

# Spread the Tunisian revolution across north Africa

Marc Lasalle and Dave Stockton Sat, 15/01/2011 - 08:54

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Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has fled to Saudi Arabia, handing power to his prime minister Mohamed Ghannouchi.

The calling of a general strike by the trade unions, for a long time subservient to the regime, changed the whole situation, making it clear the regime was not going to surmount its crisis.

On 13 January Ben Ali went on TV - even addressing the people in everyday Tunisian Arabic. He humbly apologised for the violence, saying he has heard their grievances and had ordered the police to stop firing on the crowds.

He claimed that he will not stand again for president in 2014 and that he would tackle corruption. He also promised freedom of the press. But it was all too little, too late.

The demonstrations went on, even huger than before. It was plain Ben Ali had had to get out at once. Clearly a full-scale revolution is unfolding in Tunisia.

It is highly unlikely that the prime minister will be able to stabilise the situation with a mixture of tear gas and negotiations with opposition groups.

The Tunisian uprising will have major repercussions right across the region, where similar problems afflict the masses of workers and youth.

The spark for the protests came on 17 December with a desperate act by 26-year old Mohamed Bouazizi who set fire to himself in the southern city of Sudi Bouzid after the police confiscated his merchandise, because he did not have a proper permit. Despite having a degree, in order to live, Mohamed was a street seller of fruits and vegetables.

This was no isolated act either. There have been at least a dozen other such tragic protests recently. In fact the incident is symbolic of the plight of an entire generation.

Thousands of young people recognized Mohamed's situation as their own and were moved to action by his dying words - ?no more poverty; no more unemployment.?

14 per cent of Tunisians are unemployed but for those between the ages of 18 and 19 the figure is three times higher. There are 200,000 unemployed graduates alone. That is why the revolt spread so quickly to the whole country. The demonstrators have had enough of unemployment and want jobs. They revolted too against the dictatorship which represses all protest against these inhuman conditions Ben Ali has been president for 23 years, always re-elected with huge majorities, topping 99 per cent in the 1990s, a powerful

indication of the appalling corruption of the regime.

So protesters demonstrated against the denial of basic freedoms too, against the rampant corruption and the tight grip over the country's wealth of a narrow circle around the president's extended family.

In Sidi Bouzid, the population immediately organised a sit-in under the slogan "the right to work". The regime sent the police who brutally evicted the occupiers.

Faced with mass protests right across the country both police and army opened fired on the demonstrators, sometimes during funeral processions.

The death toll in clashes in the cities of Thala and Kasserine was at least eight and maybe as high as twenty according to other sources.

Many activists were arrested and the government tried to muzzle the press and other sources of information.

It refused visas to foreign journalists, it cut off access to foreign websites and punished bloggers.

This is not the first such Tunisian mass revolt.

In 2008 and 2010 there was a marked rise in fighting by the unemployed, particularly in the mining town of Gafsa, in Shkira and Ben Gourdans.

Tunisia is a model pupil of the imperialist powers and the International Monetary Fund.

It is regularly named as a shining example of the "economic miracle" neoliberal policies bring about.

There has recently been a frenzied privatization of major enterprises. Though Tunisia is a leading exporter in Africa, especially in the areas of food processing and textiles, this development has been obtained by low labor costs, repression of trade unions and smothering all political opposition.

There are 80,000 police officers to control and suppress a population of 10 million.

Now the masses ? who do not trust the regime ? need to win over the soldiers so there can be no question of repressing the risen people. The need to arm themselves in popular militias an organise councils of delegates to ensure democracy for the working people, the unemployed and the rural and urban poor.

If they do this then the grime can really be smashed.

## **Algeria**

Algeria is in a similar situation. Today right across the region the model of privatisation and military regimes is going into crisis. The burden of unemployment and rising prices has become unbearable.

In Algeria too the oil revenues are in the hands of the state but are monopolised by a greedy and corrupt bureaucracy. Unemployment is massive and the youth have no future.

Since 5 January there were demonstrations in the Algiers neighborhood of Bab el Oued, where the young have revolted against high prices and pelted the police with stones. One of the demonstrators' slogans was: "They increased the oil and sugar, the people are determined to do battle."

Demonstrations also took place Staoueli Fuka and on the coast west of Algiers, Djelfa, in the south, in Oran, Tizi Ozouer.

According to El Watan, in a suburb of Algiers, children as young as 12 left schools and took to the streets to protest against the conditions of their schooling.

They stated - "This school is a slum. We risk getting sick every morning we go there. And when it rains, the whole school is flooded. We do not want to study in the middle of the mud."

As in Tunisia, the government responded with repression, leading to the deaths of at least three protesters and hundreds wounded.

Now the government has announced a reduction in taxes on sugar and oil, but it is unlikely that this is sufficient to calm popular anger or sustainably improve their situation.

### **What is to be done?**

Across North Africa - including in Egypt - the masses are furious with the corrupt elites which impose high prices and mass unemployment on them whilst wallowing in luxury.

It is clear that right across the region the growth of a mass grassroots movement can open real prospects of a revolutionary solution to poverty, unemployment.

They can bring down the repressive regimes based on the looting of the oil wealth of these countries and exploiting cheap labour by denying union and democratic rights.

Tunisia shows that it is the youth and the working class together who can bring this about.

Around the world workers and youth must stand in solidarity with the uprisings of youth and impoverished masses in Tunisia and Algeria, and we call the labor movement everywhere to express solidarity and to demand an end to repression, the release all those arrested, the revelation of the true figures of the casualties.

Down with the state of emergency in Tunisia ? continue the general strike till Ghannouchi has gone and elections to a sovereign constituent assembly proclaimed. Stop the ongoing violations of human rights in Algeria, Egypt and the whole region: for free expression, access to the internet and the press, for freedom of assembly, for union and political rights.

? For self-defense guards of youth, workers and poor masses against the repression of the police and army.

? Elect workers councils in the factories and all other workplaces - young people's councils in the colleges, schools, and popular quarters with high unemployment.

? Nationalise all the privatised industries and services under workers control

? For a massive programme of public works to employ all those without jobs. Expropriate the rich. Especially the families of the regime who have plundered the country.

? For popular price committees in working class and poor neighborhoods fixing the maximum price a basket of essential goods

? For a sliding scale of wages and hours

? Open the books to expose corruption and enrichment of bureaucrats

? Stop the deportations of undocumented workers and asylum seekers from France and other EU countries. Citizenship rights for everyone

? For workers and poor people's councils and revolutionary governments based on them to end the scourge of mass unemployment, inflation, and repression

? For a socialist Tunisia as part of a socialist north africa and middle east.

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