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Tunisia

A government in continuity... but capable of retaking the initiative

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This interview with Ahlem Belhadj was conducted by Jan Malewski, on March 16th, 2011.

Mobilisations of some hundreds of thousands of people have finally brought down the Ghannouchi government. A new interim government has been formed by Béji Caïd Essebsi. What does this government represent?

The second Ghannouchi government, even if it got rid of some former RCD ministers, kept others. It represented continuity with the old regime. On February 24 there was the movement that we call here "Casbah 2"âEuros" there were more than 300,000 people demanding that Ghannouchi go. On February 27 Ghannouchi and the other RCD ministers resigned.

The kasbah, the left, the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, the regional committees for the defence of the revolution âEuros" everybody demanded a "technocratic" government to lead the country "administratively". But in my opinion the far left committed an error in demanding a "technocratic" government. The January 14th Front made the mistake of not advancing the demand for a workers' and popular government.

This is a "technocratic" government in appearance only, because it is led by Béji Caïd Essebsi, a former minister under Bourguiba, an ex-diplomat and ex-president of Ben Ali's parliament, even if it is true that he said "no" to him. Today his government has come to satisfy the popular demand for a Constituent Assembly which breaks with the old regime. He has dissolved the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD, the former ruling party). At the same time, it is a government completely in continuity on the economic and social; levels, even more than continuity, because it is still more linked than its predecessors to US and French imperialism. The satisfaction of the popular demands appears then as a gain, but what kind of Constituent Assembly will it be whose election would be supervised by such a government? There lies the whole problem!

The government has also announced the dissolution of the security service, Ben Ali's political police.

They first announced that this service consisted of 200 persons! Then they understood that this wouldn't stand, so they came up with other figures. The known figures indicate that the body of the police comprised 120,000 officers, today they tell us it was 50,000, The situation remains fairly opaque at this level, what is it that has been dissolved? What remains? We don't know!

He also announced the dissolution of Ben Ali's party, the RCD. What has become of it? What has happened to the many branches of this party which managed the country?

There are many former-RCD branch offices which are used by the popular committees or by the UGTT or by the self management committees or revolutionary committees. Only the central buildings have been taken over by the state. There were also 12,000 full time employees working for the RCD. Some of them have resumed their functions, at least where they have been accepted, because in many places the people have not allowed them. If the RCD has been dissolved, it has now led to the emergence of three parties, around three of its "personalities" who have requested and have obtained the recognition of these "new" parties. It amounts to a continuation of the RCD.

Are the banned political parties now recognised?

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There are now 49 parties recognised and the list is going up every day. The Parti communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie (PCOT - Communist Workers' Party of Tunisia) was recognised two days ago. The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (LGO - Workers' Left League) has not yet requested official recognition, but it is on the agenda.

So far as the election of the Constituent Assembly is concerned, what are the discussions inside the left, in particular inside the January 14th Front? Is there a stress on the control of the future elected representatives in this Constituent Assembly by the popular committees, or are we witnessing more an electoralist impulse, with each party trying to have "Its" representatives that is to say bending before a form of institutionalisation?

The two trends exist even if currently there is a push towards institutionalism. At the same time there is the emergence of revolutionary councils in the regions and in the different localities. There are many things being done at the level of self-organisation because the municipalities have been dissolved and the councils, self proclaimed by the people, are in the position of managing local affairs. At the same time, at the central level, to counteract the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, there has been the creation of the "Higher Committee for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, for Political Reform and Democratic Transition" âEuros" already its name expresses fully the difficulty of attributing a clear mission to it. On this "Higher Committee" 71 persons have been nominated, of which 17 represent associations and 12 political parties, while 42 are individuals.

Is it an attempt at coordination or centralisation of the local revolutionary committees?

Not really because there are very few representatives of these local committees inside it. There are one or two people who are directly linked to such committees and at the same time there is the representation of the different parties recognised until now, there is the UGTT and the associations as well as the individuals who have a certain influence in their neighbourhood.

The left is present on this "Higher Committee" which means that the decision to boycott it or not is more difficult to take, because some think that the left has perhaps the possibility of acting so that this body is not completely institutionalised and cut off from the rank and file, that it could influence this "Higher Committee" so that it has links with the local revolutionary committees. Some people on it are from the left or far left.

The great difficulty also relates to the fact that the parties which make up the January 14th Front did not go collectively âEuros" as the Front âEuros" to discuss this proposal. Some groups, factions or parties agreed to be there independently of others and three parties are represented there officially. The first debates inside this commission concerned the representativeness of its members and the debates are still ongoing.

Are there attempts at a national coordination or a national congress of the local self-organised committees? Or a discussion on this subject?

The National Council for the Protection of the Revolution to some extent plays this role of coordination of the local committees. But it has been weakened by the setting up of the "Higher Committee", whose creation has to some extent the aim of replacing it. The main constituents of the National Council âEuros" the UGTT, the Lawyers and League for Human Rights âEuros" have gone over to the "Higher Committee". Thus, right now, there is no longer a legitimate national leadership of the revolution.

The January 14th Front which met yesterday âEuros" even if it was not able to make a clear decision on its presence on the "Higher Council" âEuros" adopted a communiqué requesting a meeting of the National Committees so as to decide together, But we know that the leadership of the UGTT has already decided, that the Lawyers and the League

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for Human Rights will also join this "Higher Committee". In my opinion the battle for a coordination of the structures of self-organisation will be again perhaps possible at the level of this "Higher Committee" but it is far from being settled, because one senses that the pressure of electoral institutionalism is already strong. In short, it is a time when confusion is great. One is pushed to be part of the "Higher Committee" because the National Council is ceasing to exist.

I think that that in the future it will be necessary to lead a fight both within the "Higher Committee" and outside it and that pretty soon it will become clear that it amounts to an attempt at instrumentalisation, with the aim of counteracting the whole dynamic of the revolution which until now escaped the institutions.

Where did the initiative for the creation of the "Higher Committee" come from?

It came as a response to the request of the National Council which wanted to be recognised by the president and to have the prerogatives of legislating - by agreement with the central leadership of the UGTT, which did not consult the unions on this question. For more than a month that there has been no broad meeting of representatives of the structures of the UGTT, which would have been able to decide on its policy. Thus inside the UGTT there has been no possibility of discussing this orientation.

What should be done now so that the revolutionary committees which exist locally can structure themselves at the regional and national level? What can be done so that at a given time there can be a national meeting, controlled from below, and not a meeting of those who have been named as "leaders"?

That is effectively the difficulty, because the danger is that the many people who take on responsibility for self-organisation at the rank and file level leave the "high politics" to others. With the announcement of elections on July 24 the Constituent Assembly "àEuros" whether by a majoritarian or proportional mode of election "àEuros" the dynamic of self management is undermined. Maybe in this intermediary period "àEuros" between now and July 24 "àEuros" the committees of self-organisation can play the role of link between this debate which starts "from above" and what the self-organised masses are discussing. In any case that is the current issue.

I am a member of one of these local councils in the governorate where I work. For the moment this debate is very embryonic there. The discussions of the council concern above all immediate questions and there is no discussion on what seems to be too abstract: the Constitution, political life. What interests and motivates people is what they can do. For the moment they are not thinking about how to go from there to the question of coordination of the councils.

Are there forms of workers' control developing in the factories?

For the moment not really. There are some experiences, in the enterprises belong to families linked to Ben Ali, where the workers have found themselves without any management "àEuros" they have fled "àEuros" and have taken responsibility for the management of these enterprises. There have also been quite a few farms which have been taken over by the workers, who have expelled those to whom Ben Ali's government had given these state properties. Around 80 big farms are involved. By way of example in one of these farms there are some 500 people if you included the employees and the members of their families. So there is a form of collective management of these farms. In the educational structures also, in many places, there has been the election of those who direct them "àEuros" rather than them being named from above. In public transport there has been a big strike to change the chief executive who was a member of the RCD. But this is not very generalised.