



Tunisia's Secret Apparatus:

Why Ennahda's Deputy Head was detained?

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Tunisian Ennahda party on December 31, 2021 announced that the government security forces, acting on orders from the Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine have detained the Deputy Head Nouredine Bhiri and former Interior Ministry official Fathi Al-Baladi, and put them under house arrest.

Ennahda's Rejection of the Move

Ennahda expressed its rejection of the move and condemned the arrest of the two former officials, threatening to trigger street protests, distorting the facts and making allegations. This can be detailed as follows:

1- Kidnapping Ennahda's leading figures: Ennahda issued a statement claiming that Bhiri was kidnapped and taken to an unknown location. This was further expressed in statements made by Rached Ghannouchi, the speaker of the parliament and Ennahda's leader who criticized measures taken by President Kais Saied. This was an attempt to pit public opinion against the authorities which carried out the arrest, the President and his government. Ghannouchi de-

manded President Saeid disclose the whereabouts of Bhiri and held him responsible for deterioration of his health. Bhiri was taken to the Habib Bougatfa hospital in Bizerte, north, after he had a medical condition two days after he was arrested.

2- Covering Up the President's underperformance: Ennahda rejected the arrest saying that similar security measures such as besieging politicians, prosecuting and imposing restrictions on members of the parliaments, are all part of attempts by President Saeid and his government to cover up their failure to address challenges and problems currently hitting the country. Ennahda cited the Finance Law of 2022 which increased taxes adding to the burdens of citizens. This is also an attempt by Ennahda to pit public opinion against the government

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and cover up some of its members' involvement in corruption cases.

3- Eliminating political opponents: Ennahda views the arrests and judicial prosecutions as the first step in taking the country into a new era of tyranny and extra-judicial political liquidation carried out by the coup regime, in reference to President Saied and his government.

4- Staging Sit-in and Rallies: Ennahda held a seminar in its headquarters in Montplaisir, pitting some lawyers who are members of the party to stage a sit-in inside the Tunis Lawyers association to express their rejection of the arrest of Bhiri.

Purging the State

The arrest of Bhiri at this timing can be explained by the following factors:

1- Bhiri's involvement in "Brotherhoodization" of the judicial system: Among the main charges against Bhiri is his control of the judicial authority to serve the interests of the Ennahda Movement. In violation of applicable laws, he appointed several judges loyal to the movement during his service as minister of justice in 2012 in the cabinet of Hamadi Jebali (2011-2012). During his tenure, Bhiri directly intervened in the jurisdiction and work of the judicial authority to the degree that his opponents used to say "the judicial authority of Bhiri" to describe his ascendancy over, and utilization of the judicial system to serve narrow partisan purposes.

2- Bhiri's potential ties with the secret apparatus: Bhiri was arrested on charges of helping Tunisian youth to travel to Syria to fight there. This coincides with the state's ongoing investigation into the Ennahda's secret apparatus in assassinating activists Mohamed Brahmi and Shukri Belaid, as well as the movement's involvement in contacting and coordination with some terrorist organizations. The investigation indicates the security agencies' serious doubts that Bhiri has direct ties with the secret apparatus.

The arrest of Bhiri coincided with an announcement on December 31 by the security authority about the arrest of a Tunisian citizen involved in the 2016 Nice truck attack. There is a potential link between the arrest and the announcement that may have prompted the security authority to investigate the movements possible involvement in such terrorist attacks. Such measures are part of efforts to protect the country's national security.

Significant Implications

The arrest of Ennahda's deputy head Nouredine Bhiri has the following important political and security implications:

1- The ongoing war on corruption: Bhiri was arrested as part of a campaign launched by President Saeid to continue the war on political, financial, administrative as well as judicial corruption. The president gave orders to purge the judiciary system from the Brotherhood's deep influence and eliminate judges charged with corruption and collaboration with Ennahda. This prompted more calls in the Tunisian society to dissolve the Supreme Judicial Council.

2- Exclusion of the Tunisian Brotherhood: Bhiri is Ennahda's first senior figure to be arrested since the exceptional measures were ordered five months ago. The decision to arrest the former official was made days after the judiciary sentenced former President Moncef Marzouki in absentia to four years in prison after he was found guilty of "undermining the external security of the State" and cooperating with foreign entities and states to facilitate their interference in Tunisia's internal affairs and undermining its national security.

The arrest of an Ennahda senior figure such as Bhiri will cause more embarrassment and confusion within the movement. It will also raise its leader's fears that the ongoing investigations would uncover the movement's crypts, secrets as well as involvement of its members and Ghannouchi himself in corruption cases. In particular, receiving foreign funds from Qa-



tar for spending on the 2019 parliamentary election. This would put the movement in a serious political predicament.

3- Ennahda's use of a rhetoric of grievance: Ennahda adopted a political rhetoric centered around the arrest of Bhiri and projecting claims that its leaders were wronged by the state. The movement focused its efforts on spreading statements by Bhiri's wife, who accused the security forces of using violence against her husband before they took him to an unknown location of house arrest. She also accused President Saied of kidnapping her husband, in an attempt to mobilize support against President Saied. But the use of this rhetoric now is not likely to find any response due to a decline in the movement's popularity and increasing popular anger against it due to its responsibility for a decline in the

political, economic and social situation across the country after ten years in power.

In conclusion, the arrest of Bhiri is likely to be a prelude to exposing more leading figures of the movement who are involved in financial, political and administrative cases as well as in terrorism. Accordingly, the coming period will witness interrogations by the judicial authorities, which would weaken Ennahda.

On the other side, Ennahda is likely to use the arrest of Bhiri for political escalation against President Saied, especially after it launched a few days ago an initiative to form a political front under the slogan "restoring legitimacy" in the country, and to support its last Citizens Against the Coup initiative to stage rallies to protest against the president's exceptional measures.

ABOUT FARAS

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