



Saudi king admitted in hospital

TWO-YEAR-OLD FATALLY SHOOTS MOTHER IN US



TUNIS: Tunisian newly-elected President Beji Caid Essebsi (inset) arrives in his car for a handover ceremony with his predecessor Moncef Marzouki yesterday at the Carthage presidential Palace in Tunis. —AFP

88-YEAR-OLD ESSEBSI SWORN IN TUNISIA PRESIDENT
 LANDMARK EVENT MARKS FOUR YEARS AFTER ARAB SPRING UPRISING

TUNIS: Anti-Islamist Beji Caid Essebsi, 88, was sworn in as Tunisia's first freely elected president yesterday, four years after an uprising that triggered the Arab Spring. The election of Essebsi, a veteran of previous regimes, is seen as a landmark for the North African nation, where longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was toppled in 2011.

Essebsi's victory over outgoing president Moncef Marzouki capped Tunisia's sometimes troubled transition to democracy and has won praise from Western leaders. Essebsi told parliament after a swearing-in ceremony that he would be "the president of all Tunisians" and "the guarantor of national unity."

"There is no future for Tunisia without consensus among political parties and members of civil society," he said. "There is no future for Tunisia without national reconciliation." Essebsi also attended a handover ceremony at the presidential palace where he was embraced by the outgoing leader.

Marzouki, an exiled human rights activist during Ben

Ali's rule, was elected president at the end of 2011 by an interim assembly under a coalition deal with the then-ruling moderate Islamist movement Ennahda. Opponents have accused Essebsi of seeking a return to the era of Ben Ali, who clung to power for 23 years, combining authoritarian rule with a degree of prosperity and stability for his people.

During campaigning the new leader accused Marzouki of representing the Islamists, whom he says have "ruined" the country since the revolution, and many voters appeared to be seeking a return to stability. Following independence from France in 1956, Essebsi became an adviser to the country's founding father and first president, Habib Bourguiba, holding a number of key jobs under him and then Ben Ali.

He later returned to the public stage as a supporter of the 2011 uprising and served as prime minister briefly after Ben Ali's ouster while elections were organised for the interim assembly.

Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes movement, which won landmark parliamentary elections in October, includes many members of Ben Ali's old ruling party. Even so, the anti-Islamist lawyer has vowed a fresh start for Tunisia. Essebsi took 55.68 percent of the presidential vote in a December 21 runoff against Marzouki—the first time Tunisians have freely elected their head of state since independence in 1956.

Parliament speaker Mohamed Ennaceur described the oath-taking ceremony as "an exceptional moment in history". The revolution that began in Tunisia spread to many parts of the Arab world, with mass protests in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

In every country except Tunisia the revolution was followed by violent turmoil or, as in Syria's case, a devastating civil war. Essebsi and the new government will face major challenges. Tunisia's economy is struggling to recover from the upheaval of the revolution and there is a growing threat from militants long suppressed under Ben Ali.

Essebsi said it was his duty to address economic problems "to realize the promises of the revolution: dignity, employment, health and regional equality."

One of Essebsi's first tasks will be to instruct his party to form a government with a prime minister able to command a majority in parliament. His party failed to secure an absolute majority in the October polls, winning 86 of 217 seats. Ennahda, which came second, has not ruled out joining a governing coalition. Tunisian newspapers urged the new leadership to uphold the dreams of the revolution. "All the vicissitudes of history during the past 40 years show the importance of respect for human rights," *Le Temps* said.

It said there was "no question of backtracking on respect for freedoms". *La Presse* said Tunisia's experience showed that "democracy is compatible with Arab-Muslim culture". It added: "Now we must demonstrate that this democracy can be turned into economic opportunity and prosperity." — AFP

GAMBIAN PRESIDENT HOME AFTER FAILED COUP

BANJUL: Gambia's iron-fisted ruler Yahya Jammeh returned home overnight after a failed coup launched while he was outside the country, a military source said yesterday, as fears mounted of possible reprisals by his regime. A group of heavily armed men led by an army deserter attacked the presidential palace in the capital Banjul before dawn on Tuesday, but were repelled by Jammeh's forces. Forces loyal to Jammeh, who has ruled the small west African country for 20 years, killed three suspects including the alleged ringleader identified as Lamin Sanneh, according to a military officer.

Jammeh, who had been on a private visit to Dubai since the weekend, went directly to the presidential palace where he was shown the damage caused by Tuesday's attack and bodies of the slain assailants, the source told AFP from Bissau. The 49-year-old strongman made no public comments but his demeanour was stern and some men "appeared to be nervous", the source said. "People were told to be vigilant."

The source said there were fears that Jammeh, who himself seized power in a coup in 1994, may launch a purge. The coup

bid "has exposed some flaws in the military system even though the attackers were repelled. Some officers are certain to be singled out."

Major risk of repression

Jammeh claims to have foiled a succession of coup plots and has come under fire for serious human rights abuses, including repression of the media and the disappearance of rivals.

A Dakar-based researcher, Gilles Yabi, warned of a "major risk of repression extending beyond the military figures involved in the coup attempt". "There are fears the regime could take advantage of the situation by blaming people who had nothing to do with it", Jammeh, a former head of military police, has ruled the largely rural nation of some 1.8 million people since 1994, when he came to power in a coup that toppled founding leader Sir Dawda Jawara. The United States and Britain voiced concern about the coup attempt in The Gambia, which left the Commonwealth group of nations in 2013 accusing London and Washington of lying about its human rights situation.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon called for a probe of the failed coup as the Security Council met to discuss the turmoil. Ban also urged the government, security and defence forces in Banjul to "act in full respect of human rights." Banjul, a small tropical city which lies on an island in a river leading to the Atlantic Ocean, was tense but calm yesterday, but there were many soldiers and police on the streets.

"Soldiers armed to teeth are still patrolling the streets of Banjul. Some are on foot and some are on board vehicles," resident Fatu Sall said. Public offices, banks and shops were open for business after closing on Tuesday while public television and radio, which went off air briefly after the coup bid, were operating again. "Contrary to rumors, there is peace and calm in the country and people are advised to go about their normal businesses. We are praying for peace and tranquility to continue," state radio said late Tuesday, quoting a government statement. Ordinary people were reluctant to speak out about the situation for fear of reprisals by the formidable National Intelligence Agency. — AFP



GAMBIA: A giant billboard of Gambia President Yahya Jammeh sits on an empty street in Banjul Gambia yesterday. — AP