

Cables From American Diplomats Portray U.S. Ambivalence on Tunisia

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Cables from American diplomats in [Tunisia](#) portray a deepening ambivalence toward the rule of President [Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali](#), expressing alarm about popular resentment of the blatant corruption of the country's first family but also gratitude for Mr. Ben Ali's cooperation against terrorism and the stability he long imposed.

Those cables, from the cache obtained by the anti-secrecy organization [WikiLeaks](#) and made public in recent weeks, helped fuel the anger on the streets that culminated Friday with Mr. Ben Ali's flight after 23 years in power. Posted on a site created last month called Tunileaks, the diplomats' disgusted and lurid accounts of the kleptocratic ways of the president's extended family helped tip the scales, according to many Tunisian commentators.

"What's Yours Is Mine" was the wry title of a June 2008 cable reporting the brazen habits of the president's clan.

"Corruption in Tunisia is getting worse," the cable said. "Whether it's cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali's family is rumored to covet it and reportedly gets what it wants," the cable said, reporting that two nephews of Mr. Ben Ali's had seized the yacht of a French businessman in 2006.

While the cable recounted routine demands for bribes by low-ranking government workers (the cost of a traffic stop, one Tunisian said, was up from 20 dinars to 40 or 50, or about \$28 to \$34), it said the flagrant thievery at the highest levels was most worrisome.

"Although the petty corruption rankles, it is the excesses of President Ben Ali's family that inspire outrage among Tunisians," the cable said. "With Tunisians facing rising inflation and high unemployment, the conspicuous displays of wealth and persistent rumors of corruption have added fuel to the fire."

Another cable, from July 2009, reported a "lavish" dinner of the American ambassador, Robert F. Godec, with Mr. Ben Ali's son-in-law, Mohamed Sakher el-Materi, in his beachfront home in Hammamet. There was "staff everywhere" and "ancient artifacts everywhere: Roman columns, frescoes and even a lion's head from which water pours into the pool," the cable said. The dinner included a dozen dishes, including ice cream and yogurt flown in from St. Tropez on the French Riviera.

"El Materi has a large tiger ('Pasha') on his compound, living in a cage," the ambassador reported. "He acquired it when it was a few weeks old. The tiger consumes four chickens a day.

(Comment: The situation reminded the ambassador of [Uday Hussein](#)'s lion cage in Baghdad.),” the cable added, referring to a son of [Saddam Hussein](#).

The ambassador called the opulence of the evening “over the top,” saying that his hosts’ “behavior make clear why they and other members of Ben Ali’s family are disliked and even hated by some Tunisians.”

“The excesses of the Ben Ali family are growing,” he added.

Some cables report how the “quasi mafia” of the country’s ruling family muscled its way into the management of Tunisia’s most profitable bank and how Mr. Ben Ali demanded a 50 percent share of a private university.

Others, however, make it clear just how much United States officials, preoccupied with the threat of terrorism in many other Muslim countries, valued Mr. Ben Ali’s cooperation and ability to maintain order.

An upbeat August 2008 cable giving [Condoleezza Rice](#), then the secretary of state, a survey of Tunisia before a visit reported that “Tunisia styles itself ‘a country that works’ .” The writer added, “While Tunisians grumble privately about corruption by the first lady’s family, there is an abiding appreciation for Ben Ali’s success in steering his country clear of the instability and violence that have plagued Tunisia’s neighbors.”

The cable reported not only Tunisia’s successes against terrorists but also its progressive social ways, calling it “a model for the region on women’s rights.”

Tunisian activists associated with the independent blog [Nawaat.org](#) (the core, in Arabic) created the TuniLeaks site on Nov. 28, the same day WikiLeaks, along with The New York Times and other news organizations, began posting the first of 251,287 confidential diplomatic cables the organization had obtained.

The Tunisian government subsequently tried to block access to the site, but the striking details of the cables circulated on Tunisian Web sites, adding to the ferment against Mr. Ben Ali.

On its [Twitter](#) feed, WikiLeaks has highlighted reports of its reported role in encouraging the Tunisian uprising. Foreign Policy magazine tagged the end of Mr. Ben Ali’s rule “the first WikiLeaks revolution,” and while that may be an overstatement, the cables’ role in what [President Obama](#) lauded Friday as “this brave and determined struggle for the universal rights” underscores the awkward dilemma the WikiLeaks cables have posed for the administration.

Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) has been pressing an “Internet Freedom” initiative, emphasizing the power of the Web to expose injustice and promote democracy. But at the same time, the Justice Department is conducting a criminal investigation of WikiLeaks and its founder, [Julian Assange](#), including using subpoenas to try to obtain the private Internet activity, credit card numbers and bank account details of Mr. Assange and his associates.