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Andrew Chung

MONTREAL—Tunisian Canadians in Montreal are working at a furious pace to help bring members of the ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's family to justice.

As Montreal lawyer of Tunisian origin Kamel Balti begins to take steps to pressure Ottawa to freeze Ben Ali's assets in Canada, a fundraiser Sunday night degenerated into name-calling, dividing those with ties to the Ben Ali regime, and everyone else.

The fundraiser for a group called Ma Tunisie (My Tunisia), begun by a group of Tunisian-Canadian youth to aid development in post-revolution Tunisia, began as a buffet, with music and good spirits.

But soon after, some in the audience started pointing out members of Ben Ali's RCD political party, and workers at the Montreal consulate.

"They called them traitors," said Ma Tunisie spokesperson Meriem Ben Romdhane, 26, whose group is apolitical. "They were told they weren't welcome."



Meriem Ben Romdhane, left, and Houda Jribi, members of a new group called Ma Tunisie (My Tunisia), are working to aid development of post-revolution Tunisia. A fundraiser Sunday night exposed divisions in the community when it descended into name calling. (Jan. 24, 2011)

Andrew Chung/Toronto Star

Montreal's Tunisian community, the largest in Canada, has been active since before Ben Ali decided to flee his country in the wake of mounting protests against joblessness and massive corruption.

Since then, it has accelerated efforts to do what it can to support the revolution from here.

That's no small effort, since Montreal is clearly a favoured landing strip of the Ben Ali clan.

Many were scandalized after learning some members of the leader's family arrived here last Thursday — at least one with a permanent residency visa. He's believed to be a brother-in-law of Ben Ali and his family.

Balti is working on files to take to Attorney General of Canada so the government can ask a judge to freeze the assets of family members.

Ottawa did not respond to requests for comment about freezing assets.

The dictator's son-in-law, Sakhr El Materi, owns a mansion in the tony Montreal enclave of Westmount. El Materi, who's married to Ben Ali's daughter Nesrine, bought the house for \$2.5 million in 2008. It's currently uninhabited and undergoing renovations.

Family members also opened bank accounts in Canada and deposited money, said Abdeljelil Ouanès, president of the Canada-Tunisia Chamber of Commerce in Montreal. "So they have liquid and non-liquid assets in Canada."

On Monday the Paris prosecutor's office began an investigation into the Ben Ali assets in France. Swiss authorities had earlier ordered a freeze on funds held there by Ben Ali.

"When I see France, and (President Nicolas) Sarkozy, a friend of Ben Ali, taking a position against him, I see that Canada must do the same," Balti ventured.

Balti also wants to know the names of those who arrived in Montreal last Thursday, so he can ask the government to revoke those who have permanent residency status.

Though federal immigration officials would not discuss Ben Ali's case for privacy reasons, they confirmed that permanent residency status can be revoked if a person falsely represented themselves when they applied for permanent residency.

The Ben Ali family had become increasingly intolerable for average Tunisians, especially after WikiLeaks published U.S. diplomatic cables on the scandalous opulence and corruption.

Among the observations: At El Materi and his wife's flew in ice cream from St. Tropez to their beachfront home in Hammamet, Tunisia. El Materi also kept a large tiger called Pasha, which ate four chickens a day.

Several dozen family members have already been arrested the Tunisian authorities.

The U.S. on Saturday said it had "revoked the diplomatic visas" of former government members and their families.

"Why hasn't Canada done the same?" Ouanès wondered. "They're going to take the money out of Canada and take it to Argentina or who knows where? If Canada doesn't act, then it becomes an accomplice."

Ben Romdhane said there is a kind of witch hunt for sympathizers of the Ben Ali regime in Montreal.

But said she understood and supported the sentiment.

People used to be afraid to denounce the regime to others in the community, fearful that person might be a regime sympathizer. There could be repercussions all the way in Tunisia.

"There was a fear of others," she said. "So trust in the community needs to be rebuilt."