

US Pursues Two-Track Policy to Suppress Protests in Egypt and Tunisia

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The United States is working intensively to suppress mass protests in both Tunisia and Egypt and prop up the local ruling elites that are entirely subordinate to American imperialism. It is using different tactics in the two countries, dictated in large part by their relative strategic importance to US ruling class interests in the Middle East.

In Tunisia, Washington backed its long-time asset Zine El Abidine Ben Ali until it concluded that his position could not be salvaged despite weeks of violent repression against anti-government demonstrators. Just days before Ben Ali was driven from the country, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the United States was “not taking sides” between the dictator and protesting workers and youth.

It has been widely reported that the US instructed the Tunisian military to refuse Ben Ali’s orders to fire live rounds into mass demonstrations in Tunis and other cities, effectively pulling the rug out from under Ben Ali and making the military leader, Gen. Rachid Ammar, the political arbiter within the country.

The US undoubtedly engineered the formation of a so-called interim unity government following Ben Ali’s January 14 flight to Saudi Arabia. This government, dominated entirely by political henchmen of the ousted dictator, has since been the target of popular demonstrations demanding a government free of former members of the ruling party.

The Obama administration has sent its assistant secretary of state for the Near East, Jeffrey D. Feltman, to Tunis to “confer with the interim government.” With the promise of elections in six months, Washington is backing in all essentials the old regime minus Ben Ali, and calling this cynical fraud “democracy.”

It is portraying General Ammar as the “protector” of the “democratic revolution,” even as the interim government sanctions increased police repression against the protests, which are increasingly dominated by impoverished workers and youth from Tunis and the blighted central and southern parts of the country where the revolt began in December.

Al Jazeera reported Wednesday that riot police in Tunis used tear gas to disperse protesters who have camped out in the city center in defiance of an 8 PM curfew to demand the sacking of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and the other Ben Ali cronies. Numerous injuries were reported.

Earlier in the week, the army for the first time since Ben Ali’s ouster used tear gas against anti-government protesters.

Nevertheless, the protests continue in Tunis and elsewhere. Al Arabiya reported Wednesday that several thousand demonstrated in Sfax, in eastern Tunisia. On Tuesday, university lecturers joined teachers in a nationwide strike.

Tuesday's momentous events in Egypt have complicated Washington's efforts to contain the upsurge of popular opposition in Tunisia and other Arab countries, including Algeria, Yemen and Jordan. An estimated 50,000 people, predominantly young unemployed workers and students, defied the police dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak, routinely described as a "staunch ally of the US," to demand his resignation and the lifting of emergency rule.

It was the biggest popular movement in Egypt since food riots swept the country in 1977, four years before the military installed Mubarak as president. In the midst of the regime's savage police repression—using tear gas, water cannon, rubber bullets, concussion grenades and truncheons—US Secretary of State Clinton Tuesday afternoon declared her government's support for Mubarak.

It had already been reported that two protesters in Suez had been killed by the police and countless more arrested when Clinton told reporters at the State Department: "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."

This was an unmistakable signal that the United States was drawing the line in Egypt and would not withdraw its support for Mubarak. It was tantamount to a green light to the regime to employ any degree of force necessary to crush the popular uprising.

This did not take long. In the early morning hours of Wednesday, riot police violently dispersed several thousand demonstrators who had camped out in Cairo's central Tahrir Square. Plain clothes police beat demonstrators and reporters were attacked and jailed.

This was followed by a government decree banning further demonstrations and warning that protesters would be immediately arrested. Later on Wednesday, police used rubber bullets and batons to disperse 2,000 protesters in Suez. Some 350 people were reportedly injured.

In central Cairo, dozens of people gathered in an attempt to continue the protests and Egyptian journalists demonstrated outside of their union building.

Al Jazeera reported a protest in Assuit in northern Egypt and the claim by the Muslim Brotherhood that as many as 121 of its members had been detained in the town.

There are reports that a third demonstrator has been killed by police. The Egyptian government confirmed Wednesday that 860 had been arrested since Tuesday.

This was the context in which President Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs, was asked Wednesday if the US supported Mubarak. Gibbs answered in the affirmative, saying that Egypt remained a close and important ally, according to the French press agency AFP.

The administration's open backing for Mubarak exposed the hollowness and hypocrisy of President Obama's declaration in his State of the Union address Tuesday: "Tonight, let us be clear: the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia and supports the democratic aspirations of all people."

US imperialism believes that the stakes are too high in Egypt to permit the ousting of Mubarak in a similar manner to the toppling of Ben Ali in Tunisia. Egypt is the most populous and politically important of the Arab states and the recipient of tens of billions of dollars in US military aid. It is the main bulwark of US domination in the Arab world.

As a 2009 report by the Brookings Institution put it: “Egypt is America’s closest Arab ally, a key strategic support for US military operations in the Middle East and a central player in Arab-Israeli peace efforts.”

The New York Times explained the different tactics being pursued in Tunisia and Egypt with cynical bluntness in a front-page article on Wednesday. Washington “is proceeding gingerly,” it wrote, “balancing the democratic aspirations of young Arabs with cold-eyed strategic and commercial interests. That sometimes involves supporting autocratic and unpopular governments—which has turned many of those young people against the United States.

“President Obama called Mr. Mubarak last week, after the uprising in Tunisia, to talk about joint projects like the Middle East peace process, even as he emphasized the need to meet the democratic aspirations of the Tunisian protesters...”

“An uprising in Tunisia, a peripheral player in the region, is not the same as one in Egypt, a linchpin. The Egyptian government is a crucial ally to Washington...”

The widening movement in Northern Africa and the Middle East is a powerful demonstration of the entry of the masses into revolutionary struggle and the social power of the working class. However, the movement confronts great dangers at the hands of imperialism and all factions of the national bourgeoisie, as well as those political forces that seek to subordinate the working class to the so-called “democratic” bourgeoisie.

The working class in the Middle East must recognize in the Obama administration and US imperialism its most determined enemy, and understand that the American working class—itsself facing massive attacks on its living standards and democratic rights—is its greatest ally. American workers must come to the defense of their Arab brothers, and the Arab masses should make a direct appeal to the US working class.

The critical issue is the development of a revolutionary leadership throughout the Arab world to establish the political independence of the working class and rally all of the oppressed on the basis of the socialist perspective of permanent revolution. This means building Trotskyist parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International to unite the masses in the struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

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