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Tunisia

The Congress of the LGO and the tasks of revolutionaries in Tunisia

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Having come to power following the October 2011 elections , the government led by Ennahdha has lost all legitimacy. The same goes for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), which was elected to write, in a maximum period of one year, a new constitution. Nearly two years have passed and it is still just a draft. Placing itself in the continuity of the neoliberal policies of Ben Ali, the Islamist government is a total failure on the economic and social level.

It is also directly involved in the development of political violence and terrorism: it did not hesitate to open fire on the population of Siliana (at the end of November 2012), it was involved in the repression of the demonstration on April 9, 2012 and the attack on the headquarters of the UGTT (on December 4, 2012) and then the murder of the leader of the Popular Front Chokri Belaïd (on February 6, 2013).

With the murder of a second leader of the Popular Front on July 25, the problem of "kicking out" those in power was posed on a mass scale as an immediate issue.

Nidaa Tounes, candidate to govern

Nidaa is a neo-liberal party formed in June 2012, around the figure of the former regime Beji Caid Essebsi ("BCE"), who was also Prime Minister from March 2011 to the end of that year [1]. Nidaa Tounes wants to get rid of Ennahdha, but without breaking, any more than Ennahdha, with the neo-liberal policies that have been in force since the days of Ben Ali. There can be found in Nidaa a section of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie that is attached to secularism, former leaders of Ben Ali's party, as well as small currents from the centre-right or centre-left. Nidaa Tounes is in coalition with a party of the centre-right and three small parties with more or less distant origins on the left [2]

With 24.4 per cent of voting intentions, in late September Nidaa was six points ahead of Ennahdha.

Building a left alternative

The parties who come from the Marxist-Leninist (the Workers' Party, formerly called PCOT, the PPDU, the Revolutionary Watad) or Trotskyist (LGO) traditions, came together in October 2012 under the name of Popular Front with several Arab nationalist parties, the Green Party, the association RAID (ATTAC and the CADTM) and "independents", in other words, those not belonging to any party.

Rejecting both the religious (and neo-liberal) Ennahda government and the neo-liberal Nidaa Tounes, the Popular Front has become the third political force in the country. But it is still far from having as much influence as the two main forces: 7.5 per cent of voting intentions in late July (and only 4.6 per cent at the end of September)./

On the other hand the Front includes activists who have for a long time been playing an important role in trade unions and associations, as well as in mobilizations.

The debates within the Popular Front

Completely involved in the mobilizations that followed the assassination of Brahmi, the Popular Front demanded the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. It also called for mobilizations to kick out the representatives of the central government in the regions.

But the only party capable of forming a government in the present electoral framework remains Nidaa Tounes.

Faced with this situation, the Popular Front had put forward, since October 2012, the demand for a provisional government of "competent people", that is to say, a government whose members would have no responsibilities in the various parties and who would undertake not to stand in the forthcoming elections.

But the disproportion in terms of forces between the coalition led by Nidaa and the Popular Front exerts a constant pressure on the Popular Front to ally with Nidaa in the name of the urgency of driving Ennahdha from power.

It was in this context that, by successive steps, a reconciliation took place between the Front and Nidaa. A turning point occurred in the aftermath of the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, with the creation of the National Salvation Front, among whose components were the Popular Front and Nidaa Tounes, and also the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET), the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC).

Since then, both in Tunisia and in Tunisian emigrant circles abroad, members and sympathizers of the Popular Front have expressed concern, doubts or disagreements with the policy implemented by the Popular Front, which had largely based its identity on putting Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes on the same level.

For some, the constitution of the Salvation Front represents Nidaa coming round to ideas that have been developed by the Popular Front for a long time. In their view, this would enable the Popular Front to increase its audience and develop mobilizations, particularly through "kicking out" government representatives in the regions.

For others, the formation of the Salvation Front has the opposite effect and would on the contrary enable Nidaa, in which leaders of Ben Ali's party have found a second home, to increase its audience and to make the Popular Front its satellite.

This debate was at the heart of the congress of the LGO from September 27-29.

Congress of the LGO

Formed just after 14 January 2011 , the League of the Workers' Left (LGO) held its founding congress from 27 to 29 September. The LGO is a member of the "Popular Front for the achievement of the goals of the revolution", set up almost a year ago as a third pole in relation to Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes.

In this Front, the LGO finds itself alongside numerically much more important organizations such as the Tunisian Workers' Party of (formerly called the PCOT) and the Unified Party of Democratic Patriots (Unified Watad).

Despite its modest size, the LGO has activists who have played an important role, in clandestinity during the police dictatorship of Ben Ali and in the first almost three years of the revolution. Some of its members are very well known in the country, such as Ahlem Belhadj , president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), Fathi Chamkhi, spokesman for RAID (ATTAC /CADTM) and Nizar Amami, union leader of the postal workers of the UGTT confederation.

The opening session was addressed by most of the national leaders of the Tunisian Left and by the widow of Mohamed Brahmi, murdered on July 25, as well as representatives of the NPA, SolidaritéS (Switzerland) and the LCR (Belgium).

For its part, the UGTT was represented by a member of its national leadership and several middle-ranking leaders.

The conference itself took place over the following two days, with an average of forty voting delegates, in the presence of observers from the PST (Algeria), the NPA, SolidaritéS and the LCR.

There was discussion of a document on the political situation, an organizational document and a programmatic document. Moreover, already close to the Fourth International, the LGO also decided to ask to become a full member party. The core of the discussions revolved around the Salvation Front , which the LGO decided to leave by a majority of 81 per cent. At the same time, the Congress decided to enhance the action of the LGO to build and radicalize the Popular Front as a class alternative to both the "modernist" liberals and the Islamist-liberals. An article on the debates over this question at the Congress is included in this dossier. A leadership was elected, including the different currents of opinion that were expressed during the debate on the Salvation Front.

Alain Krivine (NPA) and Jean Batou (SolidaritéS).

The central role of the UGTT

Founded in 1946, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), is the only trade union confederation with a real implantation. Matrix of the national movement during the colonial period, the UGTT has never limited itself to a role of protest: it considers that it has a right to examine the entire way in which Tunisian society functions.

The UGTT is not however a candidate for government and views itself as a counter-power. Its orientation, systematized in June 2012, is to foster the emergence of a consensus between all political and social forces, including Ennahdha. Consistent with this position, prior to the murder of Mohamed Brahmi, the UGTT did not call for either the resignation of the government or the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly.

On 29 July, it crossed one of the red lines fixed by Ennahdha by calling for the government to resign and for the setting up of a "government of national salvation ", composed of independent experts from different parties, a government that would absolutely have to fulfill a list of tasks within a fixed period of time.

But among the delegates who spoke at the National Administrative Commission of the UGTT on July 2, only about a third supported one of the key demands of the Salvation Front: the dissolution of the NCA. The result was to put the UGTT in a position that was halfway between the demands of the demonstrators and those of Ennahdha.

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Also in this position were Ettakatol (a social-democratic party which participates in the Troika that makes up the present government), the UTICA (employers' organization), the LTDH (Tunisian League for Human Rights), the Bar, etc.

Noting this, the member organizations of the Salvation Front gradually aligned themselves with the position of the UGTT and its allies. For its part, Ennahdha finally signed, on October 5, the "road map" of the UGTT which included the resignation of the government before the end of the month. Speculation is rife as to whether this process will be carried to its conclusion, or whether there will be a new manoeuvre of the Islamist party.

[1] Beji Caïd Essebi was Minister of the Interior and of Defence during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba and subsequently President of the National Assembly at the beginning of Ben Ali's period in power, in 1990-91

[2] For an overview of Tunisian political parties, see the article by Dominique Lerouge, "Legitimacy crisis and popular mobilization", published in issue 464 of *International Viewpoint*, September 2013.