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Tunisia

Consolidation of the left

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Since the spring of 2012, the Tunisian political landscape has been marked by a growing polarization between two major poles:

Since the spring of 2012, the Tunisian political landscape has been marked by a growing polarization between two major poles:

1. The first consists of the Islamists of Ennahda, the Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic - CPR) of President Marzouki and Ettakatol led by the social democratic President of the Constituent Assembly, Mustapha Ben Jafaar (Ettakatol is now the official Tunisian grouping of the Socialist International);

2. The second pole strives to bring together various forces, essentially the 17 parties emerging from the break-up of the parties of Ben Ali and Bourguiba, who, within the logic of "everything but Ennahda" have fallen behind Nidaa Tounes (the Call of Tunisia) led by Caïd Essebsi (a prominent minister under Bourguiba who was prime minister from February to December of 2011). Talks began in late spring 2012 between Essebsi's party and the forces involved in the governments of Mohammed Ghannouchi immediately after the fall of Ben Ali, like for example those emerging from the PDP (Parti démocratique progressiste – Progressive Democratic Party) and the "modernists" around Ettajid (which traces its origins to the old Communist Party). Currents from the Parti du travail tunisien (Party of Tunisian Labour - PTT) led by Badoui were added. The primary objective of Essebsi was to bring together former leaders and activists of the RCD.

The Tunisian left, whose activists had played a leading role in the revolution of December 2010 - February 2011 was marginalized during the elections of October 2011. Grouped inside the January 14 Front, the various left and Arab nationalist political organizations made the choice of contesting the elections alone, when they lacked the material means to be visible. Their capacity to intervene in the struggles was diminished.

In the spring of 2012, discussions started to reconstitute a January 14 Front on new bases, open to other parties as well as independent individual activists (not belonging to any political party). The challenge was to build a third political pole simultaneously opposing the two poles situated in the framework of neoliberal capitalism.

When asked about this in July 2012, the leader of the Parti des travailleurs (Workers' Party, the former PCOT) Hamadi Ben Mim explained: "the revolutionary political forces that formed the January 14 Front in the days that followed the fall of Ben Ali have largely contributed to the fall of the first two interim Governments. When Caïd Essebsi then became Prime Minister, on February 27, 2011, the PCOT favoured bringing him down and replacing him with a government in the service of the workers. (...) But there was no consensus on this point between the revolutionary parties: Essebsi threw some bait to the left organizations, and some of them fell for it. The January 14 Front then exploded. (...) It is now necessary to recover and bring together again the revolutionary forces of the left, whether Marxist or nationalist. It is necessary to build a new coalition, on the basis of a revolutionary new program to combat the polarization between Ennahda and the forces led by Essebsi.

To achieve this, we want to revive the January 14 Front, in another form. The conditions for such an association are now met, because most of those who had previously agreed to enter into the framework put in place by Essebsi have learned the lessons of it. (...) Exchanges between the Parti des Travailleurs and the Trotskyists of the LGO face two main problems: first, the LGO would like the UGTT to rebuild the Front and the latter would be around it. The Parti des Travailleurs is opposed to this tactic, and thinks you must start by grouping the Marxist left and nationalist political organizations. Secondly, the LGO considers that the backbone of any front must be the UGTT. The Parti des

Travailleurs thinks that the constitution of this front does not have to wait until the UGTT agrees to participate. Especially as the UGTT seeks, in its latest initiative, a consensus between government and opposition.” [1]

In July 2012 Chedli Gari, then responsible for trade union work inside the PTPD, also drew a negative balance of the break-up of the Tunisian left: “the division of the political organizations of the left was catastrophic at the October 2011 elections. We made the calculation with Jmour and Hamma Hammami: If we presented unitary lists, the PCOT of Hamma Hammami, MOUPAD of Chokri Belaïd and the PTPD could have come in second place. By adding the Arab nationalists, we would have remained second but with more seats. Three weeks before the elections, we were still trying to achieve common lists, but each organization has finally contested the elections alone thinking it would get the lion's share”.

In the summer of 2012, Gari explained the reasons for the break-up of the PTPD: “it is necessary to break with the very right-wing political orientation of Abderrazak Hammami and the majority of the political bureau reflected notably in periods of flirting with Ennahda, Essebsi, Chebbi, or Ettajid. Abderrazak Hammami has indeed tried to reach out to the major parties and has pushed for a break with the radical left. He wanted the PTPD to be perceived as the organization safeguarding the revolution from its extremist tendencies: thus he met with Rached Ghannouchi (the founder of Ennahda) and Essebsi as well as the Ennahda human rights minister”. Gari presented thus the orientation of his current since its split with the PTPD: “our focus for the coming months is as follows: strengthen the process of unification with the MOUPAD, with whom a fusion congress is scheduled from August 31 to September 2; Rebuild a Front including the Arab nationalists, who are very attached to Muslim identity, which is why Ennahda seeks to win over some of them. We are not located in the Islam-secular debate posed by Ennahda and Ettajid”. [2]

Meanwhile, Néjib Sellami, one of the main leaders of the UGTT's secondary school teachers and a known activist from the MOUPAD, said last July: “a peasant woman told me last week: the Tunisian revolution is like a watermelon on a table. It is indeed not in a stable situation, it fluctuates and may fall to earth at any time. This image pleased me very much. We had an authoritarian regime in the Palace in Carthage in the hands of Ben Ali, today, another authoritarian regime is being established at the Casbah in the hands of Jebali, the Islamist Prime Minister. This party practices a form of double-speak: it claims to be democratic and civil, but its practices are reminiscent of Ben Ali's RCD. It wants to decide everything and Tunisians today fear the return of a dictatorship in a religious form. Faced with Ennahda, a grouping has formed around Essebsi with old Bourguibistes and former RCD members. They are joined by forces of the centre, or even exits from the left. Ennahda and the US and French Governments want to push the Tunisians to choose between two poles: Ennahda and the parties originating from the old regime. These two forces are well structured and have lots of money. But a third pole is taking place rejecting this polarization. It is made up of left-wing and Arab nationalist parties. They want not only to prevent any return to a dictatorship, but also to achieve the satisfaction of the demands for which the people made the revolution. The objective is to restore what existed previously under the name of the January 14 Front”. [3]

A member of the leadership of the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers' Left League - LGO), Jalel Ben Brik Zoghlami, summarised the conditions of reconstruction of a January 14 Front this summer: “this Front will be meaningless unless several conditions are simultaneously met: 1. A firm base in the current social mobilizations, the political left is currently lagging behind the social mobilizations; 2. Establish a programme of struggle and mobilization around the essential points: against the line of Ennahda, reactionary, anti-democratic and opposed to women's rights, cancellation of the debt and the agreements of association with imperialist forces, for the campaign against unemployment and for the right to work, the establishment of a system of development favouring the disadvantaged classes and regions... 3. To clearly oppose the antisocial, pro-imperialist and undemocratic policies of the government of Muslim Brotherhood of the Ennahda party and their puppet allies. And to combat illusions around the liberal pole of the old RCDistes (around Sebsi) and their ally Najib Chebbi. 4. To call for the fall of the current government and start to discuss the nature of a popular government. For the LGO, it should be based on a popular and democratic workers' front, with the spinal column or the UGTT; 5. Opening up to and working with independents, notably leaders in the struggle in the trade union movement, in the regions, among women, the unemployed and

young people”. [ibid.]

An initial agreement was announced on Monday, August 13, 2012 between twelve parties, announcing the creation of the Popular Front for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution. The daily newspaper “Le Temps” noted: “At a time when observers of national political life believe that a polarization between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes is now inevitable (...), the Front, bringing together left and Arab nationalist parties, considers that Tunisians are not forced to choose between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes” [4].

This new Front brings together organisations from various traditions:

– Marxist-Leninist: Parti des travailleurs (Workers’ Party, the former PCOT, led by Hama Hammami), Parti des patriotes démocrates unifiés (Party of United Democratic Patriots, resulting from the recent merger of the MOUPAD led by Chokri Belaïd and the Jmour current of the PTPD), the Parti patriotique socialiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Socialist Patriotic Party, led by Jamel Lazhar), and the Parti de la lutte progressiste (Party of the progressive struggle, PLP – led by Mohamed Leban);

– Trotskyist: Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers’ Left League - LGO);

– Socialist: Parti populaire pour la liberté et le progrès (People's Party for Freedom and progress, PPLP, led by Jalloul Ben Azzouna);

-Marxist Pan-Arab: Front populaire unioniste (Popular Unionist Front, led by Amor Mejri);

– Nasserite Arab nationalist: Mouvement du peuple (Movement of the people - Hrakat Echaab, led by Mohamed Brahmi);

– Baathist Arab nationalist: Mouvement Bath, led by Othmane Belhaj Amor, Parti de l’avant-garde arabe et démocratique (Party of the Arab and Democratic Vanguard, PAGAD, led by Khereddine Souabni);

– Others: Tunisie verte (Green Tunisia, led by Abdelkader Zitouni), Mouvement des démocrates socialistes (Movement of Socialist Democrats), RAID (ATTAC and CADTM).

Many independent activists also participate in the Front.

At its first national conference in September 2012, the Popular Front adopted a draft political charter and elected the historic leader of the PCOT, Hama Hammami, as spokesperson.

[1] Interview conducted by Alain Baron in Tunis on July 18 and 19, published by the website of [Europe solidaire sans frontières](#).

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

[4] Cited in Alain Baron, [“Tunisie: Le regroupement À gauche franchit une nouvelle étape”](#).