

Ahlem Belhadj (1964-2023) - Tributes and memories

Sunday 19 March 2023, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [BARON Alain](#), [ROUSSET Pierre](#), [SAINT JEAN Henri](#), [TRAT Josette](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2023).

Ahlem Belhadj died, too young, in Tunis on March 11, 2013. Activist, child psychiatrist by training, she was best known for being the president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). We publish below a first set of tributes that we have received.

Tunisian encounter

I met Ahlem in 2009, I think, during a summer university. We had started a series of interesting discussions on the debates that were going on in the feminist movements in our respective countries, among which the one on secularism. She had invited us, the editors of the journal *Cahiers du féminisme*, to participate in the upcoming congress of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. We accepted this invitation.

I was the only one, I think, to be available at the date of the congress, the following spring. The reception was more than warm. She put us in contact with women from different social backgrounds, lawyers and other academics, but also trade unionists who worked with women from very working-class backgrounds in the suburbs of Tunis.

One of her preoccupations at that time was the need to make cohabit in the same association and to make militate together women graduates of urban environment, who had taken their distance with Islam and claimed the integrality of their rights in all the domains and women of working-class environments whose living conditions were degrading more and more and for whom the belief in Islam was a given. How could they fight for a state that was independent of religious powers and respectful of women's rights, without dividing women activists and the population at large over the religious issue?

The Arab Spring had not yet taken place. I did not have the opportunity to deepen my relationship with Ahlem. Other editors of the *Cahiers* met her afterwards. But I kept from this trip and these discussions the memory of a very warm and strong woman. She was already ill at the time, but she carried out her professional activity as a doctor, her family responsibilities and her militant commitment with great energy. It is indeed a great loss.

Josette Trat

March 12, 2023



Ahlem has left us.

I had for Ahlem a lot of affection, respect and admiration.

She combined kindness and rigor, human warmth and determination, attachment to principles and immersion in the field.

Overworked by her work, her family life and her activism, I remember having to improvise car trips with her to interview her.

Despite an illness that had been eating away at her for years, Ahlem was full of energy.

She kept her wonderful smile, and sometimes knew how to lie with perfection when I dared to ask her questions about her health.

Goodbye Ahlem.

My condolences to her family, to her many comrades in Tunisia and the rest of the world.

Alain Baron

March 12, 2023

The happiness of a freedom that will always remain to be conquered

I knew Ahlem when I was working in Tunisia (1991-1997) through Gilbert Naccache, now deceased, a great figure of the Tunisian left and who was one of the founders of the Perspective group. The Bourguiba government had condemned him for undermining the security of the state and he was imprisoned and abused for more than 10 years! (read his book, "Chrystal"). But it is through his companion Azza Ghami, that I had the opportunity to participate in meetings with the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women and to know Ahlem.

Given my status in Tunis, I was working for the Ministry of Social Affairs and I was President of the Association of the French abroad, I had a certain obligation of discretion which never hindered a hidden complicity Help for meeting rooms for example But in this discretion, there were always winks

Then after 2010, it was at the 2013 Social Forum in Tunis that we met again and were able to

demonstrate together in the streets of Tunis. All this may be a detail but these details that have made a life and this disappearance is a loss to share with her when I return to Tunis, the happiness of a freedom that will always remain to conquer. And that of the struggles to come in a Tunisia where the return of authoritarianism does not bode well for the maintenance of what can remain of the democratic gains of the Revolution. To remain faithful to it; let us continue our fights!

Henri Saint Jean



A singular strength of character

The death of Ahlem Belhadj in Tunis on 11 March affects the feminist movement, the trade union movement and the revolutionary left in Tunisia and beyond.

A child psychiatrist by training, Ahlem became involved in the revolutionary struggle when she was a student, first as a militant in the ranks of student trade unionism and then by joining the Tunisian Trotskyist group affiliated to the Fourth International [OCR]. This was a time when her country was still ruled in an authoritarian manner by the founder of modern Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba. In 1987, he was overthrown by a coup d'état led by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia with an iron fist until his overthrow in January 2011 by a popular uprising. It is known that it was the Tunisian uprising that triggered the revolutionary shockwave known as the Arab Spring, inspiring other populations in the Arabic-speaking world.

After becoming a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry, then head of the child psychiatry department at the Mongi Slim Hospital in La Marsa and president of the Tunisian Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Ahlem pursued her trade union commitment and became general secretary of the General Union of University Hospital Doctors, affiliated to the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).

The revolutionary group she had joined having entered a crisis, she distanced herself from organised political activism while maintaining her political convictions, in a way that resulted in maintaining personal relations with the Fourth International. At the same time, Ahlem invested herself fully in feminist action, becoming president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, first in 2004, then a second time in 2011, the year of the radicalisation of Tunisian social movements. In this capacity, she played a leading role in the revolutionary upheaval in Tunisia and in the constitutional process that followed, notably by fighting against moves to reintroduce clauses discriminating against women in the new Tunisian constitution.

Ahlem thus became a leading figure in her country, as evidenced by the widespread reaction in political, trade union and associative circles and in the media to her death. Her reputation as a leading figure of Tunisian feminism went beyond the borders: she received the Simone de Beauvoir Prize on behalf of the AFTD in 2012. In the same year, the US magazine Foreign Policy ranked her

18th in its annual list of the 100 most influential thinkers in the world. She was also the subject of several international press reports.

Her untimely death came after a long battle with illness. Anyone who knew Ahlem could not help but admire her exceptional courage in the face of the disease that consumed her, as well as the difficulties of her family life. As the mother of two young children, she found herself obliged to look after them alone after her partner Jalel Ben Brik Zoghlami went into exile and they separated amicably.

It obviously takes a singular strength of character to combine maternal, professional, trade union and feminist responsibilities as Ahlem did for years. She was striking for her intelligence, affability and friendly warmth, as well as for her ability to laugh in the face of adversity. Her death is an enormous loss for all the struggles she led, and a painful loss for all those who knew her well in the course of these various struggles.

Gilbert Achcar

13 March 2023



Facing up to it

I had only too rarely the opportunity to meet Ahlem, but enough to perceive her human, professional and political qualities (all intrinsically linked) and - knowing her (discreetly) ill -, her courage. A beautiful person for a beautiful commitment.

All those who knew her underline her warm character, as well as her strength of character. She stood her ground, even in very bad weather. A political episode had deeply marked me when, as president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, she had taken the defense of Amina, the young Femen threatened by justice and a howling pack for having posed topless on social networks.

Amina's initiative did not help the ATFD's fight for women's rights, and Ahlem made it clear that her association did not adopt the same methods of struggle as the Femens, but, she added, "we fully understand the choices they make. We stand in solidarity with Amina against all forms of violence that she suffers."

Faced with the storm that was rising against Amina, it would have been easier to abandon her to her fate (so many others have done so), but Ahlem and the ATFD refused to do so, whatever the cost.

March 14, 2023,

Pierre Rousset

The photos of the women's demonstration that illustrate this page were provided by Henri Saint Jean. They were taken in 2013 during the World Social Forum in Tunis, of which Ahlem was a key player!

P.S.

- Translation (except for Gilbert Achar piece) DeepL and Pierre Rousset.