

Tunisian President Kais Saied promises 'free and fair' elections in talks with EU delegation

Tue, 2022-04-12 18:06

ROME: Tunisian President Kais Saied has told a European Parliament delegation in Tunis that he is determined to hold a referendum and "free and fair" elections in a bid to end political instability in the country.

He also pledged "to preserve the unity, continuity and sovereignty of the state, according to the will of the Tunisian people."

The delegation from the parliament's foreign affairs committee included Michael Gahler, Javier Nart, Jakop Dalunde and Andrea Cozzolino.

According to a statement from the Tunisian presidency, Saied expressed his "full determination to end this exceptional period by launching initiatives to prepare the organization of a referendum, and free and fair legislative elections on Dec. 17."

Tunisia has been in a state of political upheaval since Saied declared a state of emergency on July 25, 2021, dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and suspending Parliament, which last month was finally dissolved.

An EU spokesman last week expressed "serious concern" over recent developments in Tunisia and warned that continued support depends on the country "returning to a democratic course."

The European delegation also met Prime Minister Najla Bouden and local representatives to discuss support for political reforms.

"We paid special attention to the country's economic situation and on how to better support the Tunisian authorities in implementing reforms for the benefit of the entire population, in the context of the economic crisis and food security, the pandemic and the consequences of Russian aggression against Ukraine," Cozzolino told Arab News.

The Italian MEP added that the delegation stressed "the need to respect the principles of popular participation, pluralism and representation."



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Tunisia wallows in uncertainty as President Kais Saied pushes aheadParliament dissolved, investigation launched after Tunisian MPs convene online

[Iran summons Afghan envoy after protesters throw rocks at diplomatic missions](#)

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Tue, 2022-04-12 12:26

DUBAI : Iran summoned the Afghan envoy to Tehran on Tuesday, Iranian state TV reported, a day after protesters threw rocks at Iranian diplomatic missions in Kabul and Herat over what they called “mistreatment of Afghan refugees” in

the Islamic Republic.

The protests began after videos posted on Twitter in recent days showed young Afghan refugees in Iran being harassed and humiliated by ordinary Iranians. Reuters could not verify the authenticity of the videos.

Iranian officials on Monday denied there was any mistreatment of Afghan refugees in Iran, state television reported.

"The Afghan charge d'affaires in Tehran was summoned in protest over attacks on the Iranian embassy in Kabul and the Iranian Consulate in Herat in Afghanistan on Monday," state TV reported.

Footage on social media, which could not be verified by Reuters, showed a small group of Afghan protesters throwing rocks at Iran's diplomatic missions in Kabul and in the western Afghan city of Herat on Monday.

Iran's embassy in Afghanistan, in a statement issued on Tuesday, said the Taliban, which rules Afghanistan, are responsible for the security and safety of Tehran's diplomats and said it would halt consular services in the neighboring country "until further notice," Iranian state media reported.

But later Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh contradicted the embassy's statement by saying: "All missions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Afghanistan are open and continue to operate," Iran's Students News agency ISNA reported.

Although Iran's clerical establishment has had generally good relations with the Taliban, there have been longstanding tensions along the two countries' 900-km (560 miles) joint border, which has active smuggling routes.

Over five million Afghans, both documented and undocumented, live in Iran, Iran's state news agency IRNA quoted Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian as saying last week.



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Amnesty accuses Iran of 'deliberate' denial of health care to prisoners

[Italy to increase Algerian natural gas imports by nearly 50%](#)

Mon, 2022-04-11 20:58

ROME: Italy will increase Algerian natural gas imports by nearly 50 percent after Prime Minister Mario Draghi signed an agreement with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

The agreement comes as Italy tries to compensate for a possible decrease in supplies of Russian gas amid the Ukraine conflict.

"Our governments signed a declaration of intent on bilateral cooperation in the energy sector," Draghi told the press at El-Mouradia presidential palace, adding that Italian and Algerian energy companies Eni and Sonatrach have agreed to increase gas supplies to Italy.

Speaking after his meeting with Tebboune, who is due to visit Rome at the end of May, Draghi said "relations between Italy and Algeria have deep roots," and Algeria "is Italy's first trading partner in Africa, with a bilateral exchange increasing fast."

Draghi added that Italy "is ready to work with Algeria to develop renewable energy and green hydrogen" in order to "accelerate the energy transition and create opportunities for development and employment in both countries."

A source in Italy's Ministry of Energetic Transition told Arab News that the export boost agreed in Algiers "would make Algeria Italy's top natural gas supplier to replace Russia by increasing its shipments by an additional 9-10 billion cubic meters per year by the end of 2022."

Last year Italy received around 21 billion cubic meters of gas from Algeria, compared to around 29 billion from Russia, which currently supplies nearly 40 percent of Italy's needs.

Italy imports about 95 percent of the gas it consumes, and is one of the European countries most dependent on Russian gas.

The Italian delegation in Algiers included Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, Eni CEO Claudio Descalzi and Minister of Energy Transition Roberto Cingolani, who said last week that Italy is in talks with up to seven countries, including Algeria, to secure gas supplies. Those negotiations, Cingolani added, are at "a very advanced stage."

Italy has said it would support a ban on Russian gas over the Ukraine conflict if the EU is receptive to the idea.

Di Maio was in Algiers on Feb. 28, where he discussed with his counterpart an increase in the North African country's gas supply to compensate for a possible decrease from Russia.

In late February, Algeria's state-owned hydrocarbon giant Sonatrach said it was ready to supply more gas to Europe, in particular by transporting it through the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline connecting Algeria to Sicily.

Sonatrach President Toufik Hakkar said the pipeline "still has unused capacity" that could be used to increase supplies to Europe.



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Algeria to ramp up natural gas exports to Italy by 50%: NRG mattersItaly, Algeria to launch joint political, economic, energy projects

[Syria's Ramadan drummers defiant as tradition wanes](#)

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Mon, 2022-04-11 15:11

DAMASCUS: Ramadan drummers who awaken the faithful for their pre-dawn meal are dying out across the Muslim world but the tradition lives on in Syria's capital despite growing reliance on smart phones.

Around one hour before the call to prayer rings out at dawn, Ramadan drummers, known as Musaharati, walk through narrow streets to wake the faithful.

They include Hasan Al-Rashi, 60, one of the 30 Musaharati left in Damascus. His voice breaks the nighttime silence in the capital's Old City, as he sings and pounds his drum.

"Despite the advent of smart phones and other technologies, people still like to wake up to the voice of the Musaharati," Rashi told AFP.

"The Musaharati is a part of the customs and traditions of the people of Damascus during the month of Ramadan," he added.

"It is a heritage that we will not leave behind."



Traditional Musaharati beat drums and chant religious songs to wake up Muslims before sunrise for Suhur in Damascus. (AFP)

While performing his Musaharati task, Rashi carries a bamboo cane in one hand and a drum made of goatskin in the other.

He walks quickly from home to home, using his stick to tap on doors of families who have asked for his services.

"Wake up for Suhur (pre-dawn meal), Ramadan has come to visit you," Rashi sings.

Although they do receive gifts, the Musaharati don't usually expect financial rewards.

They sometimes carry bags or straw baskets to store food and other gifts that are given to them.

For Rashi, it's not about the freebies.

"We feel joy when we go out every day," he said.



Traditional Musaharati beat drums and chant religious songs to wake up Muslims before sunrise for Suhur in Damascus. (AFP)

"Some children follow us sometimes and ask to beat the drum," Rashi added. Ahead of the call to prayer, Sharif Resho asks one of his neighbors for a glass of water before the start of his fast.

The 51-year-old Musaharati usually accompanies Rashi every night, also beating his drum and singing.

"My equipment is simple, it is my voice, my drum and my stick," he said. Resho, whose father was also a Ramadan drummer, has carried out Musaharati duties for nearly a quarter of a century.

Syria's more than decade-long war and the coronavirus pandemic did not stop him from carrying on, he said.

"I will keep waking people up for Suhur as long as I have a voice in my throat," Resho told AFP.

"It is a duty I inherited from my father, that I will pass on to my son."



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Al-Musaharati: A centuries-old Ramadan tradition now just a tale
Musaharati: Linking past and present

[Middle Eastern refugees report violent treatment by Polish authorities](#)

Mon, 2022-04-11 17:10

LONDON: Middle Eastern refugees who were arbitrarily detained by Polish authorities after crossing from Belarus in 2021 have detailed violent treatment against them.

Amnesty International interviewed asylum seekers stuck in Poland who exposed the suffering they have endured at the hands of border officials.

Many of them were being held in Wedrzyn detention center, which holds up to

600 people, and where overcrowding was rife. Guards greeted new detainees by saying "welcome to Guantanamo."

Khafiz, a Syrian refugee in Wedrzyn, told Amnesty: "Most days we were woken up by the sounds of tanks and helicopters, followed by gunshots and explosions. This would go on all day, sometimes."

"When you have nowhere to go, no activities (to) take your mind off it or a space for even a brief respite, this was intolerable."

He added: "After all the torture in prison in Syria, threats to my family, and then months on the road, I think I was finally broken in Wedrzyn."

Violent forcible returns have been another feature of Polish mistreatment, with border guards reportedly coercing refugees into signing documents that included incriminating information.

Yezda, an Iraqi-Kurdish woman, panicked after Polish authorities told her that she, her husband and three children were being sent back to Iraq.

She threatened to take her own life, but Polish authorities continued with their plans to force her and her family back to the struggle they had escaped.

"I knew I could not go back to Iraq and I was ready to die in Poland. While I was crying like that, two guards restrained me and my husband, tied our hands behind our backs, and a doctor gave us an injection that made us very weak and sleepy," she told Amnesty.

"My head was not clear, but I could hear my children, who were in the room with us, crying and screaming. We were asked to go through the airport security and the guards told us to behave on the plane. But I refused to go," she added.

"I remember noticing that I didn't even have any shoes on, as in the chaos at the camp, they slipped off my feet. My head was not clear, and I couldn't see my husband or the children, but I remember that they forced me on the plane that was full of people. I was still crying and pleading with the police not to take us."

In the end, her refusal was successful and her family remain in a camp in Poland, though border guards broke her foot during the struggle to get her on the plane to Iraq.

Almost all the people Amnesty interviewed said they were traumatized after fleeing conflict and being trapped for months on the border.

They were suffering from complex psychological injuries including anxiety, insomnia, depression and frequent suicidal thoughts.

Amnesty said these mental health struggles were "undoubtedly exacerbated" by the abuse suffered in Poland, warning that psychological support was unavailable for most of the asylum seekers.



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