

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 29, 2011 5:33 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: Tunisia secular, Islamist students clash on campus (Reuters)

Alarming.

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Wednesday, November 30, 2011 3:06 AM
To: NEWS-NEA; NEWS-Mahogany
Subject: Tunisia secular, Islamist students clash on campus (Reuters)

TUNIS (Reuters) - Hundreds of Islamists demanding segregated classes and the right for women to wear full-face veils at university clashed with secular students near Tunis on Tuesday in the latest flare-up between the two camps.

Since Tunisia ousted its leader in the first "Arab Spring" revolution this year, the country has seen mounting tensions between secularists who have traditionally held power and Islamists whose influence has been growing.

What began as a protest by Islamist students at Manouba university near Tunis soon degenerated into fighting, said witnesses.

The clash came a day after Islamists besieged a building at the same university, holding students and professors hostage in a protest over the same issue.

"We do not want to clash with anyone," one bearded Islamist said while his fellow protesters waved banners and shouted "God is greatest" at the university on Tuesday.

They also demanded a prayer room at the university.

"We want respect for a student's freedom to wear a veil like other students," he added, referring to the niqab, which covers a woman's face, leaving only a slit for the eyes. Students in Tunisia are only allowed to wear headscarves that do not cover the face.

Secular students responded to the Islamists' chants by singing the Tunisian national anthem. No one was seriously injured in the scuffles.

"I cannot believe what I see," said one secular student who gave only a first name, Sabine.

"What we see is similar to universities in Afghanistan ... Is this their idea of freedom?"

In the country's first democratic election, Tunisians last month elected a coalition government led by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party. That party has promised not to impose strict Muslim rules on society and to respect women's rights.

But a small contingent of Salafists, hardline Islamists not associated with Ennahda, have been trying to

overturn secularist laws.

Many Tunisian secularists, a group that has dominated the political landscape since independence from France half a century ago, fear that their freedoms will be undermined.

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