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Tunisia

The question of power in the revolutionary process

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A revolution is usually defined as a time where simultaneously:

- Those at the bottom no longer want to “live as before”,
- Those at the top can no longer “maintain their domination in an unchanged form”,
- And this double impossibility leads to “the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny” [1]

If one adopts such a definition, the period in Tunisia between December 17, 2010 and January 14, 2011 has undoubtedly been a revolution. The wave started by the youth in impoverished regions of the interior of the country was quickly relayed by trade unionists often themselves closely linked to various associations. The result was the UGTT trade union federation coming out in favour of the struggle against the regime. Faced with the extension of the movement, Ben Ali was abandoned by critical sectors of the Tunisian bourgeoisie and imperialism. All this made it possible for Ben Ali to flee after 29 days with a relatively limited cost in human lives.

2011: An unfinished revolution

But the enthusiasm accompanying the beginning of this process has contributed to hiding two major weaknesses:

- A reduced self-organization;
- The inability of the left to propose an alternative policy.

This dual limit has made possible a rapid blocking of the revolutionary process by politicians from the former regime, as symbolized by the accession of a former minister under Bourguiba, Beji Caïd Essebsi to the post of Prime Minister on February 27, 2011.

In this framework, the bulk of the state apparatus remains unchanged, as well as the economic and social policies in force under Ben Ali. As Fathi Chamkhi, a member of the national leadership of the Front Populaire, writes: “bringing down the dictatorship is one thing, overthrow of the regime is another”. In autumn 2011, the balance sheet drawn by some of those who made the revolution smacks of bitterness: certainly, freedom of expression and organization have been established, but gradually the same policies are reappearing and there is no improvement in the living conditions of the population.

During the elections of October 23, 2011, half the population abstained (including many youth and potential left voters). Simultaneously some voters from the popular classes turned to the Islamists of Ennahda.

Installation of the Islamist regime

Following the elections of October 2011, the government headed by Ennahdha took office on December 24, 2011. Two small parties also participated in the government [2], hence the name of troika which was given to it.

For just over two years, Tunisians have faced:

- A creeping Islamicisation of society, with particularly attacks against the freedoms and rights of women;
- A use of mosques as a place of political propaganda and recruitment for the most extremist currents;
- A systematic infiltration of the state apparatus by Ennahdha;
- An acceleration of neoliberal policies;
- The development of state and para-state political violence through Islamist militias.

Three major political alternatives are emerging:

1) Essebsi proposes to return to power after the next election. He founded the party Nidaa Tounes for this purpose early in 2012, in which are found many veterans of Ben Ali's party as well as other activists from the centre or even the left;

2) The Front Populaire, constituted in October 2012, wants to be an alternative to Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. But the Front does not constitute a concrete immediate perspective: on the one hand, its approach does not rely on a process of self-organization, on the other it has limited forces, is not homogeneous and often has a hesitant approach.

3) The UGTT is not a candidate for power. It wishes however to compel the government of Ennahdha to relinquish power peacefully. On June 18, 2012, the UGTT proposed the search for a broad consensus between all political forces to achieve this.

Since none of these three possibilities is in a position to constitute an immediate alternative, the Islamists have had a free hand to tackle the popular resistance, the UGTT and the left:

- In November 2012, the police suppressed the popular uprising in Siliana [\[3\]](#);
- On December 4, 2012, the national headquarters of the UGTT was attacked by Islamist militias;
- On February 6, 2013 Chokri Belaid, one of the main leaders of the Front Populaire, was assassinated;
- On July 25, 2013, Mohamed Brahmi, a second national leader of the Front, was also murdered.

The departure of the Ennahdha government is an immediate requirement

The assassination of Chokri Belaid, on February 6, 2013, had already highlighted this slogan. But, Ennahdha had finally managed to benefit from it. Certainly, Prime Minister Jebali had ended up resigning on February 19, but on March 13, another Ennahda leader was appointed. Result: the previous policies continued to apply.

Faced with the incompetence of the government and the dissatisfaction of a growing part of the population, the Tunisian bourgeoisie began to wish for a departure of Ennahdha from power. The same went for the major imperialist powers who decreed at the end of June a financial embargo on Tunisia. This development was strengthened with the coming to power of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt on July 3, 2013.

Following the murder of Mohamed Brahmi on July 25, 2013, Ennahdha found itself completely isolated and its immediate departure from power was supported by a very broad majority within the Tunisian population. It remained to be known what force could replace the government headed by the Islamists.

A power based on the self-organization of the people is not specifically on the agenda:

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- Even after the murder of Mohamed Brahmi, no popular committee was really set up;
- The Front Populaire remains a heterogeneous force, hesitant and of limited size.

As for the more structured forces:

- Unlike in Egypt, the army is not a candidate for power,
- The same is true of the UGTT.

Faced with the absence of any other practical alternative, two groupings successively emerged:

- The first was formed on the morning after the murder of Brahmi under the name of the Front de salut national (FSN – National Salvation Front). It brings together the essential political parties opposed to Ennahdha - including Nidaa Tounes and unfortunately the Popular Front, as well as various organizations, including the UGET, the PDU and the ATFD [4]. The NSF wants to impose both the resignation of the National Constituent Assembly and the departure of the government, to be replaced by a provisional government which would take a series of emergency measures including the struggle against Islamist violence and the organization of the next elections.
- The second grouping is formed by four organizations, hence its name of the “quartet”: the UGTT, the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the Order of Lawyers and the employers' federation UTICA.

Unlike the FSN, this “quartet” wanted the replacement of the Islamist government to be a “government of technocrats” resulting in a “national dialogue” between all the forces, including Ennahdha, in continuity with what has been proposed tirelessly by the UGTT since June 18, 2012.

To achieve this, the quartet made a step in the direction of Ennahdha by not requesting the resignation of the national constituent assembly. But the latter in return must finish writing the new Constitution and vote on it before the end of the year. On October 5, 2013, after multiple delays, Ennahdha eventually decided to accept the demands of the “quartet”. The FSN then gradually fell asleep.

Political outcome of the “national dialogue”

On January 26, 2014, the new Constitution was finally passed by a national constituent assembly where Ennahdha held 41% of the seats. Contrary to what had been long feared, this Constitution did not represent any regression compared to that previously in force:

- No reference to Islamic law (sharia);
- No challenge to the legal status of women (Code of Personal Status).

Better, some advances are contained in the new Constitution, for example freedom of conscience, with a ban on religious authorities making it possible to physical eliminate someone by characterising them as an apostate (takfir).

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On January 20, the government Ennahdha gave way as planned to the government of “technocrats”. Most of the new ministers were very much related to international financial institutions and multinationals. They accelerated neo-liberal policies, and the international financial embargo was lifted.

Other symbols of the desire to ensure continuity with the past:

- The new Prime Minister Jomaa participated in the previous government,
- The former minister of the interior maintained his post,
- The Minister of Religious Affairs is a notorious Islamist,
- A former Ben Ali supporter received the portfolio of Justice, human rights and transitional justice.

The Front Populaire said: “The government of Jomaa is a government in which we refuse to vote the confidence. This government is not our government, even if we do not call today for its fall”. The measures on which the new government had been mandated have been gradually implemented: police and military actions against Islamist violence, challenging of some partisan appointments in the administration, political neutralization of many mosques, and organization before the end of 2014 the legislative and presidential elections.

Elections in autumn 2014 and their possible consequences

The legislative elections will be held on October 26, 2014 and the presidential poll on November 23, 2014. As regards the legislatures, a poll published in July 2014 indicated the following trends [5]:

- A significant decline for Ennahda, who nevertheless remained in second place with 22% of the votes (against 37% in 2011),
- A relative stagnation of the Front Populaire at 7%, which kept it in third place,
- In these conditions, Nidaa Tounes led with 45% of the votes.

If the vote reflected this poll, the government elected would be therefore led by Nidaa Tounes. Three orientations are imaginable for this party:

- Either limit itself to winning back an increasing number of veterans of the party of Ben Ali,
- Or revert back to its previous game of alliances by linking up with the parties of the centre from which it has distanced itself recently [6].
- Or be the pivot of a broad coalition including Ennahdha, a solution that seems to be favoured by at least some Western governments.

Whatever the formula, Nidaa Tounes and the great powers consider the period opened in late 2010 as a simple parenthesis that it would be appropriate today to close. The conditions seem to have been met for a neoliberal stabilization of Tunisia, rid of its dictatorial and Mafiosi aspects of the Ben Ali period.

It remains to be seen whether those who have been the driving forces of the revolution will be in a position to mobilize effectively against such a policy which makes no response to two of the main watchwords of the revolution of 2011: social justice and dignity. Faced with the constant deterioration of the material conditions of existence of the population, the attitude of the UGTT will be decisive:

- Will it avoid confrontation with the new government as well as the employers with which it has allied for more than a year to force Ennahdha from power?
 - Or will it make defence of the interests of employees the heart of its activity, as many of its activists demand?
- We also await knowledge of the situation of the Front Populaire in the aftermath of the elections

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Inasmuch as it is possible to rely on polls available in early July 2014, the electoral weight of the Front seems to have changed little since its proclamation on October 7, 2012:

- It has never exceeded 10% in the polls, even after the assassination of two of its leaders,
- The Front scored three times less than Ennahdha and six times less than Nidaa Tounes in the July poll.
- The Front Populaire could nevertheless have more than twice the number of deputies than the total obtained in 2011 by the organizations which formed it.

The post-election period will be a crucial period for the Popular Front. It should articulate:

- Its action within the institutions,
- Its ability to be useful to the development of the inevitable and necessary social struggles,
- The clarification of its orientation and its project of society,
- Its construction as an organization.

[1] Lenin, [“The Collapse of the Second International”](#); Leon Trotsky, [“History of the Russian Revolution” \(volume 1, Preface.](#)

[2] The Congrès pour la République (CPR) led by Moncef Marzouki and Ettakatol (ex-FDTL and current section of the Socialist International) led by Moustapha Ben Jafaar

[3] A medium-sized town in the interior of the country which had been paralyzed by a general strike demanding, inter alia, the departure of the governor

[4] The General Union of Students in Tunisia; Union of Unemployed Graduates; Tunisian Association of Democratic women

[5] *Business News* [“Législatives : Malgré l'écart, Nidaa Tounes et Ennahdha demeurent à la tête des intentions de vote](#)
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[6] The coalition Union pour la Tunisie (UPT), which was dominated by Nidaa Tounes has fallen apart. Its other members were the centrist party Joumhourî led by Ahmed Néjib Chebbi and three small parties of left origin – Massar (distant successor to the Tunisian CP), the PS (formerly PSG, a 2006 split from the PCOT), the PTPD (a Marxist-Leninist current which had refused to join the Front Populaire in 2012