

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3564>



Tunisia

Year Four of the revolution - results and prospects

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV475 - August 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 26 August 2014

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The revolutionary insurrection which shook Tunisia towards the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 allowed the popular classes and youth to drive out Ben Ali and to break his regime. But to get rid of the dictator is one thing. To cut down the economic and social system that sustained him is another.

1. To bring down the dictatorship is one thing, to overthrow the regime is another

Strengths and limits of the Tunisian revolutionary movement

After having for 23 years endured the neo-colonial dictatorship of world capitalism, the Tunisian people finally revolted. Starting from the centre of Tunisia, the revolutionary insurrection quickly spread to the remainder of the country, in particular the capital, Tunis. It took only 29 days to bring down the dictator.

The revolution had set as its central objective that of overthrowing the regime. But the latter resisted the popular attack well, in spite of the loss of its chief. The revolutionary movement, primarily spontaneous and lacking political experience, did not know how to integrate its actions and its various political initiatives in a perspective of a break with the dominant order. It finally let itself be "tamed" by the right-wing political parties. The trade union movement and, especially, the left, bear a heavy responsibility for this initial failure.

The trade union movement, under bureaucratic control. One step ahead, two steps back

The leadership of the powerful trade union, the UGTT, was, during the first two weeks of the revolutionary insurrection, openly hostile to this movement. As in 2008, at the time of the long revolt of the mining basin. The massive involvement of trade unionists in the revolutionary movement and the pressure which they exerted on the leadership of the UGTT, the increase in the number of the victims and, especially, the obvious incapacity of the regime to extinguish the blazing inferno, finally pushed it into the camp of the revolution. On January 11, it decided on a series of revolving regional general strikes. The area of Tunis was programmed for January 14. The leadership of the UGTT was far from suspecting that this day would be the last in the long reign of Ben Ali. The rallying of this leadership to the revolution allowed a speedy outcome to the confrontation with the dictatorship and, especially, limited the cost in human lives.

The left, weakness and divisions

In spite of its strong anchoring in the Tunisian labour movement, whose origins go back to the beginning of the 20th

century, its fight against all forms of colonialism and its involvement in the revolutionary movement, the Tunisian left could not play a decisive political role after the fall of Ben Ali. Which allowed the regime in power and the imperialist force to call upon the services of the old political leaders, then the Islamists, to contain the revolutionary wave and to stabilize the regime once again. Extreme division and the absence of clear political prospects explain the failures of the left, at a decisive moment of the class struggle in Tunisia.

Diversion of the party-state and the local big bourgeoisie

It was difficult to imagine a revolutionary insurrection in Tunisia in 2010 and still less the fall of Ben Ali. Of course social conditions were catastrophic, corruption general and the criminal control of the families of the palace of a layer of the economy almost total. However, the signs of an imminent social eruption were difficult to detect. On December 17, 2010, a dramatic event abruptly changed things. The protest of the parents of the victim of this drama, before the seat of the governor, marked the beginning of a movement of questioning of the system, which ended up igniting the whole of the country.

The regime did not expect such a general social revolt. The police force and the army were quickly overwhelmed by the extent of the movement, but also by its strong determination.

On January 14, towards the beginning of the afternoon, the principal avenue of the capital was occupied by an immense crowd. Tens of thousands of demonstrators massed spontaneously before the building which was the symbol of the dictatorship, the Ministry of the Interior. They chanted anti-dictatorship slogans for hour, before being violently dispersed by riot squads.

Ben Ali was finally abandoned by the local big bourgeoisie and imperialism. His party, which some weeks earlier had hundreds of thousands of members, disappeared into thin air. Ben Ali had only one option, to flee abroad, an option he took without hesitation!

The imperialist forces to the aid of the Tunisian regime

Beyond the weaknesses of the revolutionary movement, the errors of the left and the hesitations of the trade-union leadership, the Tunisian regime owes its survival in particular to the intervention and the multiform support of the imperialist forces. The local big bourgeoisie was in total disarray. The G8 meeting in Deauville at the end of May 2011, which discussed the "Arab spring", was only the visible part of imperialism's reaction and operations faced with the revolutionary insurrections which called into question the imperialist order in the Arab region.

Imperialist interference in Tunisia was reinforced. This is shown by the influence exerted by the embassies of the dominant states on the local political parties, and the quasi-total control of economic and social policy by the international financial institutions (IFI) and the European Commission.

2. The Islamists as provisional guardians of the regime

Ennahdha tested by power, in the face of popular demands

The revolutionary insurrection and the fall of the dictator created ideal objective conditions to begin a progressive transformation of Tunisian society. It was important for the popular classes to know which political force could do it? Many among these classes were attracted by the Islamist party Ennahdha, which enabled it to obtain a relative majority in the Constituent Assembly at the elections of October 23, 2011, with approximately 37% of votes cast; that is, 89 seats out of a total of 217. But for control, it needed more. It made a governmental alliance with two other parties, which totalled 49 seats, thus forming the Troika. Ennahdha, but also the parties which governed with it, were charged, in a democratic manner, with making this transformation.

However, the Troika, with the Islamists in command, preferred to be used as a relay for neo-colonialist plans and demands: by continuing the repayment of the debt of the dictatorship, by signing the complete and extended Free Trade Agreement, a veritable neo-colonialist treaty demanded by the European Union and by signing, with the IMF, a new plan, which increased budgetary austerity and neoliberal capitalist reorganization. In short, it continued, under radically different social conditions, the same policies which had led Tunisia to insurrection. The result was an extension and deepening of the crisis.

The Troika was trapped by its betrayal of the promises of social justice, a fight against corruption and demand that the criminals of the old regime are brought to justice. The Islamists and their allies knew that it was impossible to please both the torturers and their victims. But, their class nature, their political interests and their ideology could only push them into being the new servants of neo-colonialism. This experience showed, in an irrefutable way, the inability of political Islam to satisfy the social, democratic and national demands raised at the time of the revolutionary insurrection.

After a first chaotic period of government, the Islamists threw in the sponge, initially on February 6, 2013, following the assassination of Belaid, one of the leaders of the Front Populaire (FP). Then, definitively, on January 9, 2014, under the combined pressure of the street, the political parties of the opposition and the foreign powers. They put an end to 767 days of government of Tunisia by the Troika. A so-called "technocratic" government devoted to "national consensus" took over.

The Front Populaire: a difficult union of the forces of left and the Arab nationalists

The left and the Arab nationalists underwent a crushing defeat with the elections of 2011. Drawing the balance sheet from this failure, they formed, on October 7, 2012, the FP for the achievement of the objectives of the revolution. In spite of ideological divergences and a past of conflict, the principal constituents of the FP succeeded in preserving their unity, and even consolidating it ; the FP is from now on a political party in construction.

The Front is not homogeneous, far from it. It contains all the tendencies of the left and the Arab nationalist movement. For certain tendencies, these names no longer mean that much. The only catalyst of this composite political body is a very tense social reality, conflictual and deprived of a clear alternative vision.

The FP wants to be a force of progress, even a revolutionary force. Its tens of thousands of members are well anchored in the social, trade-union and revolutionary movement.

On the other hand, the leadership of the FP does not fully grasp the extent of its capital of confidence among the popular classes. Where it is necessary to act firmly, it still hesitates, doubts and imposes self-limitations. In politics there cannot be certainty on the results of a combat which one enters. But taking the initiative, striking first, often contributes to determining the outcome of the battle. The FP is currently the third biggest political force. It is preparing to take part in the next legislative and presidential elections, which will begin at the end of October 2014, under its

own banner.

Nida Tounès: recomposition of the neoliberal right

The Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD), the party of the former dictator, was dissolved on March 9, 2011. Since then, the attempts at regroupment of its former members have multiplied. Nida Tounès has been by far the most successful party, not only in terms of numbers, but also in attracting cadres from the democratic and trade-union movement.

Nida Tounès is the most popular party in Tunisia, according to the opinion polls, ahead of Ennahdha. Like the FP, Nida Tounès has decided to contest the next elections alone. Several signs indicate that they will agree with Ennahdha to govern together after the elections. Their agreement is total concerning the maintenance of the neoliberal capitalist orientation and social and economic policy. On the other hand, they diverge concerning the secularization of society and, more particularly, the rights of Tunisian women.

3. The “technocratic” government

Failure and disorientation of Islamists in power

The arrival of the Islamists in power, under the concrete conditions of Tunisia after January 14, was inevitable. That cost Tunisia very dear. However, sometimes misfortune is good! This unhappy experience made it possible for the toiling classes to test the ability of the Islamists to meet their legitimate social demands. The bankruptcy of the Islamists in power was total. That will certainly make it possible for Tunisian society to finally exorcise its demons!

One of the urgent tasks of the progressive social and political forces in Tunisia must consist, starting from experience, in contributing to the crystallization of the class consciousness of the Tunisian toiling masses. Concretely, it is necessary for them to fight so that the next elections are the opportunity to repair the serious errors of the past, and not a new attempt to restore the power of the dictatorship. That means having an electoral program which rests on two planks: political on the one hand, and economic and social on the other, with immediate and operative measures to reverse the current tendency.

The “national dialogue” of a “technocratic” government

The Troika was docile with respect to the injunctions of the imperialists. But to sign free trade agreements and accept plans for austerity and neoliberal reorganization are one thing, to apply them is another. Also, faced with the catastrophic effects of these measures, the Islamists started to worry about the degradation of their image, and the political cost that implied, while the international financial institutions and the European Commission continued to demand them ever more quickly.

Mission of the “technocratic” government: to deepen capitalist austerity and neoliberal reorganization

The capitalist forces finally decided to dismiss the Troika from power. Among the economic means used to achieve this goal was the financial embargo they started to apply as from June 2013. It ended only with the coming to power of the new government, in January 2014.

This emerged, seemingly, from the “national dialogue” which had been started, one month after the assassination of Brahmi, another important leader of the FP, on July 25, 2013, and the popular movement which followed this, to demand the resignation of the Islamists from power and the dissolution of all the authorities resulting from the elections of 2011. This government is supposed not to have links of interests with the political parties. It is also supposed to be the emanation of the national dialogue. Nothing could be less true!

It was concocted in the corridors of the foreign chancelleries, with the collaboration of the local big bourgeoisie whose interests are closely related to the interests of the transnational firms.

The majority of the members of the current government are executives in such transnationals, and the IFI. Their mission, to which they attend with devotion, consists in accelerating the execution of the agreements signed with the IFI and the European Commission.

4. What immediate prospects for the revolutionary process?

The coming legislative and presidential elections (October-December 2014)

Before leaving power, the Troika had the Constituent Assembly vote through a budget which deepens the austerity policy. But, a few days after this vote, popular opposition obliged the Troika to cancel part of the new tax measures which affected the incomes and purchasing power of the popular and middle classes. The extent of the movement also forced the leader of Ennahdha and head of the government, Larayedh, to resign.

The departure of the Islamists from power was greeted with great relief in the country. The new government enjoyed a favourable public opinion. Moreover, it enjoyed broad political support. It also had the support of the two large professional workers' and employers' organizations. Officially, it must meet the conditions necessary for the holding of the elections, supposed to mark the end of the democratic transition in Tunisia.

The technocratic government has built on this to make significant advances in terms of neoliberal structural reforms. However, it is advancing with caution with regard to the budgetary austerity measures. It was constrained to organize a “national economic dialogue” in order to guarantee a political cover for the program of austerity. But this dialogue did not succeed, in particular because of the reserves of the UGTT and the opposition of the FP to the raising of prices of basic needs products.

That forced the government to maintain the subsidies on basic commodities, while at the same time increasing the price of fuel, electricity and gas significantly. Lastly, the supplementary draft budget for 2014, which it has just presented to the Constituent Assembly, includes new tax measures and compulsory deductions on wages.

The straight line of the revolutionary process

Social tension has risen again because of these measures. At the same time, the political parties are plunged in negotiations and the search for alliances for the next elections. Only the UGTT remains vigilant in relation the policy of the government. It was opposed to the raising of fuel prices, and it also demanded negotiations on wages.

The popular classes feel again abandoned by the political parties, too concerned at the present time by the elections which approach quickly. The government seems to tread water on the very significant questions affecting basic needs products, while accelerating reforms in the areas of banking, the environment and finance, the investment code, taxation laws, and liberalization of agriculture, services and public contracts.

By way of a conclusion

The popular classes and youth succeeded, thanks to their revolutionary insurrection, in breaking their chains. But almost four years after the end of the dictatorship their living conditions are degraded. No improvement in employment or purchasing power is expected. The near future will depend on the result of the elections. The worst will be the return of the Islamists to government, the ideal will be an electoral victory of the FP.

Finally, the restoration of the old system is not very probable in the coming months. On the contrary, a new revolutionary victory is very possible. All will depend on the ability of the revolutionary movement to overcome its organizational weaknesses and equip itself with a programme capable of convincing the toiling classes.