

French prime minister faces scandal over all-expenses paid Egyptian vacation

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On Tuesday, French Prime Minister François Fillon admitted that he had spent his Christmas holiday with his family in Egypt, paid for by President Hosni Mubarak's regime. Egypt has been rocked for three weeks by a mass uprising.

The PM's office issued a statement Tuesday, preempting the publication on Wednesday of revelations in the French satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné*, saying that Fillon was making this information public "in the interest of transparency." It confirmed that "François Fillon, his wife and children, were provided with accommodation by the regime and used a government plane provided free by Cairo for an excursion for the whole Fillon family to Abou-Simbel. He similarly went on a boat trip on the Nile."

His vacation at a Nile resort in Aswan lasted from December 26 to January 2. The statement also pointed out that Fillon met Mubarak in Aswan on December 30, less than a month before mass protests broke out in Egypt on January 25.

The revelation about Fillon's holiday came shortly after revelations that Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie and her husband, also a government minister, had spent their Christmas vacation in Tunisia. They used a private jet and stayed at a luxury hotel belonging to a rich businessman with links to ousted Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. While they relaxed at the expense of their billionaire host, a popular uprising against the Ben Ali dictatorship was under way, in the face of brutal state repression. (See "French government embarrassed by its ties to North African dictatorships")

Since Alliot-Marie's travel scandal was revealed, Fillon has defended her and opposed calls for her to resign.

The ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) is totally discredited due to its social austerity policies. Successive revelations of corrupt ties between French politicians and Middle Eastern dictators are deepening popular hostility to France's political establishment.

Responding to the embarrassment of the French political elite, President Nicolas Sarkozy asked the members of the government to focus on France for their holidays. He said, "Invitations to foreign countries will be authorised by the prime minister in accordance with the diplomatic office of the Republic's presidency, in order to study their compatibility with France's foreign policy."

Implicitly admitting that corrupt ties to dictatorial regimes are commonplace among leading politicians, he added, "What was still common practice some years ago can shock today."

When the social uprising broke out in Egypt, the French government, as well as the bourgeois "left" opposition, expressed phoney criticism of the Mubarak regime over its repression of workers protesting for decent living standards, democratic rights and against dictatorship. The repression has caused the deaths of at least 300 people.

The author of the *Canard Enchaîné* article, Brigitte Rossigneux, said on France 24 TV: "How can you ask for the departure of a head of state and have a critical view of his regime when you are beholden to him?"

The PS has long backed dictatorial regimes in North Africa on behalf of French capitalist interests.

The French ruling class has long maintained ties with the dictatorial regimes in North Africa in order to protect its imperialist interests. It has provided necessary logistical and military support for those regimes to carry out police-state measures to keep the working class on low wages and in miserable living conditions.

It has been reported that last October French police officers provided training to Egyptian security forces in crowd control. Shortly after the uprising began, according to the prime minister's office, France suspended sales of arms and riot police equipment to Egypt including explosive material, mostly teargas grenades. However, France authorised the export of such products for the Tunisian security forces in November last year and January, until after the departure of Ben Ali.

When Alliot-Marie's travel scandal broke out, the official bourgeois left opposition, the Socialist Party (PS) and its satellite allies such as the French Communist Party (PCF) and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) made cynical calls for her resignation.

However, this time, they have adopted a different attitude—excusing Fillon and saying that his vacation did not take place during the Egyptian uprising, whereas his foreign minister Alliot-Marie had been in Tunisia when the protest movement against Ben Ali had already begun.

PS deputy René Dosière, a specialist in transparency in public life, told the *i-Télé* that Fillon's situation is “very different” from that of the foreign minister. He said: “Fundamentally, it's almost a question of professional ethics, but as far as concerns his trip, there has been no deviation.”

Jean-Marc Ayrault, the leader of the opposition PS group in the National Assembly, who had previously called for the resignation of Alliot-Marie, told RTL radio: “François Fillon did not commit the error of going to a country shaken by riots, unlike the minister of foreign affairs.” He added: “Concerning what happened with him, it's a mixing of different activities, between a private holiday and public business.”



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