

# Tunisia: What next after the failure of the Ennahda government?

Friday 2 August 2013, by [BELHADJ Ahlem](#), [LEROUGE Dominique](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2013).

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## **Dominique Lerouge - What is the balance sheet of 18 months of Islamist government?**

Ahlem Belhadj - The failure of the Islamists is no longer a matter of much controversy. I think that the majority of Tunisians are agreed that government has failed in relation to the task it was responsible for. It had been put in place to manage a transitional period of one year. Finally 18 months have gone by and the essential tasks for which it was there, those of the Constitution, have not been fulfilled.

Everything the government has undertaken, at the economic or political level, poses enormous problems. We are very far from the objectives of the revolution. At the economic level, one of its first tasks should have been to adopt the broad outlines of a development model favouring more the poor regions, the poorer layers and jobs for the unemployed. But it has gone even further in the direction of neoliberalism than the Ben Ali dictatorship:

- The partnership with the European Union signed on November 19, 2012 is unfavourable to Tunisia. It seeks to install total free trade, notably for the agricultural and services sectors and that would be a disaster for them.
- The new agreement with the IMF in June 2013 envisages still further market liberalisation.
- The government has involved Tunisia in a policy of ever more pronounced indebtedness.

Given the inflation rate, the high cost of living, the increase in unemployment, the policy of indebtedness, the absence of new measures in favour of social justice, it is a total failure at the economic and social level.

At the political level, we have known some very difficult times under the Ennahda government with a lot of violence, going as far as political assassination. Recently Sahbi Atig, one of the main Ennahda leaders, threatened Tunisians who would dare to challenge the legitimacy of the regime as has happened in Egypt. He sought to scare people by using extremely threatening words like "trample them underfoot" or "make their blood flow". These words were pronounced not by anybody, but by the president of the Ennahda parliamentary group.

Another point concerns all the institutional reforms and state structures, like the independence of the judiciary or the reform of the police. Increasingly judicial decisions are dictated by the executive, and this troubles me hugely. We have experienced some very violent episodes with the police and people talk about a parallel police. We have to ask how far this will go.

Moreover, the state of civil liberties is worrying. We have seen several political trials recently. Some youth were arrested over a rap song. A Femen activist was arrested when she had done absolutely nothing wrong. There have been many arrests and trials. We have seen trades unionists arrested and the right to strike and exercise trade union activity are threatened.

What the current revolutionary process is fighting for is freedom of organisation, expression, freedom to demonstrate. And today, many things are thrown into question in this area. For example they are trying to muzzle the press to the maximum.

As regards women's rights, for the moment no laws have been threatened. But the debate around the draft Constitution has shown the type of social project the Islamists support. Instead of the idea of equality between men and women, they have introduced that of "complementarity", which constitutes a wide open door to every kind of regression.

A great battle was needed so that the notion of equality was reintroduced in the draft Constitution. But subsequently another article was introduced explaining that Islam was the state religion, which then allowed any kind of interpretation of this notion of equality. Ridha Belhadj, the spokesperson for the Salafist party Ettahrir, has for example said that there was no problem with equality since sharia guaranteed equality! Meanwhile, his party promotes polygamy!

The same problem is posed concerning international conventions defining what we understand by equality. Ennahda is leading a great campaign against the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Its minister of religious affairs has initiated this campaign, saying it would allow homosexual marriage and forbid marriage before the age of 18. Some Tunisian Islamists advocate that girls should be able to marry at 13.

There are regressions in social behaviour, and enormous pressure is exerted on women, notably through the re-emergence of violence against them. There is a whole discourse legitimating and banalising this violence in the absence of new measures for the protection of women.

There is also a moral pressure on women and on their behaviour. Many women self-censor now and question how they dress before going out. We have seen groups who attack women and not much has been done about it. It is in social behaviour that we see the most regression, for example concerning the difficulties in access to abortion and contraception, without their being any modification of the legislation in this area.

### **What other dangers does the draft Constitution contain?**

Several basic points are problematic.

The first is the link with religion: will Tunisian legislation be based on "positive laws" or on sharia? The Islamists have undertaken to establish a civil state based on positive laws. Both then they began to introduce sharia as the source of laws in the draft Constitution. After a battle on this point, they stopped talking about sharia, but in the preamble they used extremely vague formulations like "based on or inspired by the sharia" or "drawing on the principles of Islam".

Finally a national consensus was arrived at, which for me personally poses a problem. It concerns article 1 of the Constitution of 1959: "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state: its religion

is Islam, its language Arabic and its regime republican". This formula leaves the possibility of several interpretations on whether Islam was the religion of the country or the state religion. Of course, Tunisians are mostly Muslims but for me, the state should not have any religion. If that was the case, that would mean that those who govern do so in the name of the sacred and then there is no means of discussion.

It is a consensus because it leaves the question open. But the Islamists, after having accepted it, added an article blocking this opening and allowing article 1 to be interpreted as the affirmation that Islam is the state religion. It is something serious, because it leaves the way open to questioning all laws considered as contrary to Islam, or rather a certain interpretation of Islam.

The second point concerns civil liberties, because many clauses limit basic freedoms like the freedom of expression or of creation and publication.

The third point concerns the question of the independence of the judiciary. The current draft Constitution does not favour it: the public prosecutor, who alone can initiate investigations, is dependent on the executive. We reject this totally. The Constitution should wholly guarantee the independence of the judiciary.

A fourth point, added at the last minute to the last draft, concerns the "transitional period". It prevents the text of the future Constitution being changed for three years once it has been adopted. That will mean a three year extension of the transitional period.

More generally the question of Tunisia's adhesion to universal values of human rights has been a significant point of discord throughout the process of drawing up the constitution. A vision relating everything to Arab Muslim identity is opposed to a universalist vision of rights. Despite an improvement of the different drafts, problems subsist and that reflects significant divergences at the level of the model of society to put in place.

### **How far has the preparation for the next elections advanced? Are the dates fixed?**

The elections should take place at the end of 2013. But for me, it is impossible to prepare them for this date in good conditions. The ruling Troika has done everything to make sure that they are not organised in time.

There is an independent high commission for the elections, with people who have had experience from the elections of 2011. Money has been spent to train them. It is a national body with regional structures. But the regime, in particular Ennahdha, did not want such an independent body. That is why it has been attacked, and then some months were needed to put new bodies in place with all that involves in terms of cost and loss of time. And above all in terms of danger to its independence.

I think that the elections will not be feasible before 2014. It is necessary that they stop telling us stories, even if recently there has been talk of a series of meetings organised by Ennahdha so that the elections take place in 2013. Personally this date does not seem to me possible if the elections are to be free, transparent and democratic.

### **What about the security situation?**

As Ennahda has not dissolved its militias and there has been no real restructuring of the Ministry of the Interior, the security question remains completely posed for me. The investigation on the killing of Chokri Belaïd has not advanced. To demand the truth, the Popular Front has called a big national demonstration on August 6, to mark six months since the killing.

This stalling proves that it was a state killing: there is no will to make the truth known. And historically, we know that state crimes are the most difficult to elucidate. Following the killing the dissolution of the LPR was demanded. We had believed for a time that Ennahda was retreating a little, but finally nothing has been done. They want to keep troops to use during the elections as well as against the coming popular mobilisations. There is an increasing tendency to criminalise the social movements and use the cops and the legal system.

### **What kind of legitimacy does the regime have today?**

I think it no longer has any legitimacy. Legitimacy can't result simply from having won the elections in October 2011. The Assembly was elected to realise objectives and for a very determined period. The objectives have not been realised, and the period is over. Also there is a climate of insecurity and the economic situation gets worse every day. What legitimacy is there? A revolutionary process is underway, and the only real legitimacy is revolutionary legitimacy.

### **What is the impact of the situation in Egypt?**

Tunisians have closely followed what happened in Egypt. It has constituted an opportunity to re-motivate Tunisians and above all the activists. We are indeed in a dip in the revolutionary process with everything that has happened like attacks, repression, and limitation of liberties. Egypt has revived hope among people who despaired a little.

We have seen emerge in Tunisia a movement, Tamarod, (Rebellion) in the Egyptian style and another, "Khmagtouna" ("You asphyxiate us, you oppress us") calling notably for the dissolution of the constituent national assembly.

We have also seen the main opposition political forces call for the dissolution of the assembly, like Nidaa Tunes [\[1\]](#) and the Popular Front. That has also had an impact on Ennahda, because very rapidly we have seen repressive measures and a threatening discourse. For Ennahda, it is obviously a big loss: the overthrow of their brothers in Egypt worries them and their whole movement in the region greatly. A meeting of the Muslim Brotherhood has taken place in Turkey with Ghanouchi, the president of Ennahda, present. They have considered what happened in Egypt as a coup d'état, and that it was necessary to help Ennahda keep power in Tunisia, or there would be a fatal blow for the Brotherhood in the region.

What is happening now in Egypt, with the role of the army and the repression against the Islamists, worries me, and I think that is true for many people. Repression does not resolve any problem. The Islamists were overthrown in Egypt through a significant popular mobilization. But then the army has profited from this and sown terror inside the Islamist movement. I don't agree with this, it can only reinforce the role of victim which has very much benefited the Islamists in recent years. And this to a point where 50 people have been killed in one day and Morsi and other Brothers have been imprisoned. I am completely against all these acts which have no legitimacy.

### **Could the Tunisian army play the same role as in Egypt?**

The Tunisian army has a different history. It would be hard for it to intervene in the same way. It could nonetheless play a role, but everything depends on the way in which things evolve and if significant mobilisations take place.

What have been the concrete results of the attempts to seek consensus: the UGTT dialogue, the conference against violence?

Their objective is to bring together all forces to find a consensus so as to bring the transitional

period to an end. All these initiatives are advancing very slowly.

What happened in Egypt will undoubtedly accelerate things a little at the level of the Constitution. Overall, there is no advance concerning violence: Ennahda and the CPR have moreover withdrawn from the process at the last minute of the conference against violence and have not fulfilled their initial undertakings. Personally I think that a consensus with Ennahda is very difficult.

### **What are the common points and differences between the UGTT Initiative and the government of national salvation proposed by the Popular Front?**

It is about two different approaches.

- The UGTT does not take an approach of challenging the government, it only proposes tasks for the existing government.
- The Popular Front, however, proposes an alternative government. It considers that the current government has failed and proposes instead a government of national salvation. This should not be limited only to the democratic questions but should place economic and social questions at the first level.
- The UGTT has also begun to discuss the setting up of a national pact with the government and the employers' organisation, but that is a separate debate.

### **How does the Front respond to those who think that its meetings with the UPT for the setting up of a national congress of salvation could lead to an electoral coalition?**

The official decision of the Front adopted during its national council of June 1-2 is not to set up an electoral coalition, but to work punctually around well defined tasks. However, some Front activists are concerned about the setting up of a permanent framework of coordination between the Front and the UPT.

### **How are the mobilisations going?**

For some months, the popular social mobilisations have been somewhat in decline in the towns and neighbourhoods. That is explained by the repression and criminalisation of the spontaneous social movements, to defend the right to work, water, the roads and so on.

That doesn't mean that these movements have disappeared. It is simply a small temporary dip, because the malaise remains very deep. The will for mobilisation remains high faced with the high cost of living the everyday difficulties, the breadth of unemployment, the absence of political and economic response to all these social and popular demands. We also see the re-emergence of the more traditional forms of struggle like the strikes organised by the UGTT.

### **What initiatives have been taken for protection from the Islamist militias?**

Increasingly, and notably since the attacks against meetings, forms of self-protection have been put in place. But this movement remains embryonic.

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**P.S.**

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

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## **Footnotes**

[1] A neoliberal party basically constituted around relics of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes - it is the dominant force in the Union pour la Tunisie (UPT) coalition