

Tunisia: 'You come back - we come back'

THE TUNISIAN revolution is experiencing an uneasy, fragile pause. Strikes, sit-ins, protests and blockades continue but the intensity has lessened. Promises to hold elections to a constituent assembly on 24 July, to disband the political and secret police and to outlaw the party of the former dictatorship have given a breathing space for the latest prime minister, Béji Caïd Essebsi.

Tim Martyn

This superficial, relative calm could be shattered at any moment by a new upsurge in struggle, further prevarication by the political establishment, or police provocation.

Those who made this revolution – the working class, unemployed youth, urban and rural poor, along with sections of the middle class – remain vigilant. Nothing is guaranteed.

Joy swept through Tunisia when the dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was forced out on 14 January. Everything changed. Before the revolution, people could not talk openly about politics. There were furtive discussions, of course, secret meetings, whispers in the shadows – and the ever present threat from the secret police, arrest, imprisonment and torture.

Now, everyone talks about politics, all the time. Whether someone is on the left, in the centre, or is a right-wing reactionary, everyone is talking about what's going on; what might happen in the elections, and where the revolution will end up.

Suddenly, everyone seems to be in favour of freedom and democratic rights. Even the old dictatorship's media say they support the revolution. They have no choice. The strength of the movement and the hopes it has inspired means that no one can declare themselves against the revolution, certainly not if they want to influence events.

Behind the façade, however, large parts of the political establishment and state machinery remain in place – how will the disbandment of the secret police be verified, for example, and by whom?

In many instances, workers succeeded in driving out the bosses closest to the old regime. Yet, the tentacles of the Ben Ali/Trabelsi mafia still reach deep into the economy. Western multinationals and their government backers continue to suck its lifeblood.



Hundreds of Tunisian protesters have been killed by state forces but the determined struggle continues.

Essebsi is a more savvy politician and communicator than the thug, Ben Ali. Yet, 84-year-old Essebsi was interior minister in the first, authoritarian Tunisian republic of Habib Bourghiba.

He has the blood of strikers and other protesters on his hands. But, as he was not so closely linked with Ben Ali, he has had time to wash away some of that blood.

After he announced the elections and other measures, tensions eased to an extent. The sit-in ended voluntarily at the Kasbah – a government square occupied by thousands of Tunisians from every region.

But they did not go without a warning: 'Vous revenez – nous revenons': you [dictatorship, repression] come back, we come back. And the network is already in place, addresses and numbers have been exchanged, connections made, the movement strengthened.

Time and time again, the incredible courage and revolutionary instincts of the workers, unemployed youth and poor have been shown – despite the fact that there is no coherent leadership. Hundreds have been killed by state forces, but the determined struggle continues.

The massive demonstrations on 25 February, the biggest since Ben Ali fled, were the crest of the latest wave. Even then, a young protester was killed by police in Tunis.

Reaction

THE FOLLOWING day, as thousands converged on the interior ministry to protest against the killing, the police came out openly in full brute force.

Tear gas choked lungs, batons cracked bones, live ammunition scattered crowds. For hours, the battle raged, another four people were killed.

The streets were strewn with debris as police and their gangs of hired thugs patrolled the main intersections into the night. A curfew was imposed from 6pm in the central commercial district for the next two days, the atmosphere tense.

This was an attempt to whip up reaction, chaos and division. It did not succeed. Such was the magnitude of the demonstrations and the outrage at the brutal repression that the government was pushed back. The then prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, a Ben Ali stooge, was

forced to resign.

By mid-week, the second interim government had collapsed.

The promise of elections has only been won through mass pressure. But the process is in the hands of the establishment, over the heads of the people. There is a scramble to register political parties. At the time of writing, almost 40 have been approved, although many more await official sanction.

The workplace and neighbourhood committees need to be strengthened to play a decisive role in ensuring that the constituent assembly truly reflects the revolution. The working class, unemployed, urban and rural poor need a party or electoral platform to give them a major voice in the elections.

Such a political formation would fight to stop the old regime and capitalist class from restoring their domination in society.

A struggle is needed to nationalise the main sectors of the economy, under democratic workers' control and management. And a revolutionary workers' government would be the only way to develop socialist planning in the interests of the vast majority of people in Tunisia.

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 45 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

www.socialistworld.net

The CWI website contains news, reports and analysis from around the world. Recent articles include:



Egypt: Armed clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians

Counter revolution strikes - old regime has not given up

David Johnson, Socialist Party (CWI, England and Wales)



Kazakhstan: April presidential 'election' announced

Opposition activists arrested in protest against dictator's fake poll

Socialist Resistance (CWI in Kazakhstan)



Hong Kong: Budget backlash grows

"Biggest political crisis since 2003"

Dikang, Socialist Action (CWI, Hong Kong)

Saudi troops to suppress Bahrain protesters

TWO THOUSAND Saudi Arabian troops in armoured vehicles crossed over the border into Bahrain on 14 March in order to bolster the beleaguered Sunni ruling class. Bahrain's monarchy has seen its grip on the country severely weakened by large protests over the last two months mainly from its oppressed Shiite majority population but also involving poor Sunnis.

The United Arab Emirates has also sent 500 police to help save Bahrain's royal family.

On Sunday 13 March, thousands of Bahrainis, demanding democratic rights and social reforms, clashed with riot police in the capital Manama.

But while western governments have been quick and vocal in condemning the Gaddafi regime in

Libya for using mercenary troops to suppress its country's opposition, in Bahrain's case the US administration could only muster a muffled, cautionary response. This is not surprising as the US has a major naval base in Bahrain which is situated across the Strait of Hormuz from Iran.

The Sunni dictatorship in Saudi Arabia had previously criticised the US's lack of support for the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted by protests, strikes and an uprising by the Egyptian masses. Clearly the Saudi regime is deeply worried about its existence if the neighbouring Bahrain ruling class is overthrown by a similar popular uprising.

Indeed fear of such a popular movement has led the Saudi regime



Bahrainis have demanded fundamental social change.

to spend some of its billions of oil wealth on a jobs programme, while

also beefing up its police and other repressive agencies.