

Middle East/North Africa - Tunisia

Journalists rally

## Hundreds of journalists protest at appointments of new media bosses

10 January 2012

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More than 300 journalists and civil society members demonstrated yesterday outside the government headquarters in the Tunis Casbah to condemn police violence and call for the recognition of freedom of expression as a basic right.

The demonstration, in response to an appeal by the Tunisian journalists' union, was also aimed at protesting against the recent appointment of new bosses of state media outlets.

A counter-demonstration was organized by supporters of the Islamist party Ennahda, which supports the actions of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali's government.

"At a time when the Ennahda party is accusing the media of being out of step with the aspirations of the people, we wonder about the real reasons for these appointments," Reporters Without Borders said.

"The links those chosen for key posts have with the former Ben Ali regime do not favour a break with the old media set-up that was in thrall to political authorities and casts doubt on the present leadership's commitment to taking control of these media organizations.

"During the Ben Ali era, the authorities never openly intervened in the appointment of editors and news directors.

"The audio-visual communication authority HAICA, whose creation was provided for in a decree promulgated on 2 November, should be responsible for nominating candidates to head public media organizations to the prime minister. In this case, the prime minister appointed the media bosses himself on the pretext that the posts were vacant.

"However, in a statement issued three days ago, Hamadi Jebali, undertook not to make any decisions affecting the media without consulting the parties concerned.

"Yesterday, a delegation from the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) met the prime minister, as well as Abderrazak Kilani, minister in charge of relations with the Constituent Assembly, and Ridha Kazdaghli, the prime minister's head of communications.

"The president of the SNJT, Nejiba Hamrouni, described the appointments as "anarchic". Kamel Laabidi, head of the National Committee of Information and Communication Reform (INRIC), regretted that he was not consulted about the appointments. The committee, set up after Tunisia's revolution, expressed "surprise at the appointments announced."

The prime minister said there was a need for urgency since several top posts, such as the heads of the state news agency *TAP*, the state newspaper publishing arm *SNIFE* and the *Tunisian National Television establishment*, were vacant and this explained the need to move quickly on new management appointments. He gave an assurance that those of editors and news directors would be cancelled and, in future, these posts will be filled by elections among media staff.

The fact remains that among the bosses recently appointed, there are figures from the previous regime, such as Mohamed Néjib Ouerghi, who served as editor and publisher of the

newspaper *Le Renouveau*, organ of the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party from 2003 to 2010, then as head of the *TAP* news agency from 2010 until his appointment last week as president and chief executive of the new publishing arm *SNIFE* and director of its newspapers *La Presse* and *Essahafa*.

Mohamed Taïeb Youssefi, who worked as a government adviser from 1990 until he was promoted to head the prime minister's office last February, was named president and chief executive of the *TAP* news agency. The agency's journalists organized a sit-in yesterday in front of its offices in protest against his appointment.

Adnene Khedr, former head of the main television station, was appointed president and chief executive of the *Tunisian Television Establishment*.

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