

French government embarrassed by its ties to North African dictatorships

By Antoine Lerougetel and Alex Lantier

The mass protests in North Africa against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled his country on January 14, are shaking the French government. For the time being, attention has focused on Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who like many French politicians enjoyed close ties to the Tunisian regime.

Alliot-Marie and her husband Patrick Ollier—also a government minister—enjoyed a free ride in Tunisian multi-millionaire Aziz Milad's private jet and stayed at his luxury hotel over the Christmas holidays, as protests against Ben Ali continued. Milad's jet was chartered by Karthago Airlines, owned by Ben Ali's brother-in-law, Belhassen Trabelsi. Trabelsi is now the subject of an international arrest warrant.

While Alliot-Marie enjoyed Milad's hospitality, Ben Ali's police were gunning down workers and youth protesting unemployment, poverty, and the Ben Ali dictatorship. At least 218 were killed, according to government figures.

On January 11, once she was back on the job, Alliot-Marie proposed to send French riot police to help suppress Tunisian protestors.

Alliot-Marie's actions symbolized all too clearly the collusion between Paris and the dictatorship in Tunisia, a former French

colony. Alliot-Marie compounded her problems by making clumsy attempts to shift attention from her ties to the Ben Ali regime.

She claimed that Milad had been a victim of Ben Ali. In fact, as *Le Nouvel Observateur* noted, Milad was "one of the organisers of Ben Ali's 2004 presidential campaign, and [a signatory] of a motion of support for the candidacy of the former strongman for the presidential elections due in 2014."

Alliot-Marie also tried to appeal to anti-Americanism, ludicrously blaming Washington for Ben Ali's overthrow: "America took control of the situation... Needless to say, the Americans did not keep us informed." Such comments clearly suggested that her main objection to the state of affairs was that Ben Ali was no longer in power.

Under questioning by deputies at the National Assembly, she demonstrated her ignorance about the protests and about Mohamed Bouazizi—the young fruit vendor



President Hosni Mubarak

whose self-immolation on December 17 triggered the mass protests against Ben Ali. She got the date of his death wrong, claiming instead: "The suicide took place, I think, at the end of my stay. That's what I remember."

More brazenly still, she asserted: "There was no repression at that time." She later attacked those who criticized her, claiming they were waging a "campaign of denigration."

Members of the PS and of its pseudo-"left" satellites like the New Anti-Capitalist Party have demanded her departure. PS deputy Pierre Moscovici said, "France's foreign policy cannot be repre-



President Nicolas Sarkozy

sented by Madame Alliot-Marie." Another PS deputy, Olivier Dussopt, told the government: "Your minister of Foreign Affairs is disqualified. Be responsible and appoint another spokesperson for our partners."

While Alliot-Marie's defense of Ben Ali is particularly shameless, attempts to rescue the French ruling class's reputation by forcing her to depart is entirely cynical.

Prime Minister François Fillon has opposed calls for Alliot-Marie to resign, and President Nicolas Sarkozy has kept silent on the matter. However—amid recent reports that Fillon himself was a guest of the Egyptian regime for his Christ-



Ousted President Ben Ali

mas vacation—pressure may continue to rise.

The policy of support for Ben Ali was shared not only by the entire French government, but by the PS as well, reflecting French imperialism's strategic interests in North Africa.

France has sought to develop its former North African colonies as sources of energy and cheap labor. Any serious struggle against France's support for North African dictatorships must take as its political basis a socialist struggle against imperialism. The support given to Ben Ali by the French government is well-documented. On January 8 and 12, seven tons of te-

argas, batons and other police equipment ordered from French firms by the Tunisian police, were cleared for export by the ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Foreign Affairs.

Fillon confirmed the event in a letter sent on February 2 to Jean-Marc Ayrault, the leader of the opposition Socialist Party (PS) group in the National Assembly. The consignment was intercepted by the French customs a few hours before Ben Ali's departure. The official order to customs to block this material came from Alliot-Marie, but only on January 18.

As for the PS, the *Dauphine Libéré* pointed out that the mentor of the leadership of the Socialist Party, President François Mitterrand, enjoyed "sumptuous holidays... in Egypt at the invitation of Mubarak." More recently, the Plural Left government of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) maintained good relations with North African dictators.

It was formally affiliated to both the Egyptian and the Tunisian ruling parties inside the social-democratic Socialist International. It expelled the Tunisian Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) in January, and Egypt's National Democratic Party (NDP) on February 5. **WSWS**

Extradition hearing against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to reconvene

By Julie Hyland

The extradition hearing against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is to reconvene on Friday morning, Judge Howard Riddle at Belmarsh Magistrates' Court in London stated on Tuesday.

The extension of what was intended to be a two-day hearing came after proceedings went beyond the original time scheduled. Lawyers have been given a half-day to make their closing statements.

Sweden's Director of Prosecutions Marianne Ny is seeking Assange's extradition on politically motivated, trumped-up charges of sexual misconduct. Two women in Sweden allege rape, molestation and unlawful coercion, despite acknowledging that they had sex with Assange willingly in August last year. One claims that Assange did not use a condom during intercourse. The other alleges that he had sex with her when she was not fully awake. Assange rejects the claims

and has yet to be charged with any offence.

At the end of Tuesday's proceedings, Assange's lawyer Mark Stephens challenged Ny to attend the Friday hearing, and subject herself to cross-examination by defence counsel Geoffrey Robertson, QC. Ny had been prepared to give the media stories on the case but not to speak herself in court, he said.

Assange also questioned the absence of the Swedish prosecutor. Speaking outside the court he said that the hearing had seen "process abuse after process abuse being revealed hour after hour. What we have not seen yet is the Swedish prosecutor at these proceedings."

"Our witnesses were brought from Sweden, my lawyer was brought from Sweden and expensively cross-examined. Where is the equality in this case?" Assange asked. "Rather we see the unlimited budget of Sweden and the UK being spent on this matter and my rather limited budget being spent in response."

On Monday, Geoffrey Robertson QC had outlined the basis of the

defence case, which challenges the prosecutions on virtually every count. (The skeleton argument and other defence documents can be accessed [here](#).)

It challenges Ny's judicial authority to issue a European Arrest Warrant (EAW), arguing that its issuance is an "abuse of process" as no intention has been demonstrated to charge or prosecute Assange (it cannot be served without such intent), and that extradition is "disproportionate" given that the WikiLeaks founder has made clear his willingness to be questioned by various means from London. It further states that the claims against Assange of unlawful coercion and sexual molestation are not criminal acts in British law and that extensive press coverage of the allegations means Assange could not receive a fair trial. It warns that, if removed to Sweden, Assange might be extradited on to the US, where his involvement in WikiLeaks disclosures of US Embassy cables meant he could face the "real risk" of torture and even death.

In defending the validity of the EAW, Crown Prosecution Service legal representative Clare Montgomery stated on Monday that the Swedish authorities intended to prosecute Assange—a reversal of previous statements by Ny that no decision had yet been taken. No new substantive evidence was presented to explain this volte-face.

The defence charges that Assange is the victim "of a pattern of illegal and or corrupt behaviour by the Swedish Prosecuting Authorities". It queries the motives behind the decision to revive the allegations of sexual misconduct against Assange when Sweden's chief prosecutor, Eva Finne, had dropped the rape investigation due to lack of grounds in August.

Ny took over the investigation at the instigation of Claes Borgström, acting for the women. She had also confirmed to the media that Assange was the subject of complaints, contrary to Swedish law, "thus ensuring his vilification throughout the world."

Borgström is a leading Social Democratic politician and one of

the two women making the allegations is associated with the Christian wing of Swedish Social Democracy.

Retired Swedish appeal court judge Brita Sundberg-Weitman attacked Assange's treatment. In a written statement to Assange's counsel, she described Borgström as an "ultra-radical feminist" and said that Ny was involved in sexual politics in Sweden. She told the court that the prosecutor had "a rather biased view against men in the treatment of sexual offence cases."

On Tuesday, Sven-Erik Alhem, a former Swedish prosecutor, now legal commentator, continued his evidence for the defence. He said that Ny's decision to release Assange's name to the media was "completely against proper procedure".

The failure of the Swedish legal authorities to establish Assange's response to the claims before seeking his arrest was "quite peculiar", he said. It was a "golden rule" that a suspect should be able to respond to allegations made against them before prosecutors issue an EAW.

There was no reason that Assange needed to be extradited to Sweden for questioning, when that could take place in the UK.

Assange's Swedish lawyer, Bjorn Hurtig, gave evidence. He accused the Swedish authorities of leaking information to the media. Following Ny's decision to confirm the allegations against Assange on August 20, "The result was if you, a couple of hours after this happened, went on to the internet and entered Julian's name and 'rape', you got two to three million hits."

There was no way he could protect his client against the adverse impact of such prejudicial coverage, he said. Rape trials in Sweden are routinely held behind closed doors, with the public and press barred.

Hurtig said that he had been mistaken when he said Ny had

waited five weeks to interview Assange in Sweden—it had been three weeks. The prosecution had suggested that Assange had fled the country when he discovered he was to be interrogated. This was rejected by Hurtig, who said Ny had given permission for Assange to leave the country.

He explained the context in which the decision was made to interrogate Assange. It had been problematic to contact his client at one point, because he had had to go into hiding following "death threats" against him by some leading US politicians and media commentators.

Ny's announcement that she intended to question Assange was made on November 18. On November 29, WikiLeaks began releasing the US embassy cables. On December 1, the EAW was issued.

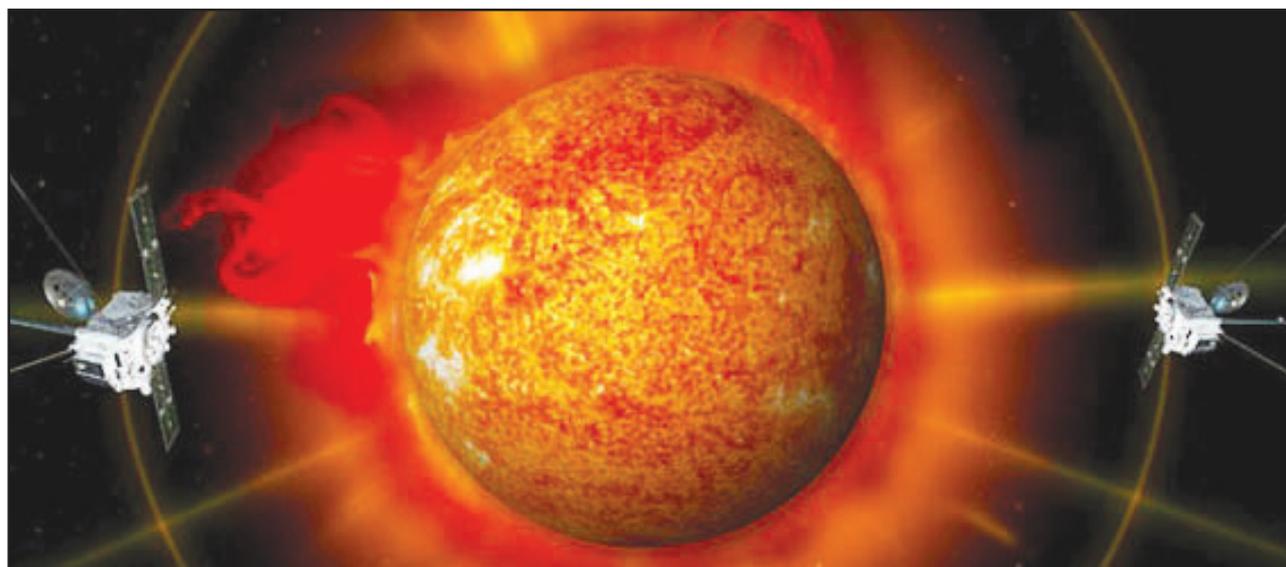
Hurtig said that he had never received the full text of the prosecution case against his client, but he had been allowed to view excerpts from it, including texts from Miss W (one of the two complainants).

"There was information in the text messages which was not good for the claimants. Regarding the rape, there are texts speaking of revenge, making money out of Julian Assange by having contact with the media and giving him a bad name.

"There was a text message saying that the woman who said she was asleep (during the alleged rape) was half asleep, which in my world is the same as being half awake."

In documents presented in evidence to the court, Hurtig said that Miss A (the other complainant) had posted messages on Twitter revealing her excitement at being in Assange's company, after he had allegedly assaulted her. She had also written a blog describing various means of getting revenge on an ex-lover. These suggested that the women "may have a hidden agenda, which casts serious doubt on their accusations and their trustworthiness", he said. **WSWS**

NASA unveils 1st ever 3D images of whole sun



This artist's illustration shows NASA's twin STEREO observatories. For the first time, the space probes are sending back images of the entire sun's surface.