

# Tunisia crisis escalates as police summon opposition figures

Author:

Reuters

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TUNIS: Tunisian anti-terrorism police summoned the country's main opposition figure for questioning on Friday, as a political crisis deepens in the wake of President Kais Saied's move to dissolve parliament and impose one-man rule.

Rached Ghannouchi, head of the Islamist Ennahda party and speaker of the dissolved parliament, was summoned to appear later on Friday, his office said, after investigations were opened into other members of the chamber who had defied Saied.

Saied demanded that investigations be carried out after members of parliament held an online session on Wednesday and voted to revoke all the emergency measures he has imposed – despite his decree last summer suspending the chamber.

The president accused those who took part in the session, along with Ghannouchi whose office had announced the move, of conspiring against state security and he ordered the justice department to open legal proceedings against them.

Last month Saied took control of the judiciary, replacing a top council whose job was to ensure judicial independence, with judges he selected himself.

Saied's moves raise the prospect of a crackdown on the opposition as Tunisia's main players grow more active in opposing his attempts to remake the political system in what they call a coup.

"It's a turning point in targeting his opponents," said deputy parliament speaker Samira Chouachi.

Saied has defended his seizure of most powers last summer as necessary to save Tunisia from a corrupt, self-serving elite he paints as responsible for years of political paralysis and economic stagnation.

He has also vowed to uphold the rights and freedoms won in a 2011 revolution that brought democracy, and so far there have been few arrests or attempts to silence critics.

However, late on Thursday Saied said he would not call new parliamentary elections yet despite dissolving the chamber, and railed against those who took part in Wednesday's session.

"There will be no dialogue with those who tried a coup and seek to divide Tunisians," he said, suggesting those who opposed his moves may not be allowed to run in future elections.

## OPPOSITION

Ennahda and the Free Constitutional Party, which leads in opinion polls, have both said they will oppose Saied's plans for a referendum on a new constitution that he plans to introduce.

The parties are sworn ideological enemies and although there is no sign that they could work together against Saied, their more active opposition to his moves suggests the crisis is intensifying.

“Saied, who usurped power, should immediately end the exceptional measures,” said the Free Constitutional Party’s leader Abir Moussi.

The strongest opposition to Saied since last summer has come from Ennahda, which has been a main player in successive governments since the revolution. Moussi and her Free Constitutional Party decry Ennahda’s Islamist background and praise the autocratic regime of the late Zine El Abidine Ben Ali who was ousted in 2011.

The United States, a major donor to Tunisia since the revolution, has voiced concern at Saied’s dissolution of parliament and threats to investigate lawmakers, and urged “a swift return to constitutional government.”

Saied is seeking international funding to avert a crisis in public finances amid growing economic pain for Tunisians after years of political bickering. The UGTT labor union, the most powerful political body in the country with more than a million members, is meanwhile contemplating a general strike to demand a dialogue on both political and economic reforms. It had previously urged Saied to dissolve parliament but also to hold rapid elections afterwards.



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# Cash-strapped Lebanon struggles to turn lights on for polling day

Author:

AFP

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's electricity company is charging \$16 million to supply power on the day of the May 15 parliamentary polls, a sum that exceeds the overall election budget by nearly 30 percent, the interior minister said.

Holding credible elections is one of the main steps Lebanon's major donors are insisting on to deliver more assistance to the country, which is mired in a deep financial crisis fueled by endemic corruption.

The state-owned Electricite du Liban (EDL) presented a quote of \$16 million to the government, which is trying to provide just half a day's worth of power to polling stations for the critical vote.

"I held several meetings with EDL, which apparently couldn't provide electricity except at a very high cost," Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said.

"The entire elections, at home and abroad, don't cost this much," Mawlawi said, saying his total budget for the vote was capped at \$12.5 million.

Mawlawi was adamant the government was working for the polls to go ahead as scheduled, despite persistent rumors they could be called off.

Lebanon, grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis since 2019, and which defaulted on its debt in March 2020, has suffered from severe power shortages for nearly a year – largely because the government can't afford fuel for power stations.

Power cuts last up to 22 hours a day in most regions, forcing many to rely on expensive generator subscriptions to keep the lights on.

The international community has long demanded a complete overhaul of Lebanon's loss-making electricity sector – which has cost the government more than \$40 billion since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war – as one of the basic conditions to disburse billions of dollars in desperately needed financial support.

EDL had asked for its payment in cash, Mawlawi said.

Mawlawi said the government may turn to private generators to power voting centers, which will need electricity to light the room at night when the votes are counted immediately after polls close.

"I can't rely on the state because despite the high cost demanded, EDL can't guarantee solid results... which may lead to a sudden blackout," the interior minister said.

"The issue of electricity is the biggest problem facing Lebanon... but we will be able to solve it for the day of elections," he added.

Lebanon's energy crisis is just one of its many economic woes, with the currency having lost more than 90 percent of its value.

Most of Lebanon's population lives below the poverty line.

Power outages mean streets are dark at night and surveillance cameras are



effectively obsolete, leading to a spike in certain types of crime, Mawlawi said, who cited deepening poverty as another driving force. Interior ministry figures show armed robberies surged by 135 percent in 2021 compared with the previous year, and car theft increased by nearly a quarter over the same period.

At the same time, Lebanon's security forces have been weakened because officers have quit to look for other work, since their salary barely covers enough to buy basic food for a family.

At least 478 security officers working for Internal Security Forces or the General Security Agency have quit ranks since the start of the country's crisis, documents provided by the ministry showed.

"There is a problem," Mawlawi said.

But "the number of those defecting is not large. We should not exaggerate the problem," he added.



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# US returns smuggled ancient artifacts to Libya

Author:

By YOUSEF MURAD | AP

ID:

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Thu, 2022-03-31 21:04

TRIPOLI, Libya: The United States on Thursday returned a cache of smuggled ancient artifacts to Libya as the oil-rich Mediterranean country struggles to protect its heritage against the backdrop of years of war, turmoil and unrest.

The repatriated items include two sculptures dating to the 4th century B.C. from the ancient city of Cyrene.

One, named the "Veiled Head of a Female," was previously in the hands of a private collector of other illegal artifacts, according to a statement from the US Embassy in Libya. The other, also a Hellenic bust, had been at the Metropolitan Museum of New York since 1998, the statement said. Both were displayed by Libyan antiquities officials at a reception ceremony in the country's capital, Tripoli.

Libyan antiquities authorities thanked American officials and law enforcement for the returned items and said that they looked forward to future cooperation. The embassy credited the work of the Manhattan District Attorney's office and Homeland Security Investigations officials for the recovery of the artifacts.

"Although these antiquities were brought illegally to the United States by traffickers, legal efforts have succeeded in returning them to their country of origin," the embassy statement read.

Libya boasts many ancient Greek and Roman structures, along with a wealth of ancient artifacts in its major museum in the capital of Tripoli and in other museums countrywide, though its archaeological sites have been plundered for decades.

Libya has been wrecked by chaos since a NATO-backed uprising toppled and killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. The country was after that split for years between rival administrations in the east and the west, each supported by an array of militias and foreign governments.

Large-scale fighting has only stopped in the past year, but Libyans have yet to unite under a single political leadership, despite strenuous UN-led efforts.

The Greeks founded the settlement of Cyrene, close to the modern town of Shahat, in the 4th century B.C. It was later incorporated into the Roman empire. The United Nations added Cyrene to the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1982 and it has been classified as a location that is particularly endangered due to neglect and looting since 2016.





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## [Three Palestinians killed as Israeli extremist visits Al-Aqsa in 'provocation'](#)

Thu, 2022-03-31 20:30

RAMALLAH: Two Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces in Jenin on Thursday, and 14 more were injured, according to Palestinian medical sources. Yazid Saedi, 27, and Sanad Abu Attyiah, 17, were killed in Jenin, in the northern West Bank, during a large-scale operation by Israeli forces. An Israeli settler, meanwhile, killed another Palestinian on a bus in

southern Bethlehem after the Palestinian allegedly stabbed another passenger. The Palestinian Ministry of Health confirmed that Nidal Juma'a Ja'fara, 30, was killed south of the town.

The violence coincided with an extremist member of the Knesset, Itamar Ben-Gvir, visiting Al-Aqsa Mosque on Thursday morning, where he photographed some areas with his mobile phone.

Jenin Gov. Maj. Gen. Akram Rajoub described to Arab News the situation in the city and refugee camp as "very tense," adding that people there were angry. "The Israeli occupation army's incursion into the camp and the city this morning had no justification as they did not arrest anyone and did not enter a house as in the previous incursions. They deliberately shot with the aim of killing and wounding, perhaps to satisfy Israeli public opinion," he added. Videos circulated online showed smoke rising from the center of the Jenin refugee camp as gunfire echoed in the background. Others appeared to show Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen moving through the narrow streets. Israeli soldiers also fired tear gas in the vicinity of Jenin Government Hospital and entered its emergency department.

Rajoub said the Israeli forces, which stayed for a short time in the camp and the city, opened fire indiscriminately at civilians in the streets, injuring them and preventing ambulances from giving them treatment.

The camp was the scene of one of the deadliest battles of the Second Intifada. In April 2002, Israeli forces fought Palestinian fighters in the camp for nearly three weeks. Twenty-three Israeli soldiers and at least 52 Palestinians, including civilians, were killed, according to the UN.

Ziyad Al-Nakhala, secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement, called on the members of the group's military wing, Al-Quds Brigades, to mobilize.

"In light of the invasion of Jenin camp by the Zionist enemy army, the secretary-general of the Islamic Jihad Movement announces the general mobilization of Al-Quds Brigades in all their locations," he said.

Meanwhile, the Israel Defense Force launched a spate of arrests across the West Bank early on Thursday that targeted more than 17 people.

On March 30 the Israeli Cabinet decided to cancel work permits for the relatives of Palestinians involved in violent attacks.

Israeli authorities agreed not to impose a closure on the West Bank despite various warnings of more impending attacks to coincide with the start of Ramadan on April 2.

Meanwhile, witnesses said police deployed at Al-Aqsa searched young men and prevented them from getting near extremist leader Ben-Gvir. They also stopped the Jerusalemite activist Mohammed Abu Al-Hummus and prevented him from moving into Al-Aqsa until Ben-Gvir left.

Bin-Gvir, who had announced two days ago his intention to visit Al-Aqsa every month, said during his tour: "I am here in Al-Aqsa, defying Hamas."

The Palestinian presidency strongly condemned the killing of Palestinians and the provocative act at Al-Aqsa.

"The Israeli provocations, represented by the continuation of the incursions, the daily killings and crimes by the Israeli army and settlers will draw the region into more tension and escalation which is inconsistent with the efforts made at all levels to make the month of Ramadan, coinciding with the holidays, a quiet month," it said in a statement.

The presidency held the occupation government fully responsible for this

escalation and its repercussions, calling on the international community to take immediate action to restrain Israel and hold it accountable for its crimes.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh also warned of the dangerous repercussions of the crimes of the Israeli occupation in Jenin and Bethlehem, and of allowing settlers to storm Al-Aqsa Mosque, calling it a violation and provocation to hurt Muslims.

Tariq Ezz El-Din, the official spokesman for Islamic Jihad in the West Bank, called Ben-Gvir's tour of Al-Aqsa "a severe violation of the mosque's sanctity," and a move that "heralds a new uprising among our people."

He warned Israeli leaders of the repercussions of such dangerous steps, and urged Palestinians in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and inside Israel to confront these attempts with all force, and "travel to Al-Aqsa to defend and protect the mosque."

The cycle of violence has continued despite efforts by King Abdullah II of Jordan to prevent it.

The king paid a visit earlier this week to Ramallah to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and senior political and security officials.

Later he received Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz and President Yitzhak Herzog in Amman.



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## Tunisia speaker rejects president's dissolution of parliament

Author:

AFP

ID:

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TUNIS: The speaker of Tunisia's parliament on Thursday rejected President Kais Saied's dissolution of the assembly the previous day.

"We consider that the parliament remains operational," Rached Ghannouchi told AFP in an interview.

"The president does not have the constitutional right to dissolve parliament."

Saied had dissolved the chamber on Wednesday, dealing another blow to the political system in place since the North African country's 2011 revolt which sparked the Arab Spring.

It came eight months after he sacked the government, froze parliament and seized sweeping powers, later moving to rule by decree in moves opponents have dubbed a "coup."

The president's announcement on Wednesday evening came hours after parliamentarians held a plenary session online – their first since Saied's power grab – and voted through a bill against his "exceptional measures." Addressing his National Security Council, Saied said MPs who had taken part would be prosecuted.

But Ghannouchi, who heads the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party that has dominated Tunisia's post-revolution politics, Saied's decision was "null and void because it contradicts the constitution."

Many Tunisians welcomed Saied's moves against political parties seen as self-serving and corrupt, but his moves have prompted accusations that he is moving the country back toward autocracy.



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