

Tunisia seeks to quell religious tension after unrest

By Mounir Souissi :AFP

Tunisia's government blamed Salafists and old regime loyalists Wednesday for the worst unrest since Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's ouster but dismissed suggestions Al-Qaeda initiated the violence.

One man died and around 100 people were injured, including 65 policemen, as a result of a three-day wave of riots which appears to have been triggered by an art exhibition that included works deemed offensive to Islam.

The authorities in the north African country arrested more 160 people and slapped a curfew on several regions, including the greater Tunis area. No incidents were reported on Wednesday.

Ultra-conservative Salafists, who advocate practising Islam as it was by Prophet Mohammed, were blamed for destroying art work deemed "blasphemous" at an exhibition in northern Tunis on Sunday.

The incident sparked clashes across the country Monday and Tuesday that saw police stations and political party offices torched, in the worst unrest since the January 2011 revolution that marked the birth of the Arab Spring.

A 22-year-old man who sustained a bullet wound to the head during riots in the eastern city of Sousse on Tuesday died in hospital, an official said Wednesday.

A joint statement by the leaders of Tunisia's government, constituent assembly and presidency condemned "extremist groups who threaten freedoms," in a thinly-veiled reference to the Salafists.

The government is led by the moderate Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance) party while the presidency and post of parliament speaker are held by the two parties that came closest in October's first post-revolution polls.

The trio also pointed a finger at former members of the Ben Ali regime, who have been accused of instrumentalising Salafist groups to stoke tensions between Islamists and secularists and destabilise the country.

The joint statement cited "the ghosts of the fallen regime trying to sabotage the transition process" at a time when Tunisia is fashioning post-revolution institutions and drafting a new constitution.

A military court on Wednesday sentenced the ousted strongman, who lives in exile in Saudi Arabia with his wife, to 20 years imprisonment over the death of four protestors in January last year.

Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia with an iron fist for 23 years, had already been sentenced to 66 years in jail on various charges, and faces the death penalty over another case of police killings.

Tunisia's uprising and ensuing democratic advances have been internationally hailed but few of the economic woes that drew people into the streets in the first place have been resolved, the security situation is fragile and society increasingly polarised over the role of religion.

The latest unrest came after an audio message in which Al-Qaeda supremo Ayman al-Zawahiri called on Tunisians to rise up and demand the implementation of Islamic law hit the Internet on Sunday.

But Ennahda's influential leader, Rached Ghannouchi, dismissed suggestions that the sudden nationwide Salafist mobilisation was a direct consequence.

"Ayman al-Zawahiri has no influence in Tunisia. This man is a disaster for Islam and for Muslims," he told reporters. "We see no link between the Salafists in Tunisia and Al-Qaeda."

In his message, Zawahiri criticised Ennahda for failing to impose full sharia: "It is astonishing to find a leadership claiming to belong to Islam saying that it does not want to rule with it."

Some secular groups and Ennahda critics have charged that the party is not as moderate as it claims and alleged that it was using Salafist groups to Islamise society.

Ghannouchi denied the claims and said that "the Salafists are not a homogeneous group. Only a minority advocates violence."

The joint statement by the presidency, parliament and government also condemned any attack on Islam. As early as Tuesday, the ministry of culture had announced it would sue the exhibition's organisers.

Ennahda has echoed calls by radical Salafist imams to demonstrate en masse after Friday prayers.

Tunisian artists have lambasted the authorities' attitude towards the Salafists as "cowardly" and denounced "a level of conservatism that is totally incompatible with freedom of creation and expression."

Incidents involving Salafists had earlier rattled the country after a television channel aired Persepolis, a French-Iranian animation film deemed an insult to sacred Islamic values by religious conservatives.

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