

Tunisia in revolt

Masses reject 'government of national unity'

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THE REVOLT, which started in the small city of Sidi Bouzid in mid-December, rapidly spread like wildfire to different parts of the country.

The Tunisian masses, having lost their fear of an increasingly isolated regime, rose up in every corner of the country.

The capital Tunis, the economic heartland of the country - which in the first weeks of the movement had been spared the massive protests erupting in the poorer central and southern inland provinces - was decisively hit by the movement from Tuesday 11 January onwards.

"We are not afraid, we are not afraid!" shouted hundreds of youth rising up and attacking local government buildings in Tunis's working class neighbourhood of Ettadem on that day.

In response, the government ordered the imposition of an unlimited night-time curfew and initially deployed army units and armoured vehicles throughout the city. But these measures were largely ineffective, as thousands courageously defied them from the first night.

Splits

PARTS OF the ruling elite, to save their own interests, were increasingly prepared to get rid of Ben Ali, hoping to appease the revolt of the masses, as you would give a bone to a dog in the hope of calming him down.

Reflecting growing divisions, reports have also talked about tensions developing in the army. The top army general, Rachid Ammar, was removed on Sunday 9 January, because of his refusal to give orders to his soldiers to repress protests, and for his open criticism of an 'excessive' use of force against demonstrators.

Similar moves multiplied, especially among the rank-and-file soldiers refusing to fire and, in some areas, fraternising with the demonstrators and protecting them against the police.

This is the reason why the military was withdrawn from Tunis by the end of Thursday, and replaced by the police and other security forces, generally considered more loyal to the ruling regime.

Despite the understandable climate of euphoria that exists because of Ben Ali's departure, the revolutionary process has only begun, and all the dangers that are lying ahead must be faced with a correct policy.

Incorrigible reactionary forces, from inside or outside the state machine, could try to exploit the general state of confusion to take back the initiative, and organise violence against progressive forces, trade unionists, young protesters, etc.

To face this situation, a class appeal should be made to the rank-and-file state forces in order to win them over to the side of the revolution; the creation of genuinely elected committees of soldiers must be part of such a process, in order to clean up the army of all reactionary elements and people who have collaborated with the old regime.

Reports are now circulating about gangs engaged in looting, plundering, robbing houses and shops, setting fire to buildings and physically attacking people. There are strong suspicions that these are composed of police, security forces and former criminals engaged by Ben Ali's clique in order to show that, without Ben Ali, 'chaos reigns', and trying to put the blame on



Tunisians defied the repressive forces of the state to overthrow the dictator, president Ben Ali.

peaceful protesters.

On the other hand, the 'law-and-order' issue is being used by the interim authorities to try and justify the maintenance of the state of emergency and to impose big restrictions on civil liberties. Both must be challenged, through the formation of democratically-run armed workers' defence forces, in order to protect the neighbourhoods, people and protests, against any arbitrary violence.

Programme

BEN ALI'S removal has been achieved but so far, unfortunately, there is no clear independent working class political force that can give a lead to the spontaneous outburst over what to do next, and what initiatives to take in order to achieve a proper political and social revolution that would transform Tunisian society.

To achieve this, a break must be made with capitalism and a start made to plan the renovation of society along socialist lines, fulfilling the interests of the majority by establishing real social justice, tackling the problem of unemployment by giving a decent job to all and satisfying the long-standing aspirations for genuine democratic rights.

The absence of a leadership armed with a clear strategy and socialist programme could result in temporary ebbs in the movement.

The unity government that has been formed is a government of the 'old faces'. There are some new faces but this does not represent a break with the past. There is an urgent need for the building of an independent workers' party to represent the interests of the masses.

The masses have not displayed such energies, made such sacrifices and spilt their blood just to see other members of the ruling elite, closely associated with the old regime, take Ben Ali's place.

The 'law and order' that Ben Ali's associates want is one which allows them to remain in control.

This is why it is essential that working people get organised and build mass independent organisations that can elaborate a revolutionary strategy to get out of this impasse and avoid their revolution

being stolen from above.

Only a 'unity government of the working class and the oppressed' - a government genuinely representing the masses in struggle, willing to completely purge those who ran and profited from Ben Ali's regime, and standing firmly against any compromise with all the capitalist rulers, whether Ben Ali's close associates or not - is acceptable.

Any other 'unity' would mean neutering the revolutionary movement and effectively utilising it as an auxiliary force to replace one clan of oppressors with another. Genuinely free elections should be organised under the democratic control of the working people; this is the only way to prevent supporters of the old regime trying to subvert the revolution.

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In that sense, the question of who controls the country's wealth and the means of production has become one of the central issues facing the movement, if it is to solve the crisis of unemployment and poverty.

Indeed, as long as economic relations remain on a capitalist basis, run for the profits of a few, no sustainable and fundamental change can be made to the living conditions of the majority. Only the organised working class, by taking control over the commanding heights of the economy, can bring such a change.

The formation of democratically controlled committees, elected by the workers themselves in the workplaces and in the factories, is necessary for this. Similar organising committees should be set up in

the neighbourhoods and villages, to make sure the struggle is everywhere controlled from below, and that every political organisation can defend democratically its views and proposals in terms of how to follow up on the present movement.

Such committees could then link up with each other on a local, regional, and national basis, to provide the foundation for a government of the working people and the poor masses.

Such a government - in which every elected official would not receive more than the wage of an ordinary worker, and would be subject to immediate recall - would confiscate the major companies and banks from the hands of the current mafia-type rulers and place them in public ownership, under the democratic control and management of the working population as a whole.

This would be the start of a socialist reconstruction of society, based on the democratic planning of the economy in the interests of all. Such a step would stand as an inspiring example for the masses of the whole region.

Revolution

THE CWI stands for the full recognition of all democratic rights, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and for an immediate end to the state of emergency.

We call for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Tunisia and for the setting up of working class courts to judge all the criminals, assassins and torturers that are still running free or even occupying leading positions in the state apparatus.

Tunisia's future must not be decided by a deal between elements of the old regime and pro-capitalist opposition leaders. Instead, there must be free and fully democratic elections for a revolutionary constituent assembly, where representatives of the workers and poor could decide the country's future.

We call for international solidarity actions with the Tunisian struggle. Initiatives can help to structure an international campaign to publicise and support actively the Tunisian revolution in the making.

the committee for a workers international

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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Cedric Gerome, CWI