



Nationwide Protests Break Out in the Aftermath of the 10th Anniversary of the Arab Spring Uprising in Tunisia

Mass protests have erupted across Tunisia over anger toward the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economy. The Tunisian government announced a 4-day national lockdown to combat COVID-19 after a surge in cases. However, the lockdown came into effect on the emotional 10-year anniversary of the toppling of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali during the Arab Spring uprising. In the ten years since his ouster, Tunisia's economy has struggled to substantially grow, and the country now finds itself in a worsening economic situation due to fallout from the ongoing global health pandemic. Tunisians are largely angry at the country's stagnation since its transition out of autocracy and took to the streets to voice their displeasure with the government. The protests began in Tunis and quickly spread to other cities, including Bizerte, Sousse, and Mahdia. The demonstrations have largely been galvanized by young people who see their chances of prosperity being impeded by the country's economic situation.

A spokesman for Tunisia's interior ministry said the majority of protesters were between the ages of 15-25. The military was deployed to quell some of the demonstrations, and over 630 people were detained. The defense ministry said that the individuals detained were arrested because they were impeding the ability of security forces to clear major roadways. Tunisia's authorities have also categorized the protests as riots due to the bad behavior of some demonstrators. The interior ministry said peaceful protests were allowed, but that the actions of some demonstrators in vandalizing public property after dark were in contrast with what is acceptable under the constitution.

One of the major reasons for the outbreak of the protests is the impact that COVID-19 has had on Tunisia. Currently, there are over 177,000 COVID-19 infections in Tunisia, and the country has recorded nearly 6,000 deaths from the virus. With cases surging, the Tunisian government announced a nationwide lockdown which further frustrated angry citizens who have seen their ability to make a living abruptly curtailed as a result of the virus. Tunisia's tourism industry is a large source of revenue for the country, but the sector has taken a severe blow because of the pandemic. The nationwide lockdown was the last straw for thousands of frustrated Tunisians who have failed to see significant progress from the government since the autocratic president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted ten years ago.

Currently, roughly a third of young people in Tunisia are unemployed, GDP shrank by 9% last year, and consumer prices have increased exponentially. Tunisia's tourism sector, which is a vital lifeline for the country's economy as a whole, has also been struggling since a spate of terrorist attacks in 2015. Tunisia's economic problems existed before the pandemic occurred, but the situation with the virus has seriously exacerbated the crisis facing the country. The imposition of a nationwide lockdown and other restrictive measures only served to further frustrate Tunisian citizens, especially around the anniversary of the ouster of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.