

EU Socialists, conservatives, play 'dictator badminton' over Tunisia

Tuesday 25 January 2011, by [PHILLIPS Leigh](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2011).

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Socialists and conservatives in the European Parliament have accused each other of cosying up to Tunisian ex-dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, with senior figures in the French political establishment also tainted by association.

Left-wingers and human rights organisations have been strident in their criticism of conservatives such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy for his government's close ties and support of the ousted Tunisian leader.

But on Tuesday (18 January), after it was revealed that Mr Ali's political party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), was a member of the Socialist International, the global alliance of centre-left parties, the RCD was expelled.

Martin Schulz, the leader of the left in the parliament, offered a mea culpa for its embrace of the party: "Now and again, we do discover that there are members of our own family and are shocked by this. They were however expelled today from the Socialist International, but it is perfectly true that he was a member."

He said that the uprising in Tunisia had been the product of "dramatic inequality", with "very rich elites and very poor masses" and that the EU "will have to work closely with other partners this side of the Mediterranean to ensure that democratic legislation can be put into place and social justice can be finalised."

He added that he hoped the instability was not going to spread from Tunisia.

Mr Schulz then used the opportunity to accuse his opposite numbers in the chamber, the centre-right European People's Party of cosying up to the ex-dictator.

"Recently there was signed a co-operation agreement with the EPP [and the RCD]. You can see it webstreamed," he said. "It is a really interesting party because they were a member of the Socialist International and the EPP too."

"Well, this is really interesting - I think this explains for me why the EPP hasn't attacked [Ben Ali's government and his allies] yet. They're willing to take anyone and everyone. Anyone can be a member."

A spokesman for the EPP told EUobserver that the Socialists seem to "have only discovered now in the last two days that Ben Ali is a bad man."

"If they've expelled them, well good for them, but it's been a quick conversion. The RCD was a member for decades. They were brothers in arms for the last 30 years."

"If you look at any of their big meetings, you see that there has been a full, wholesome partnership with the party in Tunisia all this time."

Elsewhere in north Africa, the party of Egyptian hardman Hosni Mubarak, the National Democratic Party, is also a member of the Socialist International.

The Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament could not tell EUobserver whether this fact also came as a surprise or whether the NDP should also be expelled from the international Socialist alliance.

DSK: 'Tunisia a model for emerging countries'

Meanwhile, centre-right French foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie, who has been under sustained assault from the Tunisian community in France and human rights NGOs for her offer last week to send riot police to help put an end to the uprising, on Tuesday complained that her words had been taken out of context and "misrepresented".

"I'd spent the night in an aeroplane and it's possible I did not express myself well. I began to doubt myself, but afterwards I re-read my proposal to see that it was what actually what I thought and not what was being interpreted by certain people."

Strauss-Kahn

The head of the International Monetary Fund and frontrunning name to win the French Socialist Party's presidential nomination in 2012, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was also under heavy criticism this week as his long-standing support for the Tunisian regime has been steadily revealed.

The growth of extreme inequality in Tunisia may now be explained by his colleague Mr Schulz as to why the uprising has taken place, but in November 2008, Mr Kahn called on other developing nations to adopt the Tunisian economic and political model.

"I expect strong growth in Tunisia this year, economic policy adopted here is a sound policy and is the best model for many emerging countries," he said on a visit to Carthage.

Meeting with the governor of the country's central bank, he said at the time: "Our discussions confirmed that we share many of the same views on Tunisia's achievements and main challenges."

"Tunisia is making impressive progress in its reform agenda and its prospects are favorable." □

Mr Ben Ali also awarded Mr Strauss-Kahn the Order of the Tunisian Republic, the country's highest honour for his "intellectual qualities" and "contribution to the reinforcement of economic development at the global level".

Kouchner

Straddling the ideological divide, Bernard Kouchner, the long-time Socialist who left his party to take up the post of French foreign minister in a conservative government, also frequently downplayed the authoritarian character of the Ben Ali administration.

Under his watch, in April, 2009, France reached a nuclear energy co-operation deal with Tunis and delivered an €80 million aid package. The month before, criticised by NGOs for the closeness of the two governments, he said: "It's true that there are human rights abuses in Tunisia, journalists who are harassed, sometimes imprisoned, and a general policy of firmness," before going on to praise the country's economic and social achievements, in particular the status of women and the values of secularism.

“Every year, Human Rights Watch publishes a large book on the state of human rights around the world,” he said, but “Tunisia hardly figures at all.”

However, the previous year, the most recent edition of the HRW survey contained no fewer than six pages of criticisms, detailing torture, pressure on the judiciary and press censorship.

Last week, Europe One reported that Mr Kouchner could become the new UN high representative for the reconstruction of Haiti, after lobbying on the part of President Sarkozy.

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P.S.

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