

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3939>



Tunisia

“Normalization” underway in Tunisia

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV482 - March 2015 -

Publication date: Friday 27 March 2015

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On February 5, 2015 the Tunisian parliament elected on October 26, 2014 gave a vote of confidence to the new government with an overwhelming majority of 81.5%. This major turning point in the political life of Tunisia takes place in a context of economic crisis and social tensions as demonstrations and strikes spread.

A government to try to bury the revolution

The profile of the key members of government summarizes its function: try to “close the revolutionary parenthesis opened on January 14, 2011”.

Overseeing it all, the president of the Republic Beji Caïd Essebsi, founder in 2012 of the Nidaa Tounes party: a kind of republican monarch, responsible for all the important decisions. Minister of Defence and of the Interior under Bourguiba, he embodies above all the desire to maintain the bourgeois order. A function that he particularly filled in 2011 as prime minister, from February 27 to the end of December.

Under his direct orders is the Prime Minister, Habib Essid, who participated in the Ben Ali and Essebsi regimes as well as that of the Islamists. A former magistrate, the minister of the Interior has also been a zealous servant of the regimes of Ben Ali and Ennahdha.

Symbolizing the “historic compromise” between the neoliberal “modernists” of Nidaa and the Islamists of Ennahdha, a ministry has been granted to Zied Laïdhdhari, the spokesperson of Ennahdha. He is flanked by three secretaries of state of his party.

Embodying a certain continuity with the Ben Ali regime, this government also contains three ministers from the UPL party led by the dubious operator Slim Riahi and three ministers from the ultra-neoliberal Afek Tounes party. This government has a total of 42 members, a little less than half officially representing political parties: Nidaa (19%), Ennahdha (9.5%), UPL (7.1%), Afek Tounes (7.1%) and FSN (2.4%). The other ministers are listed as “independent”.

About the new government, a few comments from the Tunisian left

– The press release of the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers’ Left League – LGO) of December 28, 2014: “The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (LGO) refuses to participate in the government of the parliamentary majority, not only because of the alliance scheduled between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes with the participation of the Islamists in the government, but especially in terms of rejection of the economic and social program hostile to the interests of the broad masses as was found in the disastrous budget recently adopted by the Assembly. The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière refused to grant its confidence in the expected governmental composition because its program and its components will only work to restore the old regime in its major choices and orientations. The LGO calls upon the members of the Front populaire to move away from the logic of the imaginary political polarization between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha within and outside of Parliament”.

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- Hama Hammami (Parti des travailleurs (Workers' Party) and spokesperson of the Front populaire (Popular Front)): “Some people accused in cases of terrorism and assassinations are part of the Essid government. Activism continues in order to reveal the truth around the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi, as well as the truth concerning the affairs of terrorism and the martyrs of the revolution”.
- Zied Lakhdhar (Parti des patriotes démocrates unifiés (PPDU – Party of United Democratic Patriots) and Front populaire): “In the sharing of ministries, where there is not a representative of Nidaa Tounes there is a representative of Ennahdha or of a political formation close to this party, as if through a desire to keep closed some of the shadier files of the Troika in the areas of agriculture, equipment, industry, health and areas of the state. For this, each minister of Nidaa Tounes was flanked by a secretary of state from Ennahdha or close to the party, such as health, agriculture, and so on”.
- Mbarka Brahimi (Courant populaire and Front populaire): “In substance and form, this government represents an alliance between the neoliberal forces, personalities from the former regime and the remnants of the Troika”.
- According to Maghzaoui (Mouvement du peuple), the Tunisians are victims of a deception on the part of Ennahdha and Nidaa: “Throughout their election campaigns, they presented themselves to the voters as enemies whereas today they find themselves side by side within the same government”.
- In the opinion of Fathi Chamkhi (LGO and Front populaire): “Whether they call it “modernism”, Islamism or frankly neoliberalism, they are only in fact differences of facade. They know it very well! None of them truly has a program, still less a project for this Tunisia which has rejected austerity and neo-liberal restructuring, and which continues to refuse to bear the costs of it. What counts for them is to convince the real masters of Tunisia, namely foreign capital, that they represent a viable alternative to the former dictatorial regime. It goes without saying that they are pursuing its neo-liberal policy, without worrying about the right of Tunisians to dispose freely of themselves. Their differences of facade are disappearing. It's the end for Nidaa's calls for the broad alliance of democrats for the defence of “civil society” against the “Islamist threat”, which have enabled it to build and then to win the elections. The end also of the discourse of the Islamist party on the need to defend the revolution against the representatives of the former Ben Ali regime. Once the election is over, the masks have fallen. It's time for the “sacred union”. It is clear that the various expressions of the counter-revolution prepare themselves, by joining together, to go on the counter-offensive against the working classes and the youth who demand a better life and a future”.

The new minister of the interior is considered to be a symbol of the desire for “normalization” of the new government. For Kalthoum Kannou of the Association of Magistrates of Tunisia, the appointment of Mr. Najem Gharsalli as minister of the interior is “the worst choice that Habib Essid could make”, because he “has played a role under the dictatorship in the harassment of honest judges”. In the opinion of Ahmed Seddik (Baath Movement and Front populaire), “The new minister of the interior in the government of Habib Essid, Najem Gharsalli is not authorised to handle the dossier on political assassinations. Najem Gharsalli was involved, under the former regime, in serious violations of human rights, particularly with regard to the infringement of the rights of magistrates in assembly and expression as well as his attempt to overthrow the legitimate structures of the Association of Magistrates of Tunisia”. Mbarka Brahimi said: “Najem Gharsalli has been designated to ensure the safety of the Tunisians, but we cannot trust him knowing that it will be difficult for him to discover the assassins of the martyrs Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi”.

Concerning the economic and social policies of the government, Fathi Chamkhi says: “The train has already started! It continues in the same direction without outcome, while trying to go faster. Specifically, the government wants to continue the implementation of the second structural adjustment plan dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, as well as the new free trade agreements with the European Union. The social holocaust will continue, which is likely to lead again to an explosive situation”.

The “historic compromise”

After having spent their time demonizing each other for nearly three years, Essebsi and Ghannouchi (respectively chairmen of Nidaa and Ennahdha) got serious in the aftermath of the second round of the presidential elections. The premises of a final alliance between Nidaa and Ennahda were in fact visible since summer 2013: in the aftermath of the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi the presidents of the two parties went to Paris for a secret meeting. Subsequently, other meetings had followed. A second index of this orientation was Ennahdha’s failure to submit a candidate for the presidential elections against Essebsi, and its advocacy of “neutrality” during the vote. In acting thus, the Ennahdha leadership opened the door to participation in the future government.

Certainly, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha have long been opposed on some topics such as the relationship between religion and the state, or on the rights of women and their place in society. But each of the two parties had made the observation that unable to eliminate the other as demonstrated by the results of the legislative elections: despite its unpopularity following two years in power, Ennahdha won only 7.8% fewer deputies than Nidaa. On the economic and social levels nothing fundamental differentiated them. And obviously, what united them was more important than what divided them. Such a rapprochement between the two fraternal enemies was naturally made under the benevolent eye, indeed more or less friendly pressure, of the major powers and international institutions.

The only thing that had prevented the two old foxes from implementing too quickly this project of “historic compromise” was the problems that such a policy was likely to cause in their respective parties. Both needed time to limit the damage. Simultaneously, the leaders of the two parties tended to their respective bases to reassure them and improve their reciprocal relationship of electoral forces prior to the parliamentary elections.

The choice of the king

A large part of those who had voted for Nidaa Tounes at the parliamentary elections, and then for Essebsi at the presidential election saw this choice as an effective way to “get rid once and for all of Ennahda and its ally Marzouki”. They have paid the price. For Nidaa, the participation of Ennahda in the government has been difficult to swallow, particularly among women. Fathi Chamkhi explains: “many, especially among those who voted for Nidaa, feel betrayed by this alliance which has returned to the government the Islamists that they wanted to remove, by voting for Nidaa. The argument for the “useful vote” against the “Islamic threat” had allowed Nidaa to siphon the votes of several parties, as well as a portion of those of the Front populaire”.

According to a Nidaa leader, nearly 80% of the members of this party were in mid-January opposed to the participation of Ennahda in government. The same was true of 90% of the Executive Bureau. But Essebsi decided to the contrary and on February 5, only one member of Nidaa opposed the vote of confidence in the government including the Islamists. In acting thus Essebsi wanted to have the votes of Ennahdha who, with 69 members, represent 32% of the Assembly. He hoped thus to shelter his parliamentary majority from the mood swings of its different components, all the more so in that:

- A majority of two-thirds will be necessary to pass certain laws to be implemented in conformity with the Constitution passed in January 2014;
- The government will have to be strong enough to face the social mobilisation aroused by the implementation of neo-liberal measures dictated by the IMF and the World Bank.

Why the Ennahdha leadership backed Essebsi

If the leaders of Ennahdha have decided to give allegiance to Essebsi, who they had previously fiercely fought, it is above all because the Islamists wanted to absolutely keep a place, however modest, inside the executive. In doing so, they intend to protect themselves against the fate suffered by their Egyptian cousins. They hope also to perpetuate the many jobs in the administrations they have provided to their clientele during the two years they have been in power. Being in government should also facilitate the stifling of at least a part of the abuses to which they are linked: multiple assaults by Islamist militias, repression of the uprising in Siliana, the attack on the national headquarters of the UGTT, the assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi and so on.

The price to pay for such a reversal is high in the ranks of Ennahdha. A large part of its members and of its electorate wanted to vote for a candidate of the party at the presidential election. They rejected the position of “neutrality” and actively campaigned for Marzouki. Fathi Chamkhi commented: “Ennahdha helplessly witnesses the narrowing of its electoral base. Its ideological discourse, which had enabled it to win the elections of 2011, is falling apart. After its failure in power, its alliance with Nidaa has lost it any credibility in the eyes of broad layers of the popular classes who had fallen, three years ago, under the charm of the Islamist ideology”.

Some historic figures, like the former secretary general and former Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, have left. But, finally, no member of Ennahdha refused to vote confidence in the government. During the vote of confidence on February 5, the parliamentary opposition comprised 18.6% of members:

- 9.3% representing the left-wing opposition to the government: essentially the Front populaire, the Mouvement du peuple (Nasserite), the MDS deputy and the independent deputy Adnen Hajji. All voted against confidence in the government,
- 4.9% originating from the “troika” in power in 2012-2013: the CPR of Marzouki and the Courant démocratique (a split from the CPR) who voted against confidence; and the dissidents of Ennahdha who abstained.
- 2.5% of Nidaa dissidents: one of them voted against confidence, the other abstained.

The position of the Front populaire

This coalition, which operates by consensus, comprises most of the left and Arab nationalist forces. It was set up in autumn 2012 on the basis of the rejection of the policies of both Ennahdha and Nidaa. In the wake of the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi (one of the national leaders of the Front), on July 25, 2013, the Front nevertheless participated in an ephemeral National Salvation Front alongside Nidaa Tounes. The Front has nevertheless subsequently managed to successively meet several tests:

- Refusal in January 2014 to vote confidence in the government which succeeded that of the Islamists of the CPR and the social democrats of Ettakatol;
- Reaching a consensus on the heads of list for the legislative elections of October 26;
- Increasing by 2.5 the number of its deputies in the Assembly;

- Then increasing its vote in the first round of the presidential elections by a magnitude of 2.4 in relation to the votes obtained in the parliamentary elections;
- Affirming the need to fight both Nidaa and the Ennahdha-Marzouki duo (in power in 2012 and 2013), contrary to the supporters of “anyone but Ennahdha and its ally Marzouki”;
- Fighting the austerity budget and refusing to vote for it in the assembly;
 - Refuse to vote confidence in a new government, or participate in it.

Reaching a consensus on these various points was not inevitable in advance given the heterogeneity of the Front, the different political trajectories of its components, some mistrust inherited from the past and the memories of the explosion of the first experience of regrouping following January 14, 2011. Politically, the challenge to the Front was simultaneously to:

- Not become a satellite of Nidaa;
- Defeat the manoeuvres of Nidaa who wanted to justify their reversal by claiming falsely that it was the refusal of the Front populaire to be allied with them which forced them to turn toward the Islamists to constitute a majority in Parliament;
- Adopt a discourse understandable to that part of the electorate and those militants of the Front that supported a vote for Essebsi in the second round of the presidential election, as well as for abstention - or even a yes vote - during the vote of confidence in the future government. After a long internal debate, the Front’s refusal to participate in the government and vote for confidence in it was based on three additional arguments:
 - The rejection of the presence of representatives of Ennahdha;
 - The rejection of the presence of powerful symbols of the old regime;
 - The incompatibility between the program of the Front and that of the new government.

On Thursday February 5 by voting unanimously against confidence in the new government, the Front populaire asserted itself as the pivot of the left political opposition to the government.

An assessment of the first phase of the Front populaire

In an interview on February 8, Fathi Chamkhi said: “In a situation of serious social crisis, having 15 members out of 217 (or less than 7%) is not enough. I regard this as a defeat. We are well behind Nidaa (86 members) and Ennahdha (69 members). The Front populaire is even behind the UPL (16 members)... Certainly, the score of the Front populaire could have been worse given its organizational shortcomings, its weaknesses of analysis of the concrete situation, its wavering policies and its repeated hesitancy. The fact of being trapped by Nidaa, after the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi in July 2013, into the National Salvation Front (FSN) was an error. This is very clear today. Nidaa has derived great political benefit, thanks to its manoeuvres within the FSN, and then the way the eviction of Ennahdha from power took place in January 2014.

“The negative impact of the tactical errors of the Front populaire and its lack of strategic clarity have been mitigated by the attitude of its political opponents. In a certain way, the Front populaire was saved by them on several occasions. There has been, for example, an intense debate within the Front around the question of electoral alliances: a part of the Front favoured a “useful vote” and a broad electoral alliance against Ennahda. Nidaa finally helped to resolve that debate by deciding to run alone in the elections. The same thing took place concerning the vote of confidence in the new government where the Front gave the impression of hesitating about its participation in the government alongside Nidaa. At the same time, Nidaa was much more tempted by an alliance with Ennahdha. It is true that a minority current, within Nidaa, was opposed to this alliance with the Islamists and wanted to reinforce its position by seeking a rapprochement with the Front. But, in the end, Nidaa opted for the alliance with Ennahdha”.

“What is positive is that even if the Front populaire has made mistakes, it has managed to overcome them. Now, all the forces having voted confidence in government will try to isolate the FP. But the FP has sufficient resources to tighten ranks, improve its organization, deepen its ideas and advance its own solutions. I remain optimistic about its future, even if it is not decided in advance. The situation is difficult, but the FP showed that it could manage its tensions and correct its mistakes. It has gained in maturity, even if weaknesses still remain at the level of its analyses. The Front has in its ranks activists with the skills and experience necessary to formulate a coherent and understandable project. It should not limit itself to acting at the level of Parliament, but take its full place in the mobilisations against the social and economic crisis that the country is going through”.

The projects of the new government

The government headed by Nidaa Tounes wants Tunisia to fully resume its place in the policies desired by the foreign and Tunisian investors, the European Union, the United States, the World Bank, the IMF, and so on. In continuity with previous governments, the new regime intends to:

- Continue the repayment of the foreign debt, accompanied by drastic cuts in social spending (for example on health, education and so on);
- Develop free trade in the agricultural sector, services and public contracts, which has impoverished millions of Tunisians, in particular in the deprived areas of the interior;
- Lower taxes on company profits, leaving a gaping hole in state revenues;
- Privatize companies confiscated from the Ben Ali clan;
- Continue the compression of social expenditure by reducing subsidies to staple goods;
- Impose “social order” in the major workers’ centres, in particular the mining basin as well as in private sector firms where trade union structures were created in the wake of the revolution.

A new cycle of struggles?

After having been in part overshadowed for a long time by the bipolarization between neoliberal “modernists” and neoliberal Islamists, the social question has returned to the first level. Workers in stable employment are today “very

affected by the deterioration of their purchasing power. They are really in the process of becoming poorer. Their priority is purchasing power, the cost of the schooling of children and then of the aid to provide them with then when they are unemployed graduates, and so on”, says Abderrahmane Hedhili. He continues: “It is manifest at the level of the rate of participation in strikes. Previously, we reached figures between 60% and 90%. Now, it is often 100%, such as for example among teachers or in transport. Never has the rate of strikers have been so high”.

For 2014, at the end of October the total number of strike days had already exceeded the record figure of 2011. Since then, numerous strikes have taken place; the level of mobilization is such that some have been triggered without respecting the obligation of filing of notice provided for in the legislation. This has for example been the case in public transport in Tunis and in some regions.

Also “the most precarious are those who work in the shipyards, many of whom earn less than the minimum wage, or again the unemployed graduates, and the unemployed non-graduates that we seldom talk about but which are much more numerous. This category will not sit idly by. They have waited for four years in the hope of a roadmap taking into consideration their situation. But there has been nothing”.

Evidence of this is the effect of the strikes of precarious workers in the mining basin. Symbolizing the convergence between these two sectors of the population, significant mobilizations were held, particularly in the deprived areas of the south of the country, including local general strikes. In this area, the attitude of the UGTT will play a decisive role. In 2012 and 2013, its national directorate had been mainly absorbed by its desire to ensure a smooth departure for the Ennahda government. Hence its motor role in the establishment of the consensual framework leading in January 2014 to the adoption of the Constitution and the establishment of the provisional government of “technocrats”, charged notably with preparing for the elections. This policy was accompanied by good neighbourly relations between the UGTT and the employers' federation, UTICA.

Now that the political objectives that the UGTT leadership laid down have been for the most part achieved, it remains to be seen how its internal relationship of forces will evolve, between those who do not want to “obstruct” the new government in the name of the “national interest” and those who consider that the resolute defence of workers' interests remains the basis of trade union action.

It also remains to be seen how the political, associative and trade union left will insert itself in the struggles and meet the expectations of those who have been among the main engines of the revolution: the youth, the unemployed, workers, women and the poor of the interior of the country. The same is true concerning the defence of liberties (which are to this day the only real achievements of the revolution) and the environment. The essential remains today to work among the masses to stimulate their organization and awareness, in order to meet the needs of the new cycle of struggles that will be played out above all at the social level.