

AP Interview: Tunisia PM to Crack Down on Violence
By Bouazza Ben Bouazza, Associated Press
13 March 2013

Tunisian lawmakers approved a new government Wednesday, and the new prime minister vowed the leadership will end violence upending the North African nation's bid to move from revolution to democracy with tough measures against religious radicals and others who resort to violence.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh said that respect for the law and for state institutions "will be our credo."

He said the new interior minister, Lotfi Ben Jeddou, will take firm measures in coordination with the military to end crime on all levels, including arms trafficking across Tunisia's border with Libya. He did not elaborate on the measures.

"Restoring security is a vital question to establish confidence among Tunisians and incite investors to relaunch the economy," said Larayedh, who is from the dominant moderate Muslim party, Ennahda. A resurgence in radical religious activity has followed the political rise of Ennahda.

Tensions rose sharply with the killing of an opposition leader last month who was a vocal critic of Ennahda. The startling attack set off riots around Tunisia and plunged it into political crisis.

"We will act with great firmness against anyone who breaks the law or tries to impose his ideology or model of society by force by inciting hate and murder or treating others like unbelievers," the prime minister told The AP, making a direct reference to radical Salafists.

The easy approval of the new government was overshadowed by the death of a young street vendor who set himself on fire in apparent desperation over his failure to find a steady job, an act that reminded Tunisians that many of the economic disparities that led to the ouster of their longtime president two years ago remain unresolved.

The new prime minister pledged immediately to reduce violence and boost the economy.

"I hope that we all understood the message" about poverty and unemployment in the young man's action, he said after the confidence vote in the Constituent Assembly. In the balloting, 139 legislators voted in favor of the new government, 45 against and 13 abstained. Ennahda lawmakers have the most seats in the assembly.

Tunisia has struggled to stabilize since the overthrow of authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 in an uprising that prompted revolts around the Arab world. The Tunisian uprising began with protests in support of a street vendor who had set himself on fire to protest corruption, repression and unemployment.

Islamist party Ennahda dominated Tunisia's first free elections, but has come under criticism for not cracking down on violence by religious extremists and for failing to revive the economy.

In a concession to the opposition, Larayedh named a new government that includes several respected figures not aligned with any party.

"We deal with all those committed to peace, but we will face with the necessary rigor all those who practice violence in public places, on social networks or in mosques," he said in the interview. He said that this tough approach does not mean compromising human rights or freedom, "the main gains of the revolution."

International human rights groups had routinely accused the toppled Tunisian leader, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, of denying basic rights to Tunisians, including freedom of speech, while cracking down on political dissent and all suspected of religious radicalism.

Larayedh pledged earlier Wednesday to speed up work toward elections and a new constitution for Tunisia. The assembly president, Mustapha Ben Jaâfar, proposed setting the elections for Oct. 27.

The United States noted a somewhat improved security in Tunisia and said in a new travel warning Wednesday that it is boosting staff at the U.S. Embassy in Tunis after ordering most non-essential employees to leave last year. Still, it said U.S. government personnel have limited ability to reach travelers or provide emergency services throughout the country "because of the unpredictability of the security situation."

The overarching challenge for Tunisia's new government will be improving the economy. Unemployment is 17 percent — and higher among young people — and inflation at 6 percent.

Joblessness appeared to be a driving factor behind the move by street vendor Adel Khedri to set himself on fire on the main thoroughfare of the Tunisian capital on Tuesday.

Khedri, a 27-year-old whose family moved from a poor town in northwestern Tunisia to the capital in search of better economic prospects, had been struggling to find a steady job to help support his mother and five siblings, one of his brothers said on national television Watanya 1.

Khedri died of severe, full-body burns on Wednesday morning, said the director of the Tunis region's burn center, Imed Touibi.

© Associated Press, ABC News, 2013