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Algeria

“It’s time for the left forces to come together”

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This interview with Mahmoud Rachedi, general secretary of the Parti socialiste des travailleurs (Socialist Workers’ Party – PST) was conducted by Mohand Aziri and appeared in the newspaper “El Watan” on June 3, 2012.

In its declaration of May 1st this year, your party called for the constitution of a trade union and political pole. You advanced the idea of a “left platform”. Can you identify the left forces with which you would unite? And what would be the basis of this “platform”?

The appeal in question is not intended solely for political forces but for all partisans of the socialist project, trade union and associative activists, all individual or collective left activists. Why such an appeal? Because we have noted, well before this electoral campaign, that there is an expectation on this subject. Even if at the level of the popular masses, of the workers, there is a kind of lack of interest, a disaffection for political activism and political action is discredited. This is due to a certain number of factors: but it does not amount to collective resignation. Algerians feel themselves betrayed by their élites, abandoned in the neoliberal disaster.

This is not resignation; how do we know? This extraordinary vitality of the social front, to the point where it would be difficult for any office of statistics to count the number of strikes, social movements, riots. Nonetheless, this vitality has not found a political expression, nor is it reflected by political demands. This concrete situation dictates this initiative to us. It is time for the advent of such a pole. When we see the international context marked by sharp, structural economic and financial crises; when we witness the death throes of the world capitalist system; when we see popular revolts spread across the region, one cannot obviously think that calling for a rallying of left forces is anything other than opportune. What is that we propose, concretely? We think that this social movement with its forces, its trade unions, this rich magma, should get around a table, discuss, reflect and jointly elaborate a left platform.

It is a project that we should, in our full diversity, appropriate for ourselves. Thus, we define ourselves in a common framework, even if we each remain with our own specificities. The goal being to be able to act together and not remain stuck in professions of faith. This platform is not an end in itself: mutual interactions are allowed and the Algerian left can, when the right time comes, proclaim a common political framework of the “big” popular left party type. We should for future generations build this pole. The context obliges it and the stakes of the moment leave us with no other choice.

Apart from the trade unions; when you evoke the left forces, one thinks of parties like the FFS which recently declared itself in favour of privatisation, and/or the PT. Is an alliance with parties of this type envisageable?

The PT is different: it is not in favour of privatisation. This is not true of the FFS. And also the MDS which has taken rightist positions on certain economic questions. But is that the case of the MDS collectively? I don’t think so. The PT is anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist. Also, the fractures and cleavages of the 20th century no longer interest us, and in this recomposition of the left that we would desire, there is no longer any USSR, no longer Maoists or Trotskyists or Stalinists and so on.

In substance, your project is to build a “big” left party, a sort of “Algerian” version of the NPA (the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste), or the Front de gauche in France?

What we want to build is specific to us, to Algeria. This pole should be built taking into consideration our roots, our history. The NPA is an experience conducted in a context which is not ours and it has the balance sheet that we know of today. We do not want to have an approach of copying. The approach is intended for those who identify with the struggle against neoliberalism, with a socialist, class based project. That will not stop us from participating in other fronts of the democratic type, for defence of liberties and so on.

For a number of Algerians who have known the experience socialism has not left many good memories. How would you try to restore this ideal in line with the tastes of today?

Understand us well: we are talking about socialism, not Communism. I can witness from my own experience during the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections last May, in Hassi R'mel, Laghouat, Béjaïa and so on: the line we took received an incredible amount of support. In fact, those who say that socialism is dead and buried in reality only recycle the propaganda which prepared the ground for neoliberalism. But today, we can speak very well of a crisis of capitalism, not socialism. Outside the socialist alternative, a rational, scientific, objective and historic response, I can see no other. Now, the discourse on the “end of history”, the death of the socialist model and so on can no longer hold water.

The history of struggles continues. The fall of the Berlin Wall sounded the death knell of Stalinism, of a certain model of socialism. This model has certainly failed, but the socialist ideal has not. And if socialism is not a model which is superior to capitalism in the area of freedom, it is certainly not socialism. Freedom has always been a basic question. We are talking of freedom for the majority, not the freedom of the new emperors, the powers of money, finance as we see them today in the Cevital case where the boss of the group, who built his empire with public money, is allowed to dismiss with impunity workers who have dared to demand a trade union section, decent wages and meal allowances.

Socialism means a society without class discrimination; it is men and women who will construct it together, with their own experience and engagement. It is a project where private property will not have the upper hand but rather collective ownership; an economy oriented towards the needs of human beings and not the opposite or worse, oriented to satisfy the needs of the market or of a minority of possessors. But as such, socialism is a distant project; in the immediate, we fight for a minimum wage of 35,000 dinars, secure status for all precarious workers; we fight for the unemployed to have a job, or failing that a payment equal to half of the minimum wage. And if the authorities are incapable of offering work to all Algerians, that they lower the age of retirement to 55, which would free 500,000 posts at a stroke; that they lower the working week to 35 hours. Also, we have 200 billion dollars of reserves invested in the FED. Why can't this money, which serves the purposes of the US economy, be used to settle our problems here?

You are one again participating in a flawed election process: you justify your participation by the desire to gain a hearing (from these elections). Does the PST, a party which has revolutionary pretensions, the heir to the Groupe communiste révolutionnaire (GCR), not risk losing its soul thereby?

Yes, we have participated in four parliamentary elections and missed out on participating in a presidential election because of a lack of sponsors. We didn't lose our soul for all that. On the contrary. We believe that elections in capitalist systems, depend on the power of money. In the USA, before every electoral campaign, only money is spoken of. Is this democratic? When Papandreou wanted to organise a referendum in Greece around the austerity measures dictated by the EU and the IMF, he was fiercely criticised. In short, that is their democracy, which consists in rushing to secure the civilians of Benghazi threatened by Gaddafi, while some months previously the civilians of Gaza were bombed with phosphorus by the planes of Tsahal which took off from the US base in Qatar, and this did not move the Western democracies.

Doesn't your participationist approach conflict with the revolutionary character of the PST?

We have always said that we use elections as a tribune. Electoral campaigns are of such a nature, at least, as to arouse an interest in political debates. It would be counterproductive not to take part, to get a hearing for our voices and proposals. It is about raising consciousness. That is what we do, even with few resources.

The Arab revolts have not pushed left forces to the forefront. Unlike some countries on the American continent where workers’ parties have come to power, in the Arab-Muslim world, the Islamists have advanced. What explains this setback?

Islamism has appeared as a possible alternative and has profited from the defeat of Arab nationalism. It amounts to an identity based inflection. World imperialism has relied on Islamism because on the basic questions it is an objective ally. In Libya, Sharia, which some wish to apply, has arrived in the NATO airplanes. To come back to your question, the left is identified with Arab nationalism and, historically, the defeat of Arab nationalism, Nasserism, Baathism, has not resolved the question of oppression. We remain oppressed nations.

Indeed, in Algeria, our current was constituted in 1974, in opposition to the Boumedienne regime. For us, Boumedienne was not “ichtiraki”, a socialist, otherwise we would not have opposed him. The fact that at the mass level the defeat of Arab nationalism was identified with socialism renders the confusion inextricable. We have all the same been anti-Stalinist activists. The very essence of the Fourth International, founded in 1938, was a response to the degeneration of the Soviet Union. But at the scale of the masses, confusion is inevitable: you get identified with the big categories and identified with the defeat of these models that we have fought. Today it is about building the socialism of the 21st century.

Precisely, the rehabilitation of the historic role of the left activists of the “Fourth International”, their contribution to the struggle for national liberation, does not appear in the official history. Has the time come, in your view, to rectify that?

Absolutely. Left, far left activists have not been given their just credit. Although their contribution was undeniable, at the very birth of the national movement in the 1920s, with the Etoile nord-africaine (ENA) emerging in the workers’ movement under the “Third international”, the Communist International, has suffered and still suffers, from the ostracism of official histories. It was indeed Abdelkader Hadj Ali, pioneer of the Algerian revolutionary movement, a Communist activist from the very start – and who doesn’t appear in the official history – who trained Messali Hadj and introduced him into the trade union milieu, inside the CGTU notably, and so on. Later, after the Second World War, the Fourth International gave unambiguous support to the struggle of the peoples for their emancipation from colonialism. Michel Pablo, one of the leaders of the Fourth International even became an adviser to President Ben Bella after Algerian independence.

We should also highlight, rehabilitate the determinant role played during the war of liberation by activists in the “maquis rouges”, in the constitution of support networks – the Jeanson network for example – the arms factory built in Morocco by the Fourth International, and I don’t know how many other examples.