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Editor: Raz Zimmt

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President Ben Ali's ouster: a warning sign for Arab regimes or for Iran? Iranian reactions to Tunisia coup

This week, Iran's media extensively covered the dramatic happenings in Tunisia and President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's escape from the country.

Top Iranian officials took a careful approach in light of the developments and chose not to take a clear, unequivocal stand on the president's departure. Commenting on the developments in Tunisia, Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said that Tunisia's various groups and parties must help restore safety to the country. He noted that Iran was following the developments in Tunisia, stressing, however, that it was an internal

affair for Tunisia to resolve. Mehmanparast expressed hope that safety would soon be restored, and that Tunisia would resume playing an efficient part in the Muslim world (Fars, January 15).

Unlike top regime officials, several conservative newspapers took a more aggressive stance towards the ousted president, going as far as to claim that the developments in Tunisia were a warning sign for other Arab regimes in the Middle East that cooperate with the West.

The conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami claimed that the dire economic situation and the unprecedented increase in inflation in recent years were the main causes for the Tunisian people's uprising against their government. One cannot ignore the fact, however, that many demonstrators also carried slogans for political liberty. According to the daily, the events in Tunisia reflect the political crisis plaguing almost all Arab countries in the region. Such countries as Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, and Algeria face conditions similar to those that prevail in Tunisia, and many Arab rulers who have held power for decades without free elections are highly concerned about the situation. The developments in Tunisia will undoubtedly affect other Arab countries, and there is no question that the Middle East is on the verge of a change. Western countries do not know what to do about the developments in Tunisia. While the U.S. expressed protest against Tunisia's violent suppression of the demonstrators, it is highly concerned about the developments that could jeopardize Western interests in the country. The West is concerned about the possibility that the next government will not be as pro-West as the ousted president. According to Jomhuri-ye Eslami, Ben Ali was also one of the major allies of the "Zionist regime" in the region, another reason for the concerns expressed by the U.S. and the Zionist circles about the developments in the country (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, January 16).

The daily Keyhan claimed that the popular uprising in Tunisia reflected the awakening of public opinion in the region, which believes that the events that took place there will spread to other Arab countries ruled by tyrannical, corrupted regimes that are not supported by the people. According to the daily, the past several decades show that the Islamic republic of Iran can be a good role model of government for the peoples of the Middle East. Combining Islam and republicanism, it is the only model that has proven itself able to withstand tyranny and imperialism, and to ensure the safety of the region (Keyhan, January 18).

The daily Mardom Salari also discussed the effects of the developments in Tunisia on other Arab countries. An editorial published by the daily says that the revolutionary wave that first broke out in the Islamic revolution in Iran and now swept Tunisia would not remain confined to that country alone. The demonstrations that took place in Egypt and Yemen after the

Tunisian coup indicate a growing desire for democracy among the region's countries. The daily says it is a natural process, particularly when considering the fact that in Arab countries there are rulers who rule for over two decades, ignoring the rights of their opponents. They will therefore fare no better than the ousted president of Tunisia.

Ignoring the principles of democracy will sooner or later spell the end of their reign. In Saudi Arabia, where reformists demand that the king lift the political restrictions, as well as in other countries (such as Kuwait and the UAE), where social activists expand their activity to the political scene, developments indicate that democracy is the only way to progress and to develop the region's countries, offering Muslim states a way out of the political dead end they have found themselves in. The developments in Tunisia may encourage other Arab rulers in the region to establish democracies in their countries. In that case, democracy will no longer be limited to the West, and Arab countries will also respect the wishes of the people (Mardom Salari, January 16).

On the other hand, sources affiliated with the reformist opposition understandably preferred to focus on comparing the Tunisian protest movement that led to the overthrow of the Tunisian president and the protest movement in Iran.

The parallels between the developments in Tunisia and the internal situation in Iran were most widely discussed in comments made by Iranian bloggers online. Some of them expressed hope that someday the Iranian people will also manage to bring about a political change, while to others the failure of Iran's protest movement last year appeared all the more frustrating after the success of the popular protest movement in Tunisia to bring about a political change.

In response to the developments in Tunisia, an Iranian blogger wrote that, just like the Tunisian tyrant, Khamenei, too, will ultimately hear the voice of the people, and that it was better late than never. By the time tyrants hear and understand the voice of the people, it is always too late. When they do, they tend to make mistakes and aggravate the disaster. The blogger expressed hope that the events in Tunisia would be a lesson for tyrants in other countries who are not willing to give up power and believe that, as long as they are alive, they can control the life, money, and dignity of their countrymen (http://rightdeffender.blogspot.com/2011/01/blog-post_14.html, January 14).

"[Zine el-Abidine] Ben Ali – Seyyed Ali [Khamenei]", from the blog http://zoorabad.wordpress.com/2011/01/14/doc099, January 14)

Another blogger wrote that after the Tunisian people forced their president to flee the country, it was now the Iranians' turn. The Iranian people, the blogger wrote, have an even more rational reason to choose such a course of action, because unlike the president of Tunisia, the president of Iran was elected in a forged election and brought the Iranian people to the most difficult economic conditions in the history of Iran (http://greenilam1.blogspot.com/2011/01/blog-post.html, January 14).

As already mentioned, for some bloggers the success of the Tunisia coup only served to highlight the failure of the protest movement in Iran. One blogger wrote that the Tunisian people had fought for two weeks, while the Iranian people had been fighting for a year and a half and had heard nothing except for the statements made by the reformist opposition leaders (http://visionisthetruth.blogspot.com/2011/01/2-15_14.html, January 14). Another blogger wondered why Tunisia succeeded where Iran had failed. The unemployment rate in Tunisia is 13.3 percent compared to nearly 20 percent in Iran, Tunisia's economic growth in 2010 was 3.7 percent compared to less than one percent in Iran. The sensible question, therefore, is why Tunisia could do it while Iran could not (http://newperson1.blogspot.com/2011/01/blog-post.html, January 14).

In response to the comparison made by reformist elements between the protest movements in Tunisia and Iran, the daily Keyhan claimed that Iran's "anti-revolutionary" opposition should be compared to the deposed president of Tunisia who, similarly to the Iranian opposition, served Western imperialists and fled to Saudi Arabia, a reactionary regime supported by the U.S., which also supported the opposition during last year's riots in Iran. Unlike the Tunisian people who turned on their president, Keyhan argued, the Iranian people expressed their support of the government and their negative view of the opposition, affiliated with the U.S. and the West (Keyhan, January 16).

Iran's conservative press blames West for political crisis in Lebanon

Iran's conservative press blamed Western countries for the political crisis in Lebanon, saying they derailed the Syrian-Saudi initiative which attempted to find a solution to the issue of the publication of the international tribunal report on the assassination of Rafik Hariri

A Keyhan editorial published early this week said that after the establishment of the Lebanese government with Hezbollah, the Americans believed that the developments in Lebanon served the interests of the resistance front: Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Following the establishment of the government, the U.S. lost its status in Lebanon and saw in the ruling of the international tribunal on the issue of Hariri's assassination an opportunity to influence the internal situation in Lebanon. It was the Americans' assessment that following the ruling, Hezbollah would have to give up its arms, at the very least. However, the organization was not willing to play by the rules set by the U.S. and Israel and pulled the rug from under the Americans by disbanding the Lebanese government.

The daily claimed that Hariri could not have acted on his own and was pressured by the Americans, who made the decisions for him. The daily assessed that the establishment of a new government would take a long time and that the March 14 faction would eventually have to agree to concessions in exchange for the establishment of a new government. The first concession would likely be the nomination of a candidate other than Saad Hariri for prime minister. According to Keyhan, now that the government has been dismissed, the issue of establishing a new government has knocked off the issue of the international tribunal from the top of the Lebanese agenda. This development tilts the situation in favor of the "resistance", and the March 14 faction will have to fight for something it had up to several days ago. This proves the stupidity of the path followed by the U.S., Israel, and their allies (Keyhan, January 15).

The conservative daily Iran also blamed the West, led by the U.S. and France, for the crisis in Lebanon and accused them of derailing the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the latest crisis. It was the intervention of the West and the pressure exerted by the U.S. and France on Saad Hariri to accept the decision of the international tribunal that led to the fall of his government and thwarted the understandings achieved between Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The West is concerned about the possibility of Lebanon's balance of power tilting in favor of the resistance faction, and is unwilling to face the reality that emerged following Israel's defeat in the second Lebanon war or acknowledge the weakening of its allies in Lebanon. Western countries are trying to create a new reality in Lebanon, which the U.S. and Britain would then be able to use in order to hit the "resistance" and Iran (Iran, January 15).

Tehran Emrouz, a daily affiliated with Tehran's Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, also laid the blame for the current crisis in Lebanon on Western governments. The political regime in Lebanon, the daily claimed, was based on the will of the people, not on the will of the rulers. Israel with its regional and international allies sought to use the international tribunal to implicate Hezbollah in Hariri's murder and thus alienate the Lebanese people from Hezbollah and hit that organization. The daily accused the West of allegedly supporting democracy in Middle Eastern Arab countries whose regimes serve Western interests while challenging the people's choice where Western interests contradict democratic elections. Western governments are interested in creating in Lebanon a political structure similar to that which exists in most Arab countries, whose rulers pay no heed to the people's wishes and allow Western hegemony to continue.

The secession of Hezbollah and its allies from the government reflects the Lebanese people's wishes, says a Tehran Emrouz commentary article, and the international community cannot preserve Israel's interests using the same methods it employs in most Arab countries in the region. Considering the political conditions in Lebanon, ignoring Hezbollah's prominent sociopolitical role in Lebanon's balance of power would be a strategic mistake that would result in a new crisis in the Middle East (Tehran Emrouz, January 15).

President makes political achievement, retains power to appoint Central Bank governor

Expediency Discernment Council Chairman Mohsen Reza'i has announced this week that the president of Iran will retain the power to appoint the governor of the Central Bank. The Expediency Discernment Council therefore adopted the position of the Guardian Council, which opposed a Majles draft law to transfer that authority from the president to the Majles. Reza'i noted that the Expediency Discernment Council intended to discuss the conduct of the Central Bank's affairs; however, the president will retain the power to appoint and dismiss the governor in the future as well. The government needs to play a major role in the appointment of bank directors, Reza'i said, adding that this practice was common in other world countries (Fars, January 18).

President Ahmadinejad and Central Bank governor Mahmoud Bahmani (to the president's right)

A draft law passed by the Majles in November removed the president from the governing board of Iran's Central Bank and gave the Majles power to appoint the Central Bank governor and his deputy. The draft law also introduced changes in the membership of the governing board, replacing some government representatives with seven economists and the head of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce. The draft law was aimed to make the Central Bank less dependent on the government. In response to the draft law, the president claimed that it limited the government's ability to make economic decisions, since the Central Bank is one of the most important tools the government has to manage its economic policy (Fars, January 9).

However, the draft law was rejected by the Guardian Council on the claim that it was incompatible with Iran's constitution, in which a person who is not a member of one of the three branches of government cannot serve on the governing board of government institutions. Consequently, the Majles was forced to make some changes in the original draft law. The revised draft law, passed in early January, stated that the president would remain the chairman of the Central Bank governing board and that several government officials would continue serving on the governing board alongside judiciary representatives, the Majles speaker, and his deputy. Majles members refused, however, to withdraw their demand to limit the president's power to appoint the governor, demanding that the appointment would also require the approval of the Majles. In light of the disagreement between the Majles and the Guardian Council, the issue was submitted for the decision of the Expediency Discernment Council, which, as already mentioned, decided this week that the president should retain the power to appoint the governor.

Since the beginning of President Ahmadinejad's term, he has had tense relations with the Central Bank as a result of his attempts to restrict the relative independence of the professional economic institutions, mainly the Central Bank, to improve the government's ability to make economic decisions in accordance with its objectives. For example, in the summer of 2007 the government decided to revoke the independent status of the Finance

and Interest Council, which acted alongside the Central Bank and was responsible for setting bank interest rates, among other things. As a result of strong disagreements between the president and the Central Bank over the government's fiscal policy and the president's instruction to lower the bank interest rate, two governors have resigned in recent years: Ebrahim Sheibani resigned in August 2007, followed in September 2008 by his successor, Tahmasb Mazaheri.

57 people executed in Iran since the beginning of 2011

On Wednesday, January 19, ten people were executed at Raja'i Shahr prison in the city of Karaj on drug trafficking charges. On Saturday, January 15, a political activist of Kurdish descent was hanged at Orumiyeh prison in north-western Iran. Authorities said he was a member of the Kurdish underground movement Pejak. According to official data, the number of people executed in Iran since the beginning of 2011 reached 57 (one person every eight hours on average). Most of them were executed for drug trafficking.

Seven people were executed in the city of Kermanshah on January 1, 16 people in the city of Ahvaz on January 5, one person in the city of Esfarayen on January 8, 8 people on January 9 in the city of Qom, 7 people on January 12 in Tehran, 5 people on January 13 in the city of Khoramabad, and 2 people on January 14 in the city of Boroujerd.

A memorandum published earlier this week by the human rights organization International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran called on the Majles and the judiciary to immediately end all executions and take steps to abolish the death penalty in Iran.

Iran currently ranks first in executions per capita among the world's countries, and is second only to China in the number of people executed per year. At least 180 were executed in Iran in 2010.

New religious ruling bans use of “Islamic” mobile phones in bathrooms

Top conservative cleric Ayatollah Ja’far Sobhani has recently ruled that religious law forbids the use of mobile phones containing Islamic contents in bathrooms. ISNA News Agency reported this week that, when asked to provide a religious ruling on the use of mobile phones containing verses from the Quran and the names of God in bathrooms, Sobhani replied that, if such a phone was found in an unclean place, it had to be taken out of there as soon as possible and not used as long as it was in the unclean place, unless the Islamic contents were removed (ISNA, January 16).

The need for the ruling arose due to the recent introduction of “Islamic mobile phones” in Iran. They include such integrated Islamic features as digital versions of the Quran and commentaries, literature pertaining to Islamic religious law, translations of Quranic verses to various languages, prayer directions and updates on prayer times in various locations across the globe, as well as live videos of prayers from mosques.

Islamic mobile phone, from the Iranian website www.deltacd.ir

Pictures of the week: foreign diplomats visit nuclear facilities