

Tunisia faces youth riots in the midst of precarious political stability

Tunisia is going through one of its worst moments, just as it marks the tenth anniversary since dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. Coinciding with that date, the Maghreb country has reached a peak in the number of infections and deaths due to the pandemic. The authorities decreed a four-day lockdown, accompanied by a curfew, which has been contested by thousands of young people in the country's main cities. The Interior Ministry announced on Monday the arrest of 632 people, mostly between 15 and 25 years old, during the three nights of violence.

The riots began in the poorest neighborhoods of the capital and spread to other regions of the country. There have been reports of looting, tire burning and clashes with police. The Army, the country's most respected institution according to several polls, has been deployed in the streets. The causes of the protests remain unknown.

French-Tunisian political scientist Khadija Mohsen-Finan, author of the book *Tunisie, l'apprentissage de la démocratie* (2011-2021), points out via email that the protests are the product of the lack of responses from successive democratic governments to social demands. Faced with the youth, Mohsen-Finan points out, there is only "a weak and divided Executive." "The different political groups may be tempted to instrumentalize this despair and transform it into a challenge to power."

Interior Ministry spokesman Khaled Hayouni told several local media that the phenomenon has "nothing to do" with protest movements guaranteed by the Constitution. "These are neither

protests nor demonstrations,” he noted. “They are attacks against the property of others. Those who want to protest or demonstrate do not break the property of their fellow citizens.”

Abir Musi, the president of the Free Desturian Party (PDL), an organization nostalgic for the dictatorship which has been growing in popularity for several months, has already called the Prime Minister to account to clarify who is behind this “vandalism”. Musi pointed out that there was nothing spontaneous about the acts and that the youths had been financed by political parties.

Political scientist Mohsen-Finan believes that MP Musi will profit from this situation, because she prioritizes order and draws a past that “she herself rewrites.” “But the common point between her and the other parties that have ruled so far is that she has nothing to offer. She only distinguishes herself by her highlighting of stability. But this is just a political offer.”

In the last 12 months, Tunisia has had three different governments. The latest ministerial crisis came last Saturday, when Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced a change in the heads of 12 ministries. Among the dozen politicians whose approval Mechichi must submit to Parliament, there are no women. Since February last year, at the height of the pandemic crisis, the Ministry of Health has changed its head four times.

Tunisia currently has 180,090 covid-19 infections and 5,692 deaths in a country of 11.5 million people. This is twice the number of deaths officially recognized in neighboring Algeria (2,836), with a population of 42 million, and slightly fewer than in Morocco (7,492), with a population of 36 million. Because of the pandemic, GDP fell by 8% last year and the tourism sector, indispensable to the country’s economy, has seen its activity reduced by 68%.

The tenth anniversary of the revolution brings together the fragility of a coalition government formed by technocrats with a very fragmented Parliament where the main party, the Islamist Ennahda, won the 2019 legislative elections with only 57 deputies out of a total of 217.