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Tens of thousands rally to oust Tunisian government



By Tarek Amara

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Tens of thousands of Tunisians crowded the streets of downtown Tunis on Tuesday to demand the transitional government's ouster, in the largest opposition protest since the country's political crisis began two weeks ago.

The secular opposition, angered by two assassinations in its ranks and emboldened by the army-backed toppling of Egypt's Islamist president, is trying to topple Tunisia's Islamist-led government and dissolve the Constituent Assembly.

The move comes weeks before the transitional Assembly is due to complete a draft constitution and new election law.

Tunisia is facing the worst political turmoil since autocratic ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled, a crisis that has been compounded by growing instability as Islamist militants step up their attacks.

"The people want the fall of the regime," shouted crowds crammed into Bardo Square, using the same slogan they popularized when Tunisians ousted Ben Ali in 2011 and sparked a wave of uprisings across the Arab world.

In the hours before the protests, the head of the transitional Assembly, Mustafa Ben Jaafar, suspended the body's work until the two sides opened dialogue.

The freeze may strengthen the opposition's hand against the ruling Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party, which has agreed to make some concessions but refuses to dissolve the Assembly or remove the prime minister.

Tuesday's opposition protests mark the six-month anniversary of the assassination of leftist politician Chokri Belaid, one of the two opposition figures shot dead in recent months.

"This proves the desire for liberation from Brotherhood rule will not be broken," Belaid's widow, Basma Belaid, said, comparing Ennahda to Egypt's elected Muslim Brotherhood.

In June, the Egyptian army responded to mass opposition protests by deposing and detaining the president and launching a crackdown and arrest campaign against Brotherhood figures.

"This is a message to end their rule, from which we have only seen disasters such as violence and assassinations," Belaid's widow said.

Earlier on Tuesday, police shot dead an Islamist militant in a suburb of Tunis that houses several luxury hotels frequented by foreign tourists, an Interior Ministry official said.

Militant attacks have spiraled since leftist politician Mohamed Brahmi was gunned down in July. A week later, militants killed eight soldiers near the Algerian border in one of the deadliest attacks on Tunisian forces in decades.

Since then there have been near-daily reports of foiled bomb attempts or police raids against militants across the country.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION 'GUARANTEE'

Tunisia has become increasingly polarized by rival street movements. Ennahda came out in a show of force a few days earlier, drawing the largest crowd since Ben Ali's ouster for a pro-government rally that it said topped 150,000.

Ben Jaafar's decision to suspend the Assembly, meanwhile, could deepen the country's political crisis. He argued it would force a resolution.

"I bear responsibility as president of the Constituent Assembly for suspending the work of the council until a dialogue is started," Ben Jaafar said in a televised speech. "This is in the service of Tunisia in order to guarantee its transition to democracy."

Mongy Rahoui, a leader in the opposition's Popular Front, said of Tuesday's demonstrations: "These legions of crowds are a response to (Ennahda leader Rachid) Ghannouchi and we say to him we are ready for any referendum ... we are the ones with legitimacy on the streets. Your legitimacy is counterfeit."

On Monday, Ghannouchi told Reuters that the prime minister and Constituent Assembly were "red lines" he would not cross, but he was willing to hold a popular referendum or talks.

A Reuters witness at the opposition protest on Tuesday said numbers were close, but not as high as the Ennahda rally. Even at midnight, however, hundreds were heading into the protest.

At the opposition protests, demonstrators celebrated - setting off fireworks and cheering protesting lawmakers who climbed onto a stage in the crowd and made the victory sign with their fingers.

The imam of the historic Zaitouna mosque in Tunis's old city also went onto the stage to read verses from the Koran.

Opposition leaders hope the move will send a message they are anti-Ennahda, not anti-Islam.

"Allahu akbar (God is great)," the crowds chanted back to the imam.

"We won't move until they (Ennahda) leave us alone," said protester Warda Habibi. "We were not afraid of Ben Ali and we're not afraid of Ghannouchi."