

The situation in Tunisia and the progressive forces nearly five years after the fall of Ben Ali

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In January 2011 an immense hope arose, a hope for a new path in the history of the Mediterranean basin, and beyond:

- In the Arab region, the revolutionary wave that started in Tunisia quickly spread to many countries;
- The example of the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo directly inspired the “indignant ones” of the “movement of the squares” against neo-liberal austerity in Greece and in the Spanish State.

Nearly five years later, the counter-revolution has undeniably scored points, including:

- The massacres organized by Assad and the Islamist forces in Syria;
- The return in Egypt to an even more repressive military power than Mubarak’s was.

Moreover, war is also raging in many countries of the region, especially in nearby Libya.

It is in this framework that the situation in Tunisia will be addressed.

A restorationist government

Since January 2015, power has been exercised by a coalition led by the Nidaa Tounes party. This formation is a continuation of the governments of the Ben Ali era. In the coalition government it formed, Nidaa included the Islamist party Ennahda, its declared opponent before the October 2014 elections, as well as the UPL (around the shady businessman Slim Riahi) and the ultra-liberal party Afek Tounes.

The first objective of the government was to block the revolutionary process in Tunisia and to restore the neocolonial capitalist order, dictated especially by the European multinationals, the

international financial institutions and the European Union. To achieve this, it proclaimed a state of emergency in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Sousse [1] with the aim of restricting democratic freedoms, combating strikes and stifling the social movement. [2]

The specific objective of Ennahda in choosing to take part in the government was not to suffer the same fate as its Egyptian cousins, sentenced to death or imprisoned by the armed forces, to obtain impunity for its leaders (in cases concerning corruption and involvement in acts of violence) and to maintain the positions of the thousands of people it installed in the state apparatus following its triumphant arrival in power in 2012.

The objective to which Nidaa Tounes is particularly attached is to guarantee impunity for those guilty of corruption during the Ben Ali era, as evidenced by the bill called “economic reconciliation”. [3]

The chain of events since 2011

On December 17, 2010, a wave of mobilizations began, launched by youth in the poorest regions of the country. The trade-union and associative left was very involved in it. Subsequently, the rallying to the revolutionary insurrection of the high school student movement and the inhabitants of popular neighborhoods, especially in Tunis, made possible its extension to the whole country. On January 14, the dictator Ben Ali was forced to relinquish power.

It should be noted that the Islamist organizations did not participate in this process, all the more so in that at the time the majority of their cadres were in exile and others were in prison.

Between March and December 2011, the elder statesman of the old regime, Beji Caid Essebsi, who had been retired from political life for twenty years, became head of the government. He managed, not without difficulty, to partially demobilize the movement, which accentuated the distancing between a part of the youth and the workers’ movement.

After the election victory of the Islamist party Ennahda on October 23, 2011, Essebsi announced his withdrawal from political life. He then made a spectacular comeback by founding the Nidaa Tounes party. This assembled around him different political traditions, united in a discourse of almost visceral rejection of political Islam.

In 2012 and 2013, the policy of the governments led by Ennahda [4]. focused on the following objectives: to continue the neo-liberal policy, infiltrate the state apparatus, Islamize society, undermine the rights of women, organize and/or cover violence against the social movement and the left. Islamist militias were set up, including the “Leagues for the protection of the revolution” (LPR). Middle Eastern Islamist preachers, among the most retrograde, roamed freely in Tunisia. The president of the republic, Marzouki, officially welcomed some of them, as well as leaders of the LPR, [5].

In January 2014, the Ennahda government was finally forced to resign. [6] Some Islamists, especially among the youth, switched over to terrorism in Tunisia, as well as to jihadism in other countries. Simultaneously there was an upturn in strike activity.

Following the legislative and presidential elections at the end of 2014, power passed into the hands of Nidaa Tounes, who opened up his government to Ennahda and two smaller parties. An unprecedented strike wave developed in the first half of 2015, as well as important social mobilizations in the most deprived areas.

A Tunisian exception: the UGTT

In no other country in the Arab region does there exist a trade-union organization comparable to the UGTT. [7] With 750,000 members, mainly belonging to the civil service and the public sector, 47 per cent of whom are women [8], the UGTT organizes about a third of the workers in the sectors where it exists. Since its founding in 1946, the UGTT has not been satisfied merely with the defence of its members. It has on the contrary always been engaged simultaneously in political action, especially during the struggle for Independence, where it played a leading role. There coexist within the UGTT members belonging to the entire Tunisian political spectrum. They must therefore put in second place their party affiliation, if they have one, which is most often on the left of the political spectrum.

Throughout its history, the UGTT has fluctuated constantly between resistance to government and corruption by it, between ability to confront and readiness to negotiate, between bureaucratic top-down methods of decision and a system of internal pressure on the leadership, between a multiplicity of centrifugal forces and determination to maintain a collective framework. Faced with the repressive regimes that have succeeded one another since independence, the UGTT has often served as an effective refuge for the forces of the political and associative left. This has resulted in a deep and lasting capillarity between these three types of organizations.

For all these reasons, the UGTT has played a central role in every crisis that Tunisia has gone through. So it was no accident that it was around it that the departure of the Ennahda government in January 2014 was finally organized.

The difficulties of the political left appearing as an alternative

Unlike other countries in the Arab region, the political left was able to maintain a continued existence in Tunisia, even in the worst moments of the dictatorship, thanks to the shield represented by the UGTT. In January 2011, it was still numerically weak, marked by a long tradition of clandestinity, dispersion and sectarianism.

After a first ephemeral attempt following January 14, 2011 [9], most of the left forces regrouped in October 2012 under the name of Popular Front. This front involved formations coming from Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism, Arab nationalism and social democracy. [10] Many of the activists of the Front are also personally involved in the UGTT, the UGET (student union) and various associations.

What united the Front was a tradition of common struggle of its founders against the Ben Ali dictatorship, indeed against that of Bourguiba, the desire to end the tradition of fragmentation of the left as well as to achieve the social demands of the revolution.

The main initial orientation of the Front was to fight simultaneously against the two neoliberal currents which were competing for power: the Islamists of Ennahda (in power in 2012-2013) and the "modernists" of Nidaa Tounes, who wanted to succeed them.

Among the many weaknesses of the Front the main ones were its organizational weakness, its lack of political clarity and programmatic precision, its heterogeneity, its permanent fear of splitting and the risk of soft consensus that could result from that. Added to this were, in the background, painful memories of the years of imprisonment and torture, as well as hundreds of dead and wounded during the general strike of January 26, 1978 and the revolt of January 1984.

Following the successive assassinations of two leaders of the Popular Front, a wave of hostility

towards Ennahda mounted across the country. Chamkhi Fathi explains: "The Popular Front had remained transfixed after the assassination of February 6, 2013. After that of July 26, 2013, the Front initially reacted strongly, even calling for insurrection. It then immediately retracted under pressure from Nidaa Tounes, and finally remained within the boundaries of respect for established order and legality." [11] The leadership of the Popular Front then decided to form an alliance with all the forces opposing the Islamist party in power.

The day after the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, this "anything but Ennahda" resulted in the establishment, alongside Nidaa Tounes, of an ephemeral "National Salvation Front" (FSN). One of the main objectives fixed by it was the establishment of a "government of national salvation" to replace the existing government [17] A similar debate took place at the presidential election at the end of December. At the end of 2014, the Popular Front was even on the verge of a split: the two deputies of the LGO, Nizar Amami and Fathi Chamkhi, had announced in advance that they would neither give a vote of confidence in the government led by Nidaa nor vote for its budget, and that they would do so whatever the decision adopted by the Front. In the end, Nidaa opted for a government alliance with Ennahda, and that once again helped the Front to decide in favour of independence from the government.

Conversely, in the wake of the terrorist attack in Sousse in June 2015, the deputies of the Popular Front voted for the Terrorism Act, which had, however, been denounced by many associations, as well as by the journalists' union of the UGTT. [18]

Two of the challenges facing the Tunisian left

The need for the left to strengthen its links with young people.

Between December 17, 2010 and early March 2011, the youth revolt was one of the driving forces of the Tunisian revolution. Subsequently, the blocking of the process and the continual deterioration of already precarious conditions of existence made some of young people bitter and/or attracted by dreams of exile in Europe. More worryingly, some of them turned to armed Islamism.

On this question, an activist of the social movement, Abderrhamane Hedhili, explained in January 2015: "There is a question concerning poverty that is never addressed. This is the poverty of the young Salafists. Nobody talks about it. There are many of them, over 100 000. I am not talking about those who have taken up arms and moved on to terrorism. I am talking about young people who are at the beginning of the process. Do we have a social, economic, cultural programme? How to address this issue? Neither the government, nor the opposition, nor civil society does - nobody. The Salafists are very active among the youth in poor neighbourhoods. Because unfortunately we, the left, should be present in these areas, but we have given way to the Islamists." [19]

The necessary convergence between the coastal regions and those in the interior of the country.

For generations, the regions in the interior have been the poorest in the country. It is no coincidence that the 2010-2011 revolution started in Sidi Bouzid. It was preceded in 2008 by the uprising in the Gafsa mining region, then in 2010 by the riots in Ben Guerdane.

The most emblematic of the recent struggles in the interior regions was that of unemployed youth in the mining region of Gafsa. For more than two months, they organized sit-ins, almost completely blocking the production and transport of phosphate, and therefore the chemical industry that is linked to it. Faced with their determination, the authorities were forced to promise to create 1500

jobs in three years, including more than a third in the summer of 2015. But this figure falls far short of the needs of this region, where unemployment is officially 26 per cent, whereas it provides about 10 per cent of the country's GNP.

Multiple forms of resistance

An unprecedented wave of strikes.

The social mobilizations that had slowed down from spring 2011 to the end of 2013 recommenced in 2014 after the departure of Ennahda from power. They reached unprecedented levels in the first half of 2015. [20]

Some of these struggles were conducted by "the most precarious workers, such as those who work on construction sites, many of whom earn less than the minimum wage, or the unemployed. This category will not sit idly by. They waited for four years in the hope of proposals taking into consideration their circumstances. But there was nothing," explained Abderrahmane Hedhili. Multiple struggles of the unemployed took place in the first half 2015, for example in the mining zone of the Gafsa region.

Under the initial impulse of the sectors where the left of the UGTT is influential, there was an explosion of strikes in the first half of 2015 among workers with a stable job. The public sector had in fact been straining at the leash for more than three years: civil service salaries have been frozen since 2012, while cumulative inflation was 17.2 per cent over the last three years. Prominent among the demands were those for the implementation of agreements that had been signed but never put into effect.

Public transport workers started the ball rolling at the beginning of 2015, including a strike without warning that paralyzed Tunis for several days and subsequently led to the satisfaction of some demands. [21] In early April, secondary school teachers and their union won a historic victory. Since autumn 2014, they had conducted several two-day strikes with nearly 100 per cent participation. Faced with the stubbornness of the government, they blocked the conduct of the examinations of the first quarter of 2015 and also threatened to block the end-of-year exams. Their determination paid off: on April 6, they won very significant wage increases, which should be able to guarantee their purchasing power over the period 2012-2017. This victory has strengthened the confidence of workers in their ability to fight, and conflicts have multiplied in government departments and public sector enterprises. The demands are generally centred on wages, for the government to respect agreements that it had signed previously, for the defence and reconstruction of public services.

The forms of struggle adopted by the workers and their middle-level and/or local union structures, bear witness to the extent of their exasperation: repeated one-day national strikes, the decision to boycott the exams in primary education, and strikes, sudden and without warning, in public transport and electricity supply, days of free care in public hospitals, etc. Some of these audacious forms of struggle were, at least initially, publicly disavowed by the executive committee of the UGTT. It is significant to note that in the case of electricity supply, strikes including power cuts began following the refusal by the rank and file of an agreement signed the day before by the UGTT federation concerned.

Strikes have also taken place in the private sector, for example in supermarkets, the food industry and tourism. Unlike in the cases of public transport and secondary education, most of these struggles have generally not led immediately to real progress.

A halt then followed the terrorist attack in Sousse in June, amplified by Ramadan, the heat wave, the summer holidays, threats against strikes by the government, etc.

After the holidays, strikes recommenced in primary education and road freight transport. The pursuit of these struggles is felt to be all the more necessary because in the public sector, the increases contained in the national agreement of 22 September between the UGTT and the government are not enough to maintain purchasing power (except perhaps in secondary education). Moreover, at the time of writing, no national agreement has been reached in the private sector.

The recommencement or not of strikes should logically depend on the combination of a variety of factors including:

- the progress of negotiations in the private sector;
- respect or not of their commitments by the government and employers;
- the evolution of inflation from now until 2017;
- How struggles in different sectors will develop, including those at present underway in primary education and road transport.

Resistance to challenging of democratic freedoms

These are the only remaining gains of the revolution of 2011. Attempts to challenge them have intensified following the proclamation of a state of emergency after the attack in Sousse.

In a statement issued on July 25, 2015, a series of associations, along with the UGTT and the National Union of Journalists (SNJT,) protested against “the serious attacks on human rights and freedoms”, “the repeated attacks against citizens, journalists and employees of the press” and “law-and-order harassment” [22] The signatories also denounced the rushed adoption of an “anti-terrorist law” which they considered to be an attack on fundamental rights. This included: “the vague definition of the crimes of terrorism and incitement to terrorism”, “non-compliance with the principles of a fair and just judgment”, “the lack of guarantees on the inviolability of suspects”, “calling into question the public nature of trials and the retention of the death penalty”, “gagging of the freedom of the press and of free access to information” and maintaining legal provisions “that reinforce sanctions against attacks on the security forces, despite the unanimous demand of the entire society to withdraw them in view of the threat they pose to basic liberties”. [23]

The mobilization against the bill aimed at whitewashing corrupt figures of the Ben Ali era. [24]

Welcomed by the Tunisian employers, the bill described as “economic reconciliation”, intended to whitewash the corrupt figures of the Ben Ali era, is rejected in particular by participants in the campaign “I do not forgive,” the political and associative opposition and the UGTT.

As explained by the leader of the Workers’ Party and deputy of the Popular Front, Amroussia Ammar, “nothing can justify whitewashing those who have looted public money without them being held accountable”. [25]

. Asked about this, Fathi Chamkhi added: “This bill is a political manoeuvre towards the bosses of the criminal economy, and of course towards crooked capitalists who got rich under the dictatorship. It aims to ensure their support for the stabilization of the dominant order. This support is essential for the government in order to complete the implementation of the new neoliberal capitalist

restructuring, which is particularly demanded by the international financial institutions and the European Union.” [26]

Up until the last moment, the authorities wanted to prevent the demonstrations planned for Saturday, September 12 against the bill, insisting that all demonstrations were banned under the state of emergency. On the evening of the previous Thursday, the Minister of the Interior even sought to terrorize potential demonstrators, claiming that “terrorist sleeper cells” were preparing to target the demonstrators, especially on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis where the demonstrations had been called. [27] But the opponents of the law did not give in and demonstrations were finally held in Tunis and in many other places, such as Sfax, Gafsa, Gabes Tataouine, Tozeur, etc. The fact that the Minister of the Interior had reaffirmed until the last moment that all demonstrations were banned due to the state of emergency has had a boomerang effect since the September 12 demonstrations took place: on October 2 the Presidency of the Republic announced the lifting of the state of emergency. But concerning the whitewashing of the corrupt, the government has not for the moment changed its position.

The rise of struggles on ecology.

As Abderrhamane Hedhili points out, “the environment is no longer a preoccupation that only interests the elites. The subject also affects a significant part of the population, such as the problem of waste on the island of Djerba, pollution in the Bay of Monastir, the factories in Gabes, and of course in the mining area.” [28]

What has changed since January 2011?

1. **Political Power.** Before January 14, the entire state power was in the hands of Ben Ali and his clan. The elections were a pure simulacrum. Today, the President and the Assembly are elected. But the administration, and in particular the police, military and judicial apparatuses, were not purged.

2. **Economy.** The present economic orientation is in direct continuity with the neoliberal policies of Ben Ali. The reality of economic power has not changed, and the present political authorities even want to give an amnesty to most of the corrupt figures of the Ben Ali era who had been prosecuted after January 14. All economic indicators are showing red: growth is close to zero, inflation is around 6 per cent, the level of external public debt exploded between 2010 and 2014 from 15.5 to 25 billion dinars (from 7 to 11.4 billion euros). The standard of living of the population continues to deteriorate, the levels of unemployment and inequality between regions continue to widen. Young people and women are the first victims of this situation.

3. **The “Law and order” Dimension.** In the days of Ben Ali, “order” was ensured by an omnipresent police. Torture was widely practised, freedom of expression and organization was very weak. Immediately after January 14, the grip of the police on society greatly weakened. Freedom of expression and organization reached a level that had never before existed in Tunisia. In recent months, in relation to the fight against Islamist terrorist groups and some of the attacks they managed to commit, especially those of Bardo and Sousse, the law-and-order dimension regained ground. These terrorist attacks were followed by the proclamation of a “state of emergency”, the accentuation of the return of the use of torture, restrictions on freedom of expression and the arrest of about a thousand suspected terrorists.

4. **Trade unionism and workers’ struggles.** Before 14 January 2011, much of the leadership and the apparatus of the UGTT had submitted to the government of Ben Ali. Opposed to them were a series of intermediate leaders and rank-and-file militants. The right to strike was very restrictive and

struggles were sometimes harshly repressed. From the end of 2011, most of the leaders of the UGTT who had been associated with the Ben Ali regime were eliminated. The readiness to fight of the workers and their intermediate union structures can now be freely expressed within the UGTT. Some forms of struggle adopted by them have been publicly disavowed by the Executive Bureau, which is really looking to find a balance between the conflicting demands of workers and those of employers and government

6. Political Life. Prior to 2011, political life was monopolized by the Ben Ali clan. Political Islam was brutally suppressed, even though discreet contacts seem nevertheless to have taken place between Ennahda and members of the government. The political left was essentially illegal, repressed, weak numerically, dispersed and marked by sectarianism. Today, for the first time in decades, there is real political life in Tunisia. But at the same time the government is now in the hands of Nidaa Tounes, which increasingly embodies the continuity with the former regime. The first big difference with the past is that Ennahdha is associated with a government that declares its determination to eradicate armed Islamist groups. The second big difference is that the political left is no longer in hiding and is practically all grouped in the Popular Front. No other left political formation has any influence. Despite its weaknesses and ambiguities, the Popular Front is today the leading political opposition force, including in Parliament.

Dominique Lerouge

Footnotes

[1] The attack in Sousse on June 26, 2015 caused a total of 38 deaths. It followed on the attack on March 18 in Bardo, where there were 23 victims.

[2] [Statement of the Popular Front on the promulgation of the state of emergency \(7 July 2015\)](#).

[3] This determination to accord impunity was appalled by the UTICA, the historic Tunisian employers' organization. ([see](#)). As for the employers' organization Conect, it requested that this procedure should even be extended to all Tunisians : [see](#).

[4] Two other parties were associated with the Ennahda government: the CPR of Marzouki, who was given the presidency of the Republic and Ettakatol (Tunisian section of the Socialist International), led by Ben Jaafar, who had been given the presidency of the Constituent Assembly

[5] [See](#) ; and [here](#) in the presidential palace.

Important mobilisations took place against the attempts of the government to undermine women's rights, and against violence from Islamist militias and/or the government: police opening fire with buckshot on the population of Siliana, an attack on the headquarters of the UGTT, the assassination of two leaders of the Popular Front, etc. [[In November 2012, the police fired buckshot at the population of Siliana. On 4 December 2012, Islamist militia attacked the national headquarters of the UGTT. On February 6, 2013, a leader of the Popular Front, the lawyer Chokri Belaid, was murdered outside his home. On July 26 Mohamed Brahmi, another leader of the Popular Front, met the same fate

[6] Regarding the period between the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi (July 26, 2013) and the

Ennahadha government's resignation (January 2014), a large number of articles are available on [ESSE](#).

[7] See the presentation of the book by H  la Yousfi on the UGTT: [Notes sur le livre "L'UGTT une passion tunisienne"](#). See also the series of articles on the [long history of the UGTT](#).

[8] There are in fact 1.5 million employees in the private sector and 800,000 civil servants and public employees. There has never been a woman on the executive board of the UGTT and their presence is very low in the intermediate leaderships, including in highly feminised branches like education.

[9] See ["Founding declaration of the January 14 Front"](#).

[10] The main organizations making up the Popular Front are: the Workers Party, formerly PCOT, Marxist-Leninist tradition; Party of Unified Democratic Patriots (PPDU) (or unified Watad Party) also from a Marxist-Leninist tradition; League of the Workers' Left (LGO), Trotskyist organization affiliated to the Fourth International; the Popular Current: (Arab nationalist - Nasserite); Baath Movement (Arab nationalist); Kotb (Social Democrat); RAID (ATTAC and CADTM Tunisia). Some formations have left the Popular Front, in particular: Green Tunisia, the Revolutionary Watad Party (Marxist-Leninist), the MDS (Social Democrat).

[11] Interview, September 29, 2015. Fathi Chamkhi, organiser of RAID and leader of the League of the Workers' Left, is a deputy for the Popular Front.

[12] See Dominique Lerouge, "Entre le d  j   plus et le pas encore " *Inprecor* No. 597, September 2013, and the ["D  claration constitutive du Front de salut national"](#).

[13] "Un nouveau Premier ministre nomm   sous la pression occidentale", *Le Monde*, December 16, 2016.

[14] See Dominique Lerouge, "Apr  s les   lections l  gislatives du 26 octobre, 2014," *Inprecor* No. 609/610, octobre-d  cembre, 2014.

[15] The question of the National Salvation Front (FSN) was at the heart of the congress of the LGO in September 2013, which decided to leave the NSF by a majority of 80 per cent, while remaining in the Popular Front. [See](#).

[16] Excerpts from ["Entretien avec Fathi Chamkhi sur le nouveau gouvernement et la politique du Front populaire"](#) (February 12, 2015).

[17] See Dominique Lerouge, ["Normalization" underway in Tunisia](#) (February 11, 2015).

[18] The vote of the deputies of the Popular Front on the final text was as follows: 0 against, 11 for, 0 abstentions and 4 absent ([see](#)).

[19] Abderrahmane Hedhili is one of the principal leaders of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights ([FTDES](#)), a Tunisian association whose themes are the right to work, the rights of women, environmental rights and the rights of migrants. The FTDES is primarily oriented towards the most disadvantaged and poorly organized populations. It cooperates in particular with the UGTT (of which Abderrahmane Hedhili is besides a member) and several Tunisian associations. The FTDES naturally forms the backbone of the organization of Social Forums in

Tunisia. See [“La situation en Tunisie: questions à Abderrahmane Hedhili” Interview by Alain Baron \(January 16, 2015\).](#)

[20] See Dominique Lerouge, [“Recrudescence des luttes pour les salaires et l’emploi” \(May 10, 2015\).](#)

[21] Concerning the progress made on January 23 in the transport sector see: [here](#) ; and [here](#).

[22] This statement was signed in particular by the UGTT, the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH), the Tunisian Forum for the respect of economic and social rights (FTDES), the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats (TANF), the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), the Committee for the Respect of Freedoms and Human Rights in Tunisia (CRLDHT) and the Federation of Tunisians for a Citizenship on Both Sides [of the Mediterranean] (FTCR). [See](#).

[23] See also in this regard: [“La loi antiterroriste utilisée pour restreindre la liberté d’expression” \(August 11, 2015\)](#) ; [“Mettre fin aux abus sécuritaires” \(September 3, 2015\).](#)

[24] On this subject, see: [“Un collectif d’intellectuels fustige la loi sur la réconciliation” \(September 4, 2015\)](#) ; [“La gauche tunisienne contre le blanchiment des corrompus du régime Ben Ali” \(September 3, 2015\)](#) ; [“Manifestations contre le blanchiment des corrompus de l’ère Ben Ali” \(September 15, 2015\)](#) . Concerning the mobilizations, see the articles from the Nawaat blog, which can be found on the [ESSF site](#).

[25] Quoted [here](#).

[26] Interview, September 14, 2015.

[27] See [here](#).

[28] “La situation en Tunisie: questions à Abderrahmane Hedhili” cf. Note 20.