate. The state is also trying to impose a 17 percent sales tax on street vendors in Algeria's large informal sector.

After reports of sporadic rioting throughout the country, there was large-scale rioting in Algeria's major cities at the end of last week.

Squads of riot police set up roadblocks and attacked protestors in the Belcourt and Bab el-Oued districts of Algiers on Friday. Protestors sacked police stations, banks, or government offices in "several eastern cities" including Constantine, Jijel, Setif, and Bouira, according to Algeria's official APS news agency. AFP also reported violent clashes in Oran, Algeria's second-largest city, Annaba, and Tizi Ouzou—the main city of the ethnic-minority Kabylie region.

The government backtracked yesterday, announcing it would cut prices by slashing duties on sugar and oil by 41 percent. However, certain sources, including the web site *Tout Sur l'Algérie*, contested government figures, claiming the measures' net effect would only be a 5 percent cut in food prices.

The government has also banned football (soccer) matches. The BBC noted that matches are "seen as a potential catalyst for protests."

Algerian Interior Minister Daho Ould Kablia confirmed yesterday that three youths had been killed during the protests, in M'sila, Tipasa, and Boumerdes. Official statistics claim that 300 people were injured. *Le Figaro* reported that Sadek Bendjedid, a 65-year-old taxi driver, died from smoke inhalation from intense police barrages of tear gas.

Unrest deepened in Tunisia over the weekend, amid reports of pitched battles between protestors and sections of the security forces.

The BBC wrote that 14 people were killed in two cities, Kasserine and Tala. Tunisia's official TAP news agency released a statement saying: "Several government buildings in Kasserine were attacked by groups who set fire to and destroyed three banks, a police station, and a filling station, and set fire to a police vehicle." Four people were reported killed in Regueb.

The protests started when an unemployed university graduate working as an itinerant vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in front of government offices in Sidi Bouzid to protest the police's confiscation of his stock. Police claimed that he did not have a permit to sell vegetables. Bouazizi died on January 4.

AFP reported that the marchers at the funeral chanted: "Farewell, Mohammed, we will avenge you. We weep for you today, we will make those who caused your death weep."

His uncle, Mehdi Horchani, told AFP: "Mohammed gave his life to draw attention to his condition and that of his brothers." As in Algeria, Tunisia faces a crisis of youth unemployment, as the state's free-market policies have slashed jobs and made it virtually impossible to obtain employment without personal connections or paying bribes.

Le Monde wrote: "In the strongly state-supported economy, an advanced degree used to guarantee a stable job, often in the state or para-state sector. But things changed with the major structural reforms of the post-Bourguiba era," with unemployment rising rapidly in the late 1990s. The youth unemployment rate is now comparable to Algeria's.

A French businessman in Tunisia told Le Monde: "Here it's not rare to be served at a gas station by someone with a master's degree in sociology. Cleaning women have English degrees, the fruit vendor has a doctorate in mathematics, and so on."

Trying to disrupt the organization of protests and halt media reporting, the Tunisian government is clamping down on the Internet. It blocked secure access to Facebook and web mail applications last week; journalists and political activists in Tunisia have reported that their accounts have since been hacked and taken over.

In particular, the Ben Ali regime is anxious to block sites that discuss WikiLeaks material on Tunisia. Though US and European firms firmly support the Ben Ali clique against the Tunisian population, US diplomats' frank assessment of the situation in Tunisia—usually hidden from the public—paints a devastating portrait of the government.

In a July 2009 cable published by WikiLeaks, US diplomats wrote: "While we share some key values and the country has a strong record on development, Tunisia has big problems. President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor. Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities."

In another cable—titled "Corruption in Tunisia: What's Yours is Mine"—US diplomats wrote: "Corruption in Tunisia is getting worse. Whether it's cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali's family is rumored to covet it and reportedly gets what it wants. ... President Ben Ali's extended family is often cited as the nexus of Tunisian corruption. Often referred to as a quasi-mafia, an oblique mention of 'the Family' is enough to indicate which family you mean. Seemingly half of the Tunisian business community can claim a Ben Ali connection through marriage, and many of these relations are reported to have made the most of their lineage."

These assessments highlight the imperialist double standards of US and European regimes in dealing with regimes in the Middle East. When defeated, US-backed Iranian candidate Mirhossein Mousavi tried to steal the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections, US and European governments denounced the Iranian government's suppression of the protests.

Ben Ali's use of violence and censorship to defend the interests of Tunisia's ruling clique has elicited no protest, however, as he is viewed as a Western ally.

France—the former colonial power in Algeria and Tunisia, and which has large populations of immigrants from the two countries—has made no official statements on the protests. *Le Monde* noted: "Tunisia has long been a privileged partner of Europe on economic matters, in the war on immigration and terrorism. It has solid allies in Italy and France, which is certainly the reason for the embarrassed silence that has dominated until now."

US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley issued a statement calling for "restraint on all sides" in Tunisia Saturday. At the same time, the Tunisian ambassador was summoned to the State Department for talks.

There is rising concern in the bourgeois media and diplomatic establishment about the possibility that these protests could spread. Indeed, their fundamental causes—social deprivation enforced by governments unresponsive to the population—are problems facing workers around the world.

Saudi Arabia's Arab News bluntly wrote: "Those who see these disturbances as a local North African difficulty should think again. The hopelessness that drove this young Tunisian to his death, that has prompted several thousands of his compatriots to do the rare thing for Tunisia—take to the streets and riot—and that has seen young Algerians looting and rioting this week against price rises are a breakdown in law and order that was waiting to happen. It can happen elsewhere in the Arab world. It is not just in North Africa that the specter of unemployment looms."

Protests could also spread to Europe, with its large populations of oppressed North African immigrants. In France, there was a demonstration supporting Algerian and Tunisian protestors in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille yesterday.

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