

## International

# Locked-down Tunisia marks decade since dictator's fall

## Few are celebrating as COVID-19 cases spiral

**TUNIS:** Tunisia marked 10 years yesterday since its street revolution sent autocratic ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fleeing into exile, but few are celebrating amid a lockdown as COVID-19 cases spiral. Habib Bourguiba Avenue, a symbol of the revolution in the capital Tunis, was deserted and under police guard. "It's a subdued January 14," a photojournalist said as a convoy of police cars drove by.

In past years, demonstrators have rallied to recall the momentous events that sparked the wider Arab Spring revolts and to push for further change, but not this year as the world is battling the pandemic. "Normally we would have demonstrated in the street to demand social justice, because successive governments still haven't responded to that demand," said Alaa Talbi of the non-government Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights. "But this January 14, I'll stay home for the first time in 10 years, because the health crisis is acute and we need strong measures."

With over 50 novel coronavirus deaths a day and many hospitals reaching capacity, authorities imposed a four-day lockdown from yesterday, leaving city centers quiet, in sharp contrast to a decade ago. Back in 2011 the world's eyes were on the Mediterranean country where mass protests had broken out following the self-immolation of the desperate young street vendor

Mohamed Bouazizi.

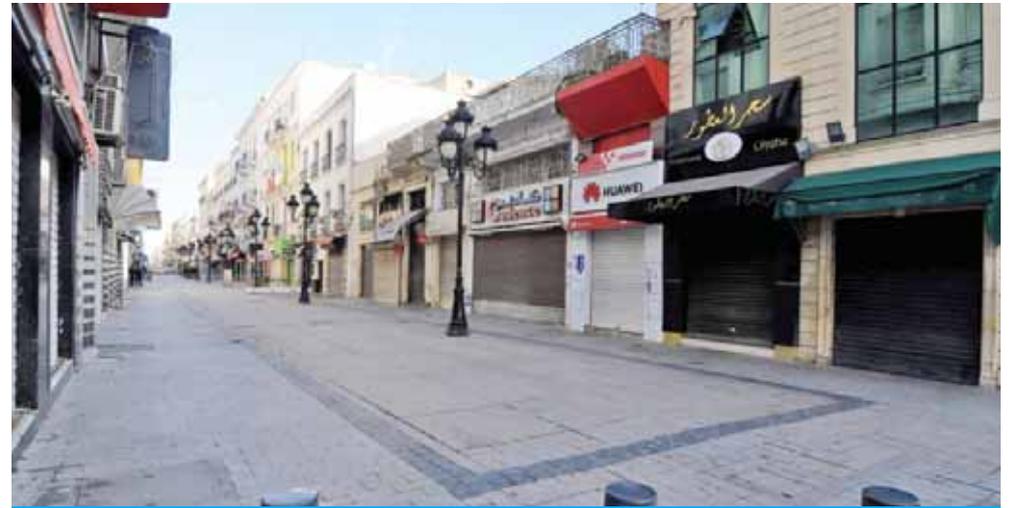
An unprecedented crowd thronged the streets outside the powerful interior ministry a decade ago Thursday, demanding an end to Ben Ali's repressive 23-year rule with deafening cries of "quit!" That evening Ben Ali fled to a luxurious, discreet exile in Saudi Arabia. He never set foot on Tunisian soil again and died in Jeddah in 2019. His fall triggered a string of uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East, toppling other dictators long seen as untouchable.

### 'No regret'

While other countries were plunged into war or returned to even more repressive rule, Tunisia successfully transitioned to democracy - albeit one still riven by corruption and economic pain. Looking back at those heady days, "we might be disappointed, but that doesn't mean we regret" the uprising, Talbi said. "Ten years is not a long time to transform a system in place for decades.

"We can be proud of our steps forward... We have installed a new political system, we've agreed on a constitution, even if it hasn't been fully implemented, and we've respected electoral deadlines." But, he warned, "now we need an economic transition".

Tunisia's economy, heavily reliant on foreign lending, shrank by nine percent last year, con-



**TUNIS:** Cafes and shops are shuttered in the capital amid a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic yesterday as the country marks 10 years since its revolution. — AFP

sumer prices have spiralled and one third of young people are unemployed. The key tourism sector, already on its knees after a string of deadly jihadist attacks in 2015, was dealt a devastating blow by the pandemic.

Crucial phosphate and oil production have been hampered by protest blockades in margin-

alized areas, where people demand jobs and investment. With few prospects at home, many Tunisians have looked abroad for a better life. Tunisians made up the largest number of irregular migrants, over 12,000, who arrived in Italy last year on boats crossing the Mediterranean - five times more than the previous year. — AFP

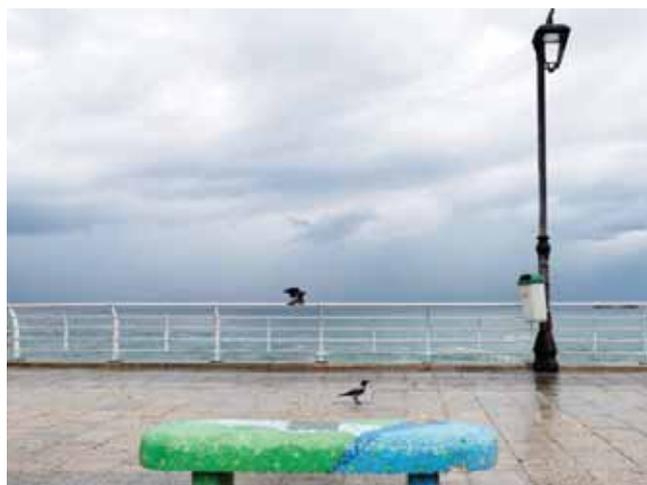
## Lebanon enters full lockdown to stem virus uptick

**BEIRUT:** A full lockdown started in Lebanon yesterday, with residents barred even from grocery shopping and dependent on food deliveries, in a bid to slow a surge in novel coronavirus cases. The new restrictions were only loosely respected in some areas of the country, however, after mass protests in recent years against a political elite held responsible for a deepening economic crisis.

The lockdown, ordered after some hospitals started to run out of intensive care beds, includes a 24-hour curfew until Jan 25. Non-essential workers are barred from leaving their homes, and supermarkets are supposed to operate delivery services only. Those wishing to request an emergency exemption - to see a doctor for example - can do so by sending a mobile phone text message or by filling in a form online.

In the capital, roads were quieter than usual on Thursday morning, while non-essential shops remained shuttered. But in areas of Beirut where there were no security forces, some people ventured out to buy groceries from local shops. On social media, users circulated a picture of a traffic jam at one of the entrances to the capital.

The strict lockdown came into effect after caretaker health minister Hamad Hasan was admitted to hospital for treatment for COVID-19 on Wednesday evening, state media said. Its announcement on Monday raised fears of food shortages in impoverished and remote regions where deliveries are not readily



**BEIRUT:** The usually bustling seaside corniche promenade in the capital is deserted as Lebanon enters its first day of strict lockdown yesterday. — AFP

available. For several days, Lebanese have flooded supermarkets and chemists in a desperate bid to stock up.

Some are worried the new restrictions will pile additional suffering on the country's poorest. Charity Save the Children said it accepted the need for a strict response to the coronavirus uptick, but said it was "very concerned that vulnerable families and their children will be left to deal with a catastrophe on their own". Lebanon, a country of more than six million, was already grappling with its worst economic downturn in decades when the pandemic hit. — AFP

## Qatar releases Bahrain bodybuilder

**MANAMA:** Qatar released three Bahrainis including a bodybuilding champion and his companion who Manama says were unlawfully seized by Doha while fishing, Bahrain's interior ministry said yesterday. Bahraini bodybuilding champion Sami Al-Haddad was detained on Jan 8 along with a friend, according to Bahrain, which insisted they were in the country's own territorial waters.

A third man, Habib Abas, a fisherman allegedly detained by Qatar in a separate incident on Dec 3, was also freed, Bahrain's interior ministry added in a statement. "The Interior Ministry... was notified by the Foreign Ministry about the release (of the) three Bahrainis arrested by the Qatari Coast and Border Guard," Bahrain's Interior Ministry said.

Bahrain was among a group of four countries led by regional power Saudi Arabia that imposed an economic blockade on Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of being too close to Iran and funding extremists. The quartet's freeze ended earlier this month at a regional summit. But Bahrain has separately repeatedly clashed with Doha over the enforcement of maritime boundaries, with several incidents in recent months which have seen Qatar's coastguard intercept Bahraini vessels.

The released trio were flown home via Oman, the statement said. But "their seized boats weren't released, bringing the total number of Bahraini boats that are still confiscated in Qatar to 50," it added. Bahrain has recently opened its airspace to Qatar following the resolution of the Gulf crisis. Direct flights between the two nations have yet to resume. Bahrain's foreign minister has invited a Qatari delegation to visit "as soon as possible". — AFP