

Hundreds protest police repression in Tunisia

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TUNIS: Hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of Tunisian cities on Saturday to protest police repression, corruption and poverty, following several nights of unrest marked by clashes and arrests.

Saturday's protests come as the North African nation struggles to stem the novel coronavirus pandemic, which has crippled the economy and threatened to overwhelm hospitals.

Over 6,000 people have died from Covid-19 in Tunisia, with a record 103 deaths reported on Thursday.

The government on Saturday extended a night-time curfew from 8 p.m. (1900 GMT) to 5 a.m. and banned gatherings until February 14.

But protesters took to the streets in several parts of the country, including the capital Tunis and the marginalized interior region of Gafsa, to demand the release of hundreds of young people detained during several nights of unrest since January 14.

"Neither police nor Islamists, the people want revolution," chanted demonstrators in a crowd of several hundred in Tunis, where one person was wounded in brief clashes amid a heavy police presence.

Protests were also held in the coastal city of Sfax on Friday.

Much of the unrest has been in working class neighborhoods, where anger is boiling over soaring unemployment and a political class accused of having failed to deliver good governance, a decade after the 2011 revolution that toppled long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Economic misery exacerbated by novel coronavirus restrictions in the tourism-reliant nation have pushed growing numbers of Tunisians to try to leave the country.

"The situation is catastrophic," said Omar Jawadi, 33, a hotel sales manager, who has been paid only half his salary for months.

"The politicians are corrupt, we want to change the government and the system."

The police have said more than 700 people were arrested over several nights of unrest earlier this week that saw young people hurl rocks and petrol bombs at security forces, who responded with tear gas and water cannon.

Human rights groups on Thursday said at least 1,000 people had been detained.

"Youth live from day to day, we no longer have hope, neither to work nor to study – and they call us troublemakers!" said call center worker Amine, who has a degree in aerospace engineering.

"We must listen to young people, not send police in by the thousands. The whole system is corrupt, a few families and their supporters control Tunisia's wealth."

Tunisia last week marked one decade since Ben Ali fled the country amid mass

protests, ending 23 years in power.
Tunisia's political leadership is divided, with Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi waiting for parliament to confirm a major cabinet reshuffle announced last Saturday.







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Tunisia rights groups say 1,000 arrested in 6 nights of riots Tunisia marks revolution's 10th anniversary in lockdown

[El-Sisi says Egypt to begin COVID-19 vaccinations on Sunday](#)

Author:

Reuters

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CAIRO: Egypt will begin coronavirus vaccinations on Sunday, beginning with medical staff, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said in recorded comments on Saturday.

On Friday, Egypt recorded 748 new cases and 52 deaths. However, health officials say the real number is likely far higher because of the relatively

low rate of coronavirus testing and the exclusion of private test results. Egypt received its first shipment of vaccines developed by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) in December. Egypt will get 40 million vials via the GAVI vaccine alliance for 20 million people, or 20% of the 100 million population, its health minister said last week.



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Egypt's security services bust Muslim Brotherhood network in capital
Egypt reports lowest daily COVID-19 cases in a month

[Lebanon MPs accuse Aoun of 'acting as a party'](#)

Sat, 2021-01-23 22:00

BEIRUT: Deputies in the Lebanese Parliament have accused President Michel

Aoun of acting "as a party, not as a president entrusted with the constitution."

On Saturday, MP Anwar Al-Khalil said that Aoun's media office's statement on Friday "undermines the Lebanese people's minds and destroys the hope of forming an important government. It is also a digression from obstinacy and stubbornness."

Friday's statement said Aoun was a "partner in choosing ministers and distributing ministerial portfolios."

Al-Khalil reminded Aoun that "the constitution named you as president, a symbol of national unity and a protector of the constitution."

"Your advisers are making you one team. Enough bickering! Support the whole country and save it from collapse," Al-Khalil said.

Aoun defended himself and the head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), MP Gebran Bassil, against the accusation of obstructing the formation of a government, which raised tension between him and Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri.

MP Hadi Abu Al-Hassan said: "Hariri is faced with a crippling process in order to force him to resign." He added that the president and the FPM "do not want the return of Hariri as prime minister without Bassil in the government."

He criticized Aoun, saying: "The covenant is unconscious. It lives somewhere else, as attested to by all, and through his practices, he wants to monopolize everything."

"The problem in the country is the non-presence of a conscious central authority that is aware of what is happening. It is absent and today, we are reaping what was sown," he said.

Former MP Mustafa Alloush, who is also the Future Movement's vice president, said the president's objective was "to make Bassil afloat again and move the presidency to his son-in-law. It is not the rescue of the republic."

Alloush said that the new government should "lend a helping hand to establishments and countries. Lebanon might be able to convince the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to have a loan, however, if that is not followed by CEDRE (Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises) and aid from the Gulf and the US, we will have increased our debt to the IMF."

He said the other team, specifically Hezbollah, was not interested in the rescue operation. "Aoun and the FPM rely on Hezbollah to justify their stubbornness to obstruct the formation of the government, with the aim of making Bassil president." He said Bassil was subjected to US and personal sanctions that were neither accepted by the Gulf nor internationally and "they are trying to impose a de facto government."

On the calls to form an opposition against Aoun and his political team, Alloush said: "There is a lot of talk, but if these parties agree on the idea, they disagree on the details."

Abdel-Sattar Al-Laz, adviser to former prime minister, Tammam Salam, told Arab News: "A meeting was held a while ago at Salam's house. It included former heads of government, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt, and addressed the possible scenarios to solve the stalemate in the country."

Forming an opposition was difficult at the moment, Al-Laz said. "Any new opposition needs Christian and Shiite participation and cannot be limited to Sunni forces and a Druze party. There is a need for a Christian team such as the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, and those have their personal agendas. The opposition cannot be formed of independent people. It is required to have driving forces with a real representation."

"The ball is in the court of the Christian partner. Can they form an opposition against the president to ask for his removal or pressure him to resign? Such opposition should be headed by the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai, and I rule out its formation since it will affect the position of the Maronite presidency. In that light, there is no hope except to wait for change in the region, otherwise, we are facing a dead end."



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Dispute between Aoun and Hariri escalates in Lebanon Patriarch Al-Rai resumes mediation between Aoun and Hariri to form government

Venezuelan president sent letter to Khamenei accrediting US fugitive

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-23 01:26

BEIRUT: A Colombian businessman was carrying a letter from Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro accrediting him to Iran's supreme leader when he was arrested on a US warrant last year, according to a new court filing in a politically charged corruption case ratcheting up tensions with the South American nation.

Attorneys for Alex Saab made the filing in Miami federal court on Thursday just hours after prosecutors in the African nation of Cape Verde said they granted the 49-year-old Colombian house arrest as he fights extradition to the US to face money laundering charges.

US officials believe Saab holds numerous secrets about how Maduro, his family and top aides allegedly siphoned off millions of dollars in government contracts amid widespread hunger in the oil-rich nation. He was detained last June when his jet made a refueling stop on a flight to Tehran, where he was allegedly sent to negotiate deals to exchange Venezuelan gold for Iranian gasoline.

Lawyers filed a motion seeking to dismiss the US charges, arguing Saab is immune from prosecution as a result of the many diplomatic posts he has held for Maduro's government since 2018.

As evidence, they presented letters signed by Maduro's foreign minister purportedly accrediting Saab as a special envoy for humanitarian aid as well as a resolution – signed last month – naming him Venezuela's alternate permanent representative to the African Union in Ethiopia.

There is also a letter, addressed to Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in which Maduro asks the Iranian supreme leader to help Saab obtain an "urgent" shipment of 5 million barrels of gasoline following the arrival of several previous shipments from Iran.

Another apparent diplomatic note, from the Iranian Embassy in Caracas, refers to Saab's upcoming "official" visit and a request for the delivery of Iranian-made medicines.



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Iran, pressured by power blackouts and pollution, targets Bitcoin

[Iran, pressured by power blackouts and pollution, targets Bitcoin](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-23 01:22

Iran's capital and major cities plunged into darkness in recent weeks as rolling outages left millions without electricity for hours. Traffic lights died. Offices went dark. Online classes stopped.

With toxic smog blanketing Tehran skies and the country buckling under the pandemic and other mounting crises, social media has been rife with speculation. Soon, fingers pointed at an unlikely culprit: Bitcoin. Within days, as frustration spread among residents, the government launched a wide-ranging crackdown on Bitcoin processing centers, which require immense amounts of electricity to power their specialized computers and to keep them cool – a burden on Iran's power grid.

Authorities shuttered 1,600 centers across the country, including, for the

first time, those legally authorized to operate. As the latest in a series of conflicting government moves, the clampdown stirred confusion in the crypto industry – and suspicion that Bitcoin had become a useful scapegoat for the nation’s deeper-rooted problems.

Since the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018 from Tehran’s nuclear accord with world powers and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, cryptocurrency has surged in popularity in the Islamic Republic.

For Iran, anonymous online transactions made in cryptocurrencies allow individuals and companies to bypass banking sanctions that have crippled the economy. Bitcoin offers an alternative to cash printed by sovereign governments and central banks – and in the case of Iran and other countries under sanctions like Venezuela, a more stable place to park money than the local currency.

“Iranians understand the value of such a borderless network much more than others because we can’t access any kind of global payment networks,” said Ziya Sadr, a Tehran-based Bitcoin expert. “Bitcoin shines here.”

Iran’s generously subsidized electricity has put the country on the crypto-mining map, given the operation’s enormous electricity consumption.

Electricity goes for around 4 cents per kilowatt-hour in Iran, compared to an average of 13 cents in the United States.

Iran is among the top 10 countries with the most Bitcoin mining capacity in the world – 450 megawatts a day. The US network has a daily capacity of more than 1,100 megawatts.

On Tehran’s outskirts and across Iran’s south and northwest, windowless warehouses hum with heavy industrial machinery and rows of computers that crunch highly complex algorithms to verify transactions. The transactions, called blocks, are then added to a public record, known as the blockchain. Iran’s government has sent mixed messages about Bitcoin. On one hand, it wants to capitalize on the soaring popularity of digital currency and sees value in legitimizing transactions that fly under Washington’s radar. It authorized 24 Bitcoin processing centers that consume an estimated 300 megawatts of energy a day.

On the other hand, the government worries about limiting how much money is sent abroad

and controlling money laundering, drug sales and internet criminal groups.



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Iran: Oil product exports hit record high despite US sanctions