



Tunisia: Recent Developments and Policy Issues

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On January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine ben Ali fled the country after several weeks of increasingly violent protests. The protests initially seemed to stem from discontent related to high unemployment, but eventually spiraled into an unprecedented national challenge to Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. As of January 15, the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, has assumed the role of interim president, in line with constitutional prerogatives. On January 17, a "unity" cabinet was formed, which includes three leaders of officially sanctioned opposition parties. Ruling party figures have nonetheless retained control of key posts, while members of banned Islamist and leftist political movements have not been invited to participate. Tunisian authorities have promised political reforms and elections within 60 days. However, the impact of recent developments is difficult to predict. Violence between protesters, security forces, and unidentified gunmen persisted in urban centers as of January 17. The political shifts of recent weeks have been accompanied by speculation over the views and roles of Tunisia's security forces, portions of which orchestrated the crackdown on demonstrations while others appear to have influenced Ben Ali's decision to resign.

Prior to the December-January protests, Tunisia had been seen as a stable, autocratic government since its independence from France in 1956. Ben Ali, who was in power for 23 years, was elected for a fifth term in October 2009 in an election widely seen as flawed and boycotted by leading opposition parties. His Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted strong control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. The government cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner. Tunisia is a non-oil-exporting, middle-income country with a growing economy but high unemployment.

The unexpected and rapid upheaval in Tunisia raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region, pertaining to the struggle between entrenched forces loyal to the former regime and an unorganized popular movement without a clear leader; the potential shape of the new political order; the potential future role of Islamist and/or radical movements in the government and society; the role of the military as a political power-broker; and the difficult diplomatic balance—for the United States and other partners—of encouraging greater democratic openness while not undermining other foreign policy priorities. Recent developments also have potential implications for Congress related to the oversight to U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations and assistance, and to broader questions of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Many analysts believe the events in Tunisia could affect political stability in other countries in the region with authoritarian-leaning, Western-backed regimes.

Current U.S.-Tunisian relations largely emphasize military cooperation, although Tunisia has pushed for a greater focus on trade. Congress has been supportive of security assistance programs in Tunisia, directing the State Department in FY2009 and FY2010 to allocate levels of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) that surpassed budget requests by the executive branch. According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia's primary supplier of military equipment. U.S. officials, who grew increasingly critical of the government in the days prior to Ben Ali's departure, have since called for free and fair elections.

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