

Anger at Slow Pace of Tunisian Trials

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Demonstrations as former regime figures appear to escape justice.

Despite the burning summer heat and the Ramadan fast, Tunisians continue to protest against the slow pace of change.

A large demonstration in Habib Bourguiba Avenue, the main street in the capital Tunis, was dispersed after police fired tear gas into the crowds on August 15.

"We're afraid of losing our revolution because we're now seriously in a worse situation than we were before January 14, and our financial and political problems seem to have doubled in a short time," one of the protesters said.

One of the major concerns raised by Tunisians is the delay in putting former regime figures on trial, and the fact that some have slipped through the net.

"No matter what happens, our people have to rise up against the remnants of the dictatorship, which is what I consider the current government's actions and the decisions on trials to be," Hussein Chbiel of the General Union of Tunisian Workers said.

Actress Marwa Ben Saleh, taking part in the August 15 demonstration, drew unfavourable comparisons with Egypt, where former president Hosni Mubarak has gone on trial.

"My heart really ached when I saw the Mubarak trial on TV and how the Egyptians have got more out of their revolution than we, the ones who started all this, have done," said. "We should be the ones setting an example to others. Instead, we have a president who has run away to live in a palace in Saudi Arabia."

Public anxiety has been fuelled by the fact that several high-profile allies of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who fled to Saudi Arabia earlier this year, have been allowed to leave the country.

Saida Agrebi, former head of the Tunisian Mothers' Association and a high-profile ally of Ben Ali, was allowed to leave Tunisia on July 30 despite a government order that she should be investigated.

Chief prosecutor Nejib Maaoui was dismissed for allowing her to leave.

Former transport minister Aberrahim Zouari and justice minister Bechir Tekkari, have been freed after being arrested on corruption charges.

The sense of impunity is adding to a general sense of disquiet over the interim government's actions.

At another rally in the capital, an elderly participant voiced the commonly-heard concern that corruption remains prevalent in official life.

"Even in Ramadan, these people can't be honest for once in their lives," he said as he made his way through crowds of angry protestors. "I hope this country isn't heading for the abyss."

There are increasing numbers of strikes and worker sit-ins, to the point where they seem to have become a weekly occurrence, leaving the Tunisian economy close to meltdown.

Other parts of the country have seen outbreaks of unrest in a variety of forms.

When tribal clashes broke out in Jbeniana, for example, more than 100 people were injured in three days of fighting which left a trail of destruction and only ended when the government imposed a truce.

In Jendouba in the northwest of the country, Islamic extremists attacked restaurants, smashing windows and destroying kitchen equipment after Friday prayers. The attackers accused the restaurants of serving food outside the hours of the Ramadan fast. Many cafes and restaurants remain open during Ramadan, with the rule that their windows are covered over.

Tunisia's interim administration is urging people to be patient and wait for October, when a nationwide ballot will be held to elect a constituent assembly that will draft a new constitution and lay the ground for parliamentary and presidential elections.

But despite huge media publicity for the elections and a government campaign to encourage people to register as voters, only 40 per cent of the population had done so by the time the deadline expired.

“We did the hard part by carrying out the revolution,” Ahmed, a maths teacher who is a member of a group called the Committee to Protect the Revolution, said. “So why can’t people take the easy step to complete the road to freedom, and just go and get a piece of paper in order to vote?”

Ramy Jarboui is a Tunisian writer, activist and film-maker.

Location: Tunisia

Topic: Protests

Focus: The Arab
Spring

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