

Fresh Tunisian Movement Grows

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Activists want to hold new leaders to original aims of revolution, even as public tires of protest.

A new protest movement is aiming to hold Tunisia's transitional administration to account, although observers say public hunger for change is diminishing as people opt for a return to normality.

Hundreds of protesters have been gathering since late November outside the National Constituent Assembly in Tunis, where officials are working on the constitution that will determine the country's political direction. A provisional draft of the document was approved last week, and a final version is expected within a year. (See also **Protests Greet Tunisian Assembly.**)

Supported by more than 20 civil society organisations as well as student unions and some political parties, the protesters have agreed a list of 11 demands which include live broadcasts from parliament, a crackdown on corruption and the suspension of foreign debt payments, as well as progress on job creation and economic revival.

A central core of activists have been camping in tents outside the assembly, taking their lead in part, they say, from the Occupy Wall Street protest, and calling themselves "Occupy Bardo" after the district where the government is located.

The crowd has attracted counter-protests from Islamists who want religion to play a greater role in how Tunisia is run, and there have been occasional violent clashes.

But Mohamed Hidri, who lives next to the protest site, said that in the main the gathering has attracted "a panorama of Tunisians of different political and social backgrounds", with lively debates between different groups.

"I believe the Occupy Bardo movement will continue as a watchful eye on the government," Hidri said, although he added, "The real future of the country will be determined by the success in the fight against corruption and favouritism."

Abidi Nouh, a blogger and protester, said that while it was too early to judge the new regime, the authorities seemed to be listening.

"Tunisia will be a good democratic example... because the majority are taking into consideration the demands of the minority," he told IWPR, adding that the protesters wanted to avoid too much power being consolidated in the hands of one individual.

However, it is unclear how much wider popular support the protesters enjoy. Their action is nowhere near the size of the demonstrations that toppled Ben Ali in January.

Many Tunisians have had enough of political turmoil and want their lives to go back to normal.

The public broadly back these attempts to hold the assembly to account, according to Wafa ben Hassine, editor-in-chief at the Tunisia Live news website, although she added, "Most people think they should get back to work."

Leila Hilal, co-director of the Middle East Task Force at the New America Foundation, a think-tank, estimated that while perhaps 40 per cent of Tunisians are committed to liberal democracy, the majority are undecided on which direction the country should follow.

The poorer parts of the country tend to be more conservative, and Islamists in the capital have recently occupied a university campus to call for gender segregation in classes, and the right for women to wear a full face veil.

The demonstrations come as a new president, Moncef Marzouki - a dissident jailed under former leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali - was sworn in this week. While he has few real powers, Marzouki has vowed to break with Tunisia's history of dictatorship, and stressed the regional importance of his country's experiments with democracy.

"The Arab world is watching the Tunisian experience and its success will be a model, while its failure would have negative repercussions," the Associated Press quoted him as saying.

Tunisia, with a population of ten million, faces manifold challenges. It has 700,000 unemployed young people, and urgently needs to attract foreign tourists and investors.

One western diplomat said that it was vital that the new administration focus on addressing real public concerns.

“The constitution will need broad public support,” he said. “It’s going to be a tough road but... they’ve given every indication they’ll be able to establish a viable democracy.”

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