

Tunisia: A groundswell against the Muslim Brotherhood

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For more than a month in Tunisia, the signal for battle has been given on all sides, amid increasingly serious political, economic and social tensions. The detonator of the current political crisis was the assassination on July 25 of Mohamed Brahmi, a member of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), leader of the Popular Current party [1] and a member of the leadership of the Popular Front [2]. Then the tension mounted even further after eight soldiers were brutally killed, four days later, in an ambush on Mount Chaambi, on the border between Tunisia and Algeria.

A trial of strength is taking place between, on the one hand, the government coalition (Troika), dominated by the Islamist party Ennahdha [3], which has a majority in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), and on the other, the National Salvation Front [4].

More than two and a half years after the revolutionary uprising that ousted Ben Ali from power, including nearly two years of Islamist government, all the signals are on red: the working classes are bearing the brunt of the effects of the crisis, youth has the feeling of having been “taken for a ride”, while bosses are threatening to shut up shop. Tunisia is in a bad way. Are the Islamists the only ones responsible for the current situation? Would their departure from power be enough to “correct the course of the revolution”?

Islamists tested by being in government

The victory of the Islamists in the elections to the NCA in October 2011 surprised no one. Their widely remarked absence during the revolutionary uprising did not weaken their audience among broad layers of the population, because of their reassuring religious discourse, their charity work in poor neighbourhoods [5], their promises to fight corruption and moralize politics.

There was also the absence of a progressive, even revolutionary force, able to counterbalance the influence of the Islamists. Only the trade union confederation (UGTT) was capable of combating the illusions that the working classes had in Ennahdha's promises of a better life and acting as a catalyst for the revolutionary process. The leadership of the UGTT was rather occupied looking for a broad political consensus, which would hasten the return of stability. The aim was above all to reassure foreign investors and European tour operators, to avoid plant closures and a drop in tourism, both major providers of jobs in Tunisia.

The elections did not only result in empowering the Islamists, they were also instrumental in making possible the neutralization of the masses as direct agents of social change in Tunisia and the transfer of political power to the NCA, which in turn passed it to the government of the Troika. The current

deadlock of the NCA is an opportunity for the working classes to regain their power to unblock the revolutionary process and to work for change which goes in the direction of their own class interests.

The popular mandate was a double-edged sword for the Islamists: it gave them the legitimacy to govern, while at the same time demanding of them concrete and immediate results in terms of improving the living conditions of the majority of the population. The extent and severity of the social crisis, the demands and expectations that resulted from it, pushed the masses to consider, rightly, that they were entitled to the fruits of their victory against the dictator. Faced with this situation, the Troika did not have many options:

- Continue the revolutionary process, setting the absolute priority on urgent economic and social demands, thanks in particular to the mobilization of financial resources from the state. To embark on this path would have meant also challenging the dominant economic and social policy. But it was the only way that could make possible a rapid and vigorous recovery of economic activity and a return to calm. It is still valid and relevant.
- Or, on the contrary, turn their backs on the people, as Ben Ali had done before, by serving the interests of the wealthy local minority, the multinationals and rich foreign creditors.

The ruling coalition, dominated by the Islamists, contrary to its election commitments and all its fine speeches, was the new watchdog of neocolonial interests in Tunisia. The Islamists tried to hide their treachery, trying to demonize revolutionary organizations and activists, criminalizing social protest movements and deflecting the discussion of economic and social problems to questions of identity, encouraging the formation of fanatical and violent religious groups.

The manoeuvre of the Islamists was successful during their first year in power. But the deteriorating economic and social situation and the political violence of Islamist groups and militias eventually turned public opinion against them. The revolution gave power to the Islamists on a silver platter; and then they used this power to try and strangle the revolution. Their treachery, and especially the deteriorating economic and social situation under their government, has been accelerating their fall. The current protest movement is driving them to the wall. The determination to drive them from power is gaining ground quickly.

Unlike Ennahdha, which fared better during its first year in power, the other two parties of the Troika (the CPR and Ettakatol), which served as a cover for the Islamists, saw their support eroding quickly. Today, they are empty shells clinging to power like moths drawn to a flame.

Hastening the departure of this gang that is in power will no doubt have beneficial effects on the revolutionary process, provided, of course, that we remain extremely vigilant; the fall of a counter-revolutionary government is undoubtedly an opportunity to be seized by the revolutionary movement, but it still needs to be able to do it! It is obvious that when the battle is engaged and the enemy is destroying everything, we should under no circumstances shrink from the fight, otherwise defeat is certain!

What are the alternatives to the Islamists

After several months of crisis [6], different positions are crystallizing around the question of the institutions that emerged from the 2011 elections, including the NCA and the government, but also the refusal of a retrograde constitution, of political appointments to key positions in the administration and in public enterprises, as well as the demand for the dissolution of violent and

even terrorist Islamist organizations and militias.

On the other hand, the central issue of economic and social policy is only being posed in a subsidiary manner. It should be noted that long before the arrival of the Islamists in power, an idea was widely accepted: that the current task was to carry out the "democratic transition", strictly limited to its political aspects. Everything concerning economic and social policy was relegated to the next stage, even going so far as to describe any economic or social demand as premature, if not counter-productive, which could even endanger the democratic transition.

Worse, the two main political parties that confront each other today - namely Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes - are in agreement on continuing and indeed deepening the economic and social policies of the former regime . This agreement has been translated into action:

- Firstly, under the government (March-December 2011) of Essebsi, the founder and leader of Nidaa Tounes, who defended and maintained the policy and commitments of the former dictator vis-à-vis imperialism and neocolonialism. This was formulated particularly in the "Jasmine Plan" in the framework of the "Deauville Partnership" [7](on 26 and 27 May 2011);
- Then, under the government of the Troika, which has continued in the same direction, relying especially on loans provided mainly by the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the French government. This approach has been embodied in particular by strengthening the "partnership" imposed by the EU in the framework of the "Enlarged and Deepened Economic Free Trade Zone" and the signing on 7 June 2013, of a new programme of structural adjustment with the IMF.

Of course, in their speeches, everyone stresses the importance of economic and social demands, as well as the importance of addressing the issue of regional disparities that oppose the relatively prosperous coastal niches, especially around Tunis, Nabeul-Hammamet , Sousse-Monastir and Sfax, on the one hand, and the rest of the country, ravaged by unemployment and poverty, on the other.

Therein lies the whole problem of the Tunisian revolution. Imperialist forces, through their local servants, old and new, have so far managed to "contain" the revolutionary process within a political reform of government. While at the same time they attempt to deepen and broaden the neoliberal capitalist restructuring and strengthen the neocolonial grip on the country.

The demands formulated by the NSF to get out of the current crisis are:

- The dissolution of the NCA and the formation of a "High Authority for National Salvation", representing political parties , associations and experts in constitutional law, which will commission a "committee of experts" to finish writing the Constitution, and another authority for the organization and supervision of elections;
- The dissolution of the government and the creation of a "government of national salvation", comprising a limited number of ministers and chaired by an independent personality;
- The cancellation of "political appointments";
- The dissolution of violent Islamist organizations and militias.

These demands have received the very important support of the UGTT trade union confederation, but also of the employers' organization UTICA. Both say that they are ready, in case of a refusal of the Troika to comply, to use pressure tactics, such as, for the UGTT, a general strike, and on the part of the UTICA, an administrative boycott of returns concerning social funds or taxes.

The arc of forces opposed to the Troika is quite broad, since it comprises, besides the Popular Front and the NSF, the UGTT, democratic and progressive organizations, the employers' organization UTICA and a significant sector of the population [8]. All of them have been demanding for more than a month that the Islamists and their allies leave the government. This cause is just and necessary. The Islamists have proved themselves to be zealous servants of neocolonial interests. It is not excluded that their policy has irritated some of the local bourgeoisie, especially those who work for the local market. Need we recall the discontent of the UTICA, in 1995, when Ben Ali accepted the free trade zone with the European Union? It was said at that time that one-third of the country's industrial base was condemned in advance. Not to mention the adverse impact on the living conditions of the popular masses, making worse a situation that was already dramatic enough.

Moreover, to remain in power, the Islamists drape themselves in a religious discourse that is as retrograde as it is radical, in order to confuse the issue, neutralize the popular neighbourhoods and divide the working class. In addition, they utilize for their project fascistic and terrorist Islamist organizations, which have already been responsible for many political crimes. The Popular Front was right when it took the initiative of calling for civil disobedience against their government. For the moment, it is at the head of a vast movement with a very broad representation at the base of society.

The NSF has been built around the political initiative of the Popular Front, which has enabled the Popular Front to break the bipolarization that existed between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, to come out of its isolation and no longer be lagging behind events. A notable fact: this is the first time that a political coalition has managed to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in the street; this was the case on August 6, where the number of protesters certainly approached half a million. Until then, only the UGTT could mobilize massively, but never as much as that. The Popular Front has demonstrated over the last month that it is a real "activist body", not only in Tunis but in all the regions of the country. In contrast, Nidaa Tounes has appeared as an "electoral body" - voting intentions without militant content.

The discourse adopted by the Popular Front, moderate but firm and well adapted to the reality the Tunisian people at the present moment, is now bearing fruit, which tends to significantly weaken the influence of the Islamist discourse over the popular masses. If the Ennahdha government falls, it will undoubtedly be perceived as the victory of the Popular Front. But this should not overshadow the many failures of the Popular Front. Weaknesses exist, particularly in the construction and organization of the Front. Despite a good start, especially thanks to the initiative of regional activists, the construction and the organizational implantation of the Front, across Tunisia, has remained quite fragile. The leadership of the Popular Front (the Council of General Secretaries) and the (recently created) Executive Committee are, after all, apart from some regional coordinating committees, the only bodies which function regularly. The many independent activists who form the backbone of the Popular Front have difficulty making their voices heard in such an organization.

There is also the risk, real, of letting ourselves be drawn into the logic of the dominant system, under the pretext of realism, even of a so-called inevitability of the neoliberal capitalist ruling order. Tactical issues are one thing, and the accommodations and concessions to which the Popular Front may be required to submit under the pressure of Nidaa Tounes and the UTICA, and which are likely to deflect the Popular Front from its revolutionary goal, are another. Some components of the Popular Front could be tempted, under the guise of pragmatism, to make concessions or accommodations that can be counter-revolutionary. These temptations tend to become stronger at a time when the noose is increasingly tightening around the Islamists, who are retreating under the pressure of mobilization. They may be on the verge of giving in over the government to reorganize their defence around the NCA, from where they hope to set off for the conquest of power in the next elections, which will be held, probably, in a few months.

Now the problem is situated beyond the Troika, at the level of the "government of national salvation", which could be established in the coming weeks. What programme will it have? What are the priorities? What are the urgent measures?

The question concerning the structure, the composition and the urgent political, economic and social tasks of the "government of national salvation" has been discussed at length in the leadership of the Popular Front. The Popular Front has agreed on a plan to stop economic and social hostilities against the popular classes, in particular by imposing the suspension of the structural adjustment programme, freezing the prices of essential commodities, a moratorium on payment of the external public debt, a tax on large fortunes and the taxation of the profits of multinationals, etc. These are the main lines of the economic and social policies of the Popular Front.

It remains to discuss this orientation and these measures within the NSF, and with the UGTT and the UTICA. Therein lies the real political issue at the moment. Faced with its current partners, whose interests and strategic programme are diametrically opposed, the Popular Front will work hard to set a course toward radical social change. In fact, it is carrying on its shoulders the inexperience and the unpreparedness of the Left, of the progressive and revolutionary elements, faced with the multiple questions of economic and social policy, and especially their shortcomings in the formulation of appropriate measures, based on sufficient knowledge of the questions that are posed and the objectives that we must attain.

Furthermore, the dominant ideology, the enormous political pressure exerted by the very numerous right-wing parties, the serious nature of the economic and social situation, and especially the strong dependence of Tunisia on the outside world (exports, tourism, debt, foreign investment) and the presence of a strong neo-colonial economy also complicate the task of the Popular Front, which is not immune to mistakes. Of course, to avoid making mistakes, all you have to do is to stand well back from the fields of struggle, observe and criticize those who are struggling to maintain hope and confidence in victory. Some people in Tunisia are discovering a vocation as givers of lessons in good revolutionary conduct to those who are trying, through struggle, to eliminate the obstacles and avoid the pitfalls that stand in the way of the revolution.

Our task is not easy; the enemies of the revolution are many and powerful. The allies of today may at any moment turn against us, and we are quite aware of this. It is not easy to stay mobilized for months, especially when we lack means in the face of a highly equipped enemy. But despite all this, we are standing firm and we are moving forward. Our cause is just and we believe in victory.

Lastly, the coming days are likely to be very tense. Anything is possible. We are doing everything to ensure that the outcome of the battle goes in the right direction, in the direction of the interests of the majority of the Tunisian people.

Fathi Chamki, Tunis, 31 August 2013

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Ettayar Achaabi, a nationalist party in the Nasserist tradition.

[2] This is the second murder that the Popular Front has had to mourn, after that of Chokri Belaïd , General Secretary of the United Democratic Patriot Party, who was assassinated on February 6.

[3] The Tunisian branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood. In the elections on 23 October, 2011, Ennahdha and its two allied parties won 63 per cent of the seats in the NCA. Since then, many defections in the ranks of its allies have reduced this percentage to about 50 per cent.

[4] The National Salvation Front (NSF) was established on July 26, 2013. It includes the Popular Front (a coalition of a dozen left and nationalist parties) and the Union for Tunisia (a liberal reformist coalition of five parties, including Nidaa Tounes which, according to the polls would win 20 per cent of the vote, slightly more than Ennahdha), and a large number of small political parties and associations.

[5] Financed by petrodollars, in particular from Qatari, which flowed freely and enabled the Islamists top win many votes from a population caught in a vice between low income (and sometimes none at all) and higher and higher prices.

[6] On February 6, 2013, the assassination of Belaïd left Tunisia in a state of shock; over a million people attended his funeral on February 8. The UGTT trade union confederation had called a national general strike for the day. In addition, on the evening of February 6, Jebali, Prime Minister and General Secretary of Ennahdha, proposed forming a new government of national unity. Discussions were initiated with the main opposition parties, but they did not succeed. Jebali resigned and Ennahda replaced him with Larayedh, the other leader of the party and former Minister of the Interior. The Troika emerged weakened but still dominated the government.

[7] The G8 demanded from the Essebsi government an economic five-year plan. In return, the World Bank provided a loan of \$1 billion in a "Governance and Development" programme in partnership with the African Development Bank, the French Development Agency and the European Union.

[8] It should be noted that the various actions organized by the NSF in the last month have involved hundreds of thousands of people across the country.