

Tunisia: Police Fury at Premier's Salvo

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Officers protest over prime minister's criticism and threat to close their unions.

Tensions between the interim government and the police in Tunisia are rising after the prime minister described some officers as "monkeys" and threatened to disband police unions.

"I have decided from today to ban all union activity among security services in view of the danger that such activity represents for the security of the country," Beji Caid Sebti said in a televised news conference on September 6. He later partially backed down, saying the ban would only apply to unions found to have acted illegally

His move prompted protests by angry police officers in central Tunis. Many complained their service was being unfairly targeted for its actions during the January revolution. There are numerous ongoing trials of policemen accused of using excessive force - and police unions are concerned the proceedings won't be fair.

"We are one of you," an officer appealed to the public in the September 8 police protest in Kasbah square against the proposed ban on unions. "When I go home and take my uniform off, I'm just another simple citizen who loves his country as much as you and has the same problems as you."

Some policemen were in uniform, with others dressed in civilian clothes. One angry protester held a sign declaring, "The real officers are honest."

"There are some high-ranking officers appointed by the former regime who defiled the reputation of the police, and I can understand the rage of people over this," he said. "But we are humans too and have rights."

Police anger was heightened by the now-infamous speech in which Sebti declared that "97 per cent of the force are honest men and three per cent are monkeys".

This caused an outcry in both the mainstream and social media.

Olfa Ayari, president of the prison division of a police union, said, "It's impolite for a leader of a country to compare a human to an animal and he should apologise officially to all sectors of the police."

"How could a man in a sensitive period like this - I mean there are the elections and the beginning of new academic year - utter these words?" said one of the officers during the protest, in a reference to the premier's remarks

Union official Ilassaad Kchaw said he had talked to the prime minister as part of a four-man union delegation to discuss the controversy.

"He told me personally that he found it peculiar that from all his words the people only concentrate on the three per cent - so what the about the 97 per cent whom he considers to be like his sons?" Kchaw said.

The premier's remarks, however, appear to have resonated with many members of the public who distrust the police.

Some people passing by the police protest threw bananas at the officers, in a mocking allusion to the premier's speech.

"[The police] mentality has to change because it's drenched in disgrace. The old regime raised them to harm others mercilessly and to not respect the citizens," said Ali Azek a student sitting in a cafe near the demonstration.

One local resident who owns a bakery near Kasba square found it ironic that the police were now demonstrating when in the past they would try to thwart such gatherings.

"They are now [part] of the rally and not here to prevent it by hitting people and firing teargas," he said.

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

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