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STILL A LONG HARD ROAD TO ARAB DEMOCRACY

Tunisia: not over yet

BY DON DUNCAN

THE Tunisian revolution that toppled Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali now has an aftermath: protests against the government put in place to assure the revolution's goals. In these, the young have been rioting and getting charged by police in Tunis.

There is a pattern to the new demonstrations: angry protesters march down Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main thoroughfare; then riot police fire tear gas and charge; the protesters disappear and in seconds the street is empty. One of the crowd, Majid Saidi, was, like the others, protesting against what they say is a counter-revolution being launched by government figures loyal to Ben Ali: "We never saw this [kind of overt police brutality] under Bourguiba, nor under Ben Ali – not even under the French!"

A video appeared on Facebook on 4 May, in which the former interior minister Farhat Rajhi, a trusted public figure in Tunisia, claimed that Ben Ali loyalists still hold significant sway in the political sphere and were planning a military coup, depending on the results of July's election. Whether the accusations are true or not doesn't matter in paranoid post-revolution Tunisia. They were a political bombshell because this highly respected figure confirmed suspicions already harboured by many. As another protestor, Imen Megri, put it: "It's true that Ben Ali, the man, left the country, but Ben Ali, the regime, lives on." Some of the demonstrators, like two young women I met in mid-flight from tear gas, told me that they wanted to get rid of any remaining influence of the Constitutional Democratic Rally, Ben Ali's now defunct party.

State practices such as internet censorship and police beatings of journalists, that Tunisians had thought were in the past, have returned. "First he tried to grab my phone from me and my camera," said radio journalist Marwa Rekik, accosted by a policeman while covering the protests. "He hit me on the head; I have five stitches in my head." Her legs were covered in bruises from police batons. Fourteen journalists say they were beaten by the police.

The government declined to comment, but in a televised interview on 7 May the prime minister Beji Caid Sebti denied a counter-revolution and called Farhat Rajhi a liar. He said the beating of journalists was a mistake. Rekik finds that hard to believe: "They could say they took me for an ordinary citizen, but there were 14 of us and each of us said we were journalists."

The optimism and euphoria of January's revolution has given way to dread. The revolution is not over yet and its goals are far from assured. All Tunisians can do is continue the fight. "We aren't here for bread or for higher salaries: we simply want our dignity," said a protester, Houdi Ben Aisha, carrying a placard reading "No Justice, No Peace". She said: "We must never, never, never let go."