

Tunisian police clash with hardline Islamists, one killed
By Tarek Amara, Reuters
11 April 2013

Police fired on Islamists attacking a police station in a southern Tunisian town, killing one person, a security source said, in the latest incident to raise religious tensions in the North African country.

Hundreds of Salafists - followers of a puritanical interpretation of Islam - protested in front of the police station in Hergla on Thursday after officers arrested some of their comrades who had attacked alcohol sellers in the city, police and witnesses said.

"Police fired bullets on the Salafists who attacked a police station in Hergla town and tried to burn it down, killing one person and wounding others," a security source said.

Salafist websites posted a photograph of a young man they said was killed by a bullet to the chest. Medical sources in Sahloul hospital in the nearby city of Sousse declined to comment. Interior Ministry officials were not immediately available for comment.

Since secular dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled in the first "Arab Spring" uprising two years ago, Tunisia has seen mounting strife between secularists, who long held power, and Islamists, whose influence is increasing.

Hergla is around 100 km (60 miles) south of the capital Tunis and near the tourist resorts of Hammamet and Sousse.

During the past months, Salafists have attacked wine sellers in several Tunisian cities, prompting secularists to accuse them of having formed a religious police and threatening the state.

On Wednesday, Islamists burst into a school and assaulted its chief after he barred entry to a teenage girl wearing a face veil.

Salafists prevented concerts and plays from being staged in several Tunisian cities last year, declaring that they violated Islamic principles. Hardline Islamists also ransacked the U.S. Embassy in September during worldwide Muslim protests over an anti-Islam video posted on the Internet.

The moderate Islamic Ennahda Movement won Tunisia's first free elections in October 2011 after the revolution and heads a government that also includes two secular parties.

While Islamists did not play a major role in the revolt, the struggle over the role of religion in government and society has since emerged as the most divisive issue in Tunisia, which for decades was considered one of the most secular countries in the Arab world.

Tunisian police blamed Salafists for the assassination of secular opposition politician Chokri Belaid in February, which provoked the biggest street protests in Tunisia since the overthrow of Ben Ali in January 2011.

(Editing by Mohammad Zargham)

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