

We Support the *Democratic Revolution* in Tunisia

STATEMENT BY THE CAMPAIGN FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

We express our solidarity with the Tunisian people in their struggle against a repressive and corrupt regime.

Unemployed youth, students, trade unionists, lawyers, and the full range of opposition parties, in the cities and in the rural areas, have taken to the streets and — for the first time in the Arab world — ousted a dictator.

Tunisia has always had just the façade of democracy. Its ruling party won every seat in the parliament in 1989, and every directly elected seat in the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had been in office since 1987, when he deposed the previous autocrat, Habib Bourguiba. Ben Ali abolished the position of “president for life,” but then ran unopposed for president in 1989 and 1994, and got 99.44 percent of the vote in 1999, 94.5 percent in 2004, and, running against three opponents, 89.6 percent in 2009.

The U.S. government’s annual human rights report summarized the situation in Tunisia this way:

“There were significant limitations on citizens’ right to change their government. Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees and arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals. Security forces acted with impunity, sanctioned by high-ranking officials. There were also reports of lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention. Government imposition of severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, and association worsened in the lead-up to the October [2009] elections. The government remained intolerant of public criticism, and there were widespread reports that it used intimidation, criminal investigations, the judicial system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage criticism.”

Tunisia ranked number 154 out of 173 countries in the 2009 Reporters Without Borders list of World Press Freedom rankings, down from 143 in the previous year. OpenNet Initiative found that the Tunisian government engaged in “pervasive” filtering of political and social internet sites, using U.S.-made software.

Corruption by the president and his inner circle was notorious. The U.S. Embassy reported, in a cable released by WikiLeaks, that “one Tunisian lamented that Tunisia was no longer a police state, it had become a state run by the mafia.” Commented the U.S. Ambassador in a secret cable: “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.”

While political insiders have been living in luxury, life is hard for the vast majority of Tunisians. In 2005 46 percent of young college graduates did not have a job 18 months after graduation; nearly 50 percent of Masters graduates and graduates with advanced technician diplomas were unemployed. And in response to pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, government subsidies continue to be reduced or eliminated from food and gasoline, squeezing even those who have jobs.

Despite Tunisia’s record of repression, Washington has long had “very good relations” (in the words of the State Department’s Background notes) with the country. The two nations have “an active schedule of joint military exercises.” Tunisia is one of only five countries (the others being Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Colombia) that receive direct U.S. military aid. In fact, as recently as December 2010, when the uprising against Ben Ali was already building, Congress authorized \$12 million in “security assistance” to the Ben Ali dictatorship.

On January 11 of this year, as demonstrations raged in the country and the regime responded with lethal repression, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the United States “was not taking sides.” And the French foreign minister suggested that French police forces could help police in Tunisia “appease the situation through law enforcement techniques.” Only after Ben Ali fled the country did the White House, on January 14, finally condemn the violence against peaceful demonstrators. Until then, support of the Tunisian government was justified on the grounds that it was a “partner against terrorism” and a “moderate” Arab voice that did not join the Arab consensus against Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.

We call on Washington and Paris, the two major props of the regime, to keep their hands off Tunisia, allowing the Tunisian people to establish a society that provides full democratic rights and social justice. We demand that the Tunisian security forces end all acts of repression, and we oppose any sort of military takeover. There must be no interference with the right of Tunisians to create a new civilian government through free and fair elections involving all political parties. In addition, we call for an end to IMF/World Bank pressure on Tunisia to reduce food and gasoline subsidies. Such policies are typically characterized by the U.S. as “reforms,” but they only deepen the misery of the Tunisian people.

Whether the toppling of the dictator will lead to fundamental changes in Tunisia remains to be seen. But there is no doubt that U.S.-backed autocrats throughout the Middle East ought to be very worried. May this be an inspiration for people seeking real democracy everywhere, from Egypt to Jordan to Saudi Arabia ... to the United States.



A woman holds sign in protest of Tunisian President Ben Ali during a demonstration near Tunisia’s embassy in Paris. AllVoices.com



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