

Tunisian government agrees deal with union to avert strikes

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TUNIS: The Tunisian authorities on Thursday reached a deal with a powerful trade union over wage hike demands to avert a further round of paralysing strikes.

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) last month brought the North African country to a standstill with a 24-hour strike by public sector workers to secure wage hikes and economic reforms.

The union said it had "concluded a deal with the government putting an end to the crisis" that would see pay rises worth up to \$55 per month (just under 50 euros) for civil servants.

The group said it was now calling off another round of strikes scheduled for February 20 and 21.

Tunisia is seen as having had a relatively smooth democratic transition since the January 14, 2011 toppling of president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years in power.

But price hikes fueled by the fall of the Tunisian dinar, combined with tax increases and stubborn unemployment, have spurred social discontent.

In 2016, the IMF granted Tunisia a four-year 2.4-billion-euro loan in exchange for a promise to carry out economic reforms and to control civil service salaries.



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[Sudan protesters rally in support of detainees](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-07 22:07

KHARTOUM: Crowds of Sudanese protesters rallied on Thursday in downtown Khartoum in support of fellow demonstrators detained in the weeks of rallies against President Omar Al-Bashir's iron-fisted rule, witnesses said.

The latest protest came after Al-Bashir acknowledged that Sudan's controversial public order law and growing economic hardships had angered youths and sent them out into the streets.

The rally was called to express solidarity with the hundreds of demonstrators who have been arrested since anti-government rallies erupted in December.

The protesters returned to the downtown area, chanting their campaign's rallying cry of "freedom, peace, justice," witnesses said.

For almost two weeks a security clampdown had prevented them from converging on the capital's downtown area.

"Bring all your soldiers but today you will fall," chanted the protesters, witnesses said, adding that riot police swiftly confronted them with tear gas.

"The authorities thought we won't be able to reach downtown," a demonstrator told AFP without giving his name for security reasons.

The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) which has led the demonstrations called Thursday's protests specifically in support of the detainees who it says are being "tortured."

On Wednesday, Al-Bashir acknowledged that youths, mainly women, were leading the rallies and said the public order law was "one of the reasons" for their anger.

Activists say the decades-old law targets mainly women, often accusing them of "indecent dressing and immoral behavior."

Hefty punishments including fines and jail terms are imposed on women found guilty under the legislation.

According to some Sudanese women's rights groups, more than 15,000 women were sentenced to flogging in 2016.

Al-Bashir, who swept to power in 1989, said the harsh economic conditions in Sudan, such as high inflation, were also driving the protests.

"It's not only the public order law that we are against," said Tahani, a female protester who asked not to be fully named for security concerns.

"Once we overthrow the regime, we will change the old laws completely with new laws that respect the dignity and diversity of the Sudanese people."

Protests first erupted on Dec. 19 after a government decision to raise the price of bread.

But they quickly turned into nationwide rallies against Al-Bashir's three-decade-old rule, with protesters calling for his resignation.

Officials say 30 people have died in protest-related violence, while Human Rights Watch says at least 51 people have been killed in clashes with security forces.



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Sudan minister appeals to youth as protests continue Sudan's Bashir vows rural development as new protests loom

[Iraq's Shiite militants vow to oust US troops – by law or force](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-07 21:53

BAGHDAD: Ousting US troops from Iraq despite President Donald Trump's vow to stay is now the top goal of pro-Iranian Shiite armed groups. And their leaders say there are only two ways – by passing a new law, or by force.

US-Iraq relations have grown tense once again, after a series of ups and downs over the years, from the 1990 Gulf war through crippling sanctions to the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein and the fight against Daesh.

But a year after Iraq declared victory over Daesh following a three-year war against the militants in which it was also backed by Iran, the Americans are seen by some as an unwanted "occupying force."

And if they do stay, "every Iraqi will have the legitimate right to confront them by any means," warned Mohammed Mohie, spokesman for the Hezbollah Brigades in Iraq, a force close to Iran that has also fought on the side of President Bashar Assad in Syria.

The powerful leader of the Asaib Ahel Al-Haq armed group, Qais Al-Khazali, echoed the warning.

"If we are ever needed, we are ready," he said.

There were nearly 4,500 US troops killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, including in fighting with Shiite armed groups. But before any decision to take up arms again and spill more blood, Mohie said he wants to give lawmakers a chance to set a time frame for the departure of US troops from Iraq.

A bill has been tabled in Parliament, and there could be a rare show of unanimity in support of it between its two biggest factions: Populist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's alliance, which champions Iraq's independence, and the pro-Iranian bloc of former anti-Daesh fighters.

"For three years, the main rivalry in Parliament has been among Shiite factions," said Renad Mansour, a researcher at the Chatham House think-tank.

"They cannot agree on the choice of a minister, but they do on one point: That the experience of having America in Iraq has been bad." Ironically, the person who has given new impetus to the proposed timetable for American troops to leave Iraq is the US president himself.

At the weekend, Trump provoked indignation even among Washington's allies in Baghdad when he said he plans to keep American forces in Iraq to keep an eye on Iran.

As a result, US diplomats and military officials in Baghdad were "very worried" and doing everything to "minimize" the impact of the remarks, said Mansour.

Trump had already irritated the Iraqis by not meeting any of the country's officials during a surprise Christmas visit to US troops stationed less than 200 km from Baghdad.

US forces left Iraq in 2011, only to return in 2014, at the head of the coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

But the US is now seeking to use Iraq as "a base for attacking neighboring countries," Khazali told AFP.

"Trump does not understand that Iraq is now a strong country. But he can be sure that if he persists, he will pay very dearly," said the Asaib leader wearing a Shiite white turban.

Mohie said adoption of the bill on a US withdrawal would be the "first step."

But he swiftly added that “we think the United States will again challenge the popular will” by trying to stay in Iraq.

In that case, Mohie said his forces and others like it would move to the “second step” and take up arms against “an occupying force.”

“The resistance factions have gained capabilities and expertise in the fight against” Daesh, he said.

The experience they gained “will serve to confront any army that threatens Iraq and its sovereignty.”

He said that above all any confrontation would allow Shiite factions “to find an external threat on which to focus attention rather than their internal problems.”



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Iraqi armed factions hit Daesh targets inside Syria
Baghdad anger at Trump plan for US troops in Iraqi base

Baghdad anger at Trump plan for US troops in Iraqi base

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-07 00:09

BAGHDAD: Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric joined criticism on Wednesday of President Donald Trump's plan to keep US troops in Iraq to counter Iran.

Iraq wants good relations with all its neighbors "based on mutual interests and without intervention in internal affairs," and "rejects being a launching pad for harming any other country," Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani said.

Trump said last week that US troops should remain at Al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq, which belongs to the Iraqi army.

"We spent a fortune on building this incredible base," he said. "We might as well keep it. And one of the reasons I want to keep it is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real problem."

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi reminded Trump that there were no US bases in Iraq and called on him to retract his statements.

President Barham Saleh said Trump had not asked for permission to use Iraqi territory to monitor Iran. "Don't burden Iraq with your own issues," he said.

Trump's comments added to concerns in Iraq about America's long-term intentions, particularly after it withdraws its troops from Syria. However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo assured allies on Wednesday that the pullout was only tactical and called on them to recommit to permanently defeating Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

"US troops withdrawing from Syria is not the end of America's fight," Pompeo said. "The fight is one we will continue to wage alongside you. To that end, we ask that our coalition partners seriously and rapidly consider requests that will enable our efforts to continue. Those requests are likely to come very soon."



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Pompeo reassures allies of US commitments in Syria, Iraq Trump wants US military in Iraq to 'watch Iran' -CBS interview

[**Egypt opposition rejects move to extend EL-Sisi's rule**](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-06 22:08

CAIRO: Egyptian opposition parties have formed a coalition against proposed changes to the constitution that would allow President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to stay in office well beyond the end of his current term in 2022, two opposition leaders said on Wednesday.

Egypt's Parliament has given its preliminary approval to the changes, after two-thirds of the general committee endorsed the proposed amendments on Tuesday.

The 596-seat assembly – which is packed with El-Sisi supporters – will take a final vote on Feb. 17, but the amendments would also need to be put to a national referendum.

Abdel-Aziz El-Husseini, a senior leader in the Karama, or Dignity party, said that 11 parties met the previous day and declared their opposition to the proposed changes.

The group established a “union for the defense of the constitution” that includes secular and left-leaning parties and lawmakers, he added.

Khaled Dawood, another opposition leader and former head of the liberal Dostour, or Constitution party, questioned the legitimacy of the process to amend the 2014 charter, citing a constitutional clause that bars extending the two-term limit.

“We will challenge the proposed amendment before the country’s Supreme Constitutional Court,” he said. Amending the constitution was widely expected. Pro-government lawmakers and media figures have argued for years that the constitution is crippling the president’s efforts to advance the country, including overhauling its economy and defeating militants.

El-Sisi himself said in 2015 that “the constitution was drafted with good intentions.”

A draft of the proposed amendments shows concerted efforts by the pro-government “Supporting Egypt” coalition to consolidate El-Sisi’s power. The 64-year-old leader could be allowed to run for a third and fourth six-year term, potentially extending his rule to 2034.

Talaat Khalil, a lawmaker attending Monday’s meeting, decried the proposed changes, especially a broad clause stating the military’s duty is to protect “the constitution and democracy and the fundamental makeup of the country and its civil nature.”

He told a press conference on Monday that this could allow the armed forces to support one politician at the cost of another. “And this is a great danger,” he said.

Experts say opposition parties are too weak to effectively challenge the amendments amid an unprecedented crackdown on dissent.

In another development, the Istanbul governor’s office on Wednesday said Turkey will investigate the deportation of an Egyptian facing execution in Cairo over a car bomb and has suspended eight policemen involved.

Mohamed Abdelhafiz Ahmed Hussein, whom the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement identifies as a member, was among 28 people sentenced in absentia to death in July 2017 for killing Egypt’s public prosecutor in the attack, according to state media.

He was sent back to Egypt last month from Istanbul’s main Ataturk airport on arrival from Somalia for not having a visa.

The case adds to strained Turkey-Egypt relations since the army ousted President Mohamed Mursi, of the Brotherhood, following mass protests against his rule in 2013.

The Istanbul governor's office said on Tuesday that when Hussein arrived, there was no information he was facing trial anywhere, and he did not request protection, so officials deemed him an "unacceptable passenger" due to lack of a Turkish visa.

In a separate statement on Wednesday, the governor's office said a commission had been set up to investigate the deportation and eight police officers were suspended from duty over it.

An adviser to Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said it was wrong to repatriate anyone facing charges in Egypt and the matter needed checking.

"During the leadership of (Egyptian President Abdel Fattah) Sisi, Turkey has not and does not hand over anyone facing the death penalty or any other charges," Yasin Aktay wrote in the pro-government Yeni Safak newspaper on Wednesday.



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Egypt MPs table law amendment to extend El-Sisi rule
Egypt mulls changing constitution to keep El-Sisi in power