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Tunisia

# "We need a second revolution"

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**Adnen Hajji, a teacher and UGTT activist from Redeyef, spoke to Eve Fitoussi and Alain Baron for *Afriques21* in December 2011 about the current situation in Tunisia.**

**Can you describe the context in which you lived prior to the uprisings?**

Redeyef, with Mdhila, Matlaoui and Moulares, is one of the four cities of the mining basin of Gafsa in which phosphate has been mined for more than a century and is the main source of life in the region.

But there is no sign of development in these cities and throughout this region. Since the regime of Bourguiba, in 1956, the state has not intervened in the region to salvage the social situation, or create additional projects to the phosphate company. It is happy with this company.

The result for our region is poverty and massive unemployment, affecting particularly young people of working age, but also the pollution of drinking water deposits, which are partly dry, while the infrastructure becomes increasingly old. We live in a situation that is not human at all in our region.

On the political and administrative side, the corruption and domination of the RCD, Ben Ali's old party, became increasingly unbearable for the inhabitants.

What characterizes the town of Redeyef is the fight that we conducted, in particular demonstrations of the unemployed, since the 1970s against the regime of Bourguiba, then that of Ben Ali from November 1987.

It can be said that what happened in 2008 was the result of an accumulation of acts of activism for many years. Many activists in Redeyef are members of the UGTT, the Tunisian General Labour Union. Some have also participated in political parties since the end of the 1970s, like for example the PCOT, the Communist Workers' Party of Tunisia.

**And concerning your own profession?**

I am a teacher. The situation of education is critical, either in the primary or the secondary sector, especially as regards infrastructure.

Life in this region is miserable in all areas, despite the wealth we produce here, phosphate, which is regarded as one of Tunisia's main resources. In 2008, in this context, the proclamation of falsified results for a highly anticipated competition for the recruitment of workers at the CPG, the Gafsa phosphate company, led to the outbreak of a social movement in the four mining towns. At Redeyef, a hunger strike began at the UGTT offices.

My comrades and I (I'm a member of the local UGTT committee and secretary general of the rank and file union in primary education) decided to support this hunger strike and negotiate with the sub-prefect of Redeyef, and with the Governor of Gafsa.

Without satisfactory results, we continued our struggle by demonstrations in the streets, and meetings on the square before the local headquarters of the UGTT. For six successive months of struggle, we demanded equality in

## **"We need a second revolution"**

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development, the equality of our share of the national wealth! We sent the message to the Ben Ali regime, that we could not continue to live in misery and that the state should intervene to develop our region, to create things for people to live humanely.

Finally, the police intervened to stop this movement and fired on the demonstrators: 3 dead, 34 wounded and more than 300 people arrested in the region.

Myself, I was sentenced to 10 years in prison. I spent almost 17 months between Kasserine and Mornaguia prison in Tunis. Then we were released on November 4, 2009. We have been supported by many people in Tunisia and France: civil society, associations, parties, trade unionists, democrats and so on.

We thank our comrades, our friends, and all those who supported us to demand our release and helped our families. While we were in prison, our families demonstrated in the street and women organized a sit-in.

After our release from prison, we continued to fight against the regime of Ben Ali. We never stopped until the beginning of the revolution, December 17 in Sidi Bouzid: that day we organized a sit-in in the premises of the UGTT to demand jobs. The inhabitants of Redeyef and the mining region participated in this revolution by demonstrations, marches in the streets, by assemblies, and so on until the flight of Ben Ali.

### **How do you explain how the movement extended across Tunisia at this particular time?**

The first spark of the revolution came from our region, January 5, 2008. But the basis of this revolution, the movement of the mining basin, is the social situation. The same goes for the outbreak of the revolution of January 14: it was based on the social situation of the inland regions of the Tunisia.

When we started, it was a first in Tunisia and we were isolated, the leadership of the UGTT turned his back on its activists. The executive bureau of the UGTT even sanctioned some of its local activists, including me. But the Ben Ali regime also found itself in a somewhat disturbed situation, it did not know what to do with this movement and it delayed its intervention a little.

In December 2010, in Sidi Bouzid, it was not the same thing. When it began, the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid, in particular young people, won the solidarity of everyone, including the UGTT. The country supported them.

And the Ben Ali regime committed a more serious error still than in the mining basin: from the first day, the police intervened! But, this time, the population of the regions of Gafsa, Sidi Bou Zid, Kasserine and other regions in struggle against Ben Ali, had learned the lessons of the struggle of the mining basin in 2008. What we had waited for since 2008 was that this spark would spread to all Tunisian regions, to all of the Tunisian population.

Since 2008 - we could not of course say it publicly - we targeted the Ben Ali regime, we aimed at the revolution. We have named our movement the el-karama revolution, the revolution of dignity (we had in 2008 created a website entitled "Redeyef Karama"). The revolution of January 14 or December 17 is a continuation of the movements of 2008.

### **Can you describe the forms of organization that you have selected and the link between the local union, the population and the national union?**

## "We need a second revolution"

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The UGTT has chosen to launch and provide a framework for this movement. The UGTT office was the place where people organised or met to discuss the directions to adopt. We convinced young people to come together, we organized demonstrations in the streets, avoiding confrontation with the police. It was they who assaulted us.

We began first by saying to the authorities that it was necessary to cancel the results of this competition. But, little by little, we developed other more profound claims on equal development between all regions of the Tunisia, especially for the regions of the interior who have lived for decades, and even centuries, in poverty. The population was persuaded by these claims.

### **Today, what has changed in your view?**

Until now I think that little has changed in Tunisia. Even after the elections on October 23, the social situation persists still. Until now the region has lived through a difficult situation. There is the anger of the young, of people and so on. There is also a sit-in, there are blockages of the CPG services and therefore the production of phosphate.

In the future, the current government formed by Ennahda and its associates may solve some problems. But until today I can confirm to you that the situation is the same. Throughout 2011 there was no elected government, and without government we cannot solve social problems.

Now that we have an elected Government, the social situation and the question of unemployment must be priorities. In a year or 18 months perhaps, the Constitution will be written, the situation may be somewhat improved. We need remedies, soon, because people cannot wait any longer.

### **Do you feel that the fight is not over, that people are prepared to revolt if they are dissatisfied?**

I am not optimistic, on the contrary. We have been disappointed by the results of these elections. I do not believe that this government will do much. That is evident in the program of the current Prime Minister. This is disappointing, so we must continue the fight.

And we must expect a second revolution. Because the situation is very serious, and I do not think that this newly elected regime will succeed in solving the problems.

### **What do you think are the most urgent measures to alleviate the catastrophic social situation in your area?**

In our region, we have filed our claims with the Minister of Labour. The problem of unemployment is difficult to solve in a short time, but we must first begin with the problem of precarious workers, those with no guarantees in their work, in their lives, such as those involved in what is called in Tunisia "the worksite." It is a system in place since the days of Ben Ali to calm people by employing them to, for example, carry out improvements of the urban environment. But as they are very lowly paid, this cannot solve the social problem. It is necessary to regulate their work situation.

There are also the former workers in subcontracting, created in 2008 to calm the situation. Today, these people have been recruited by a company called the Society of Environment and Planting, it must solve the problem of these people. It is also necessary to compel the phosphate company to recruit hundreds, thousands of unemployed young people in the region, to improve the situation somewhat.

There is also the problem of the former injured workers who have suffered serious work accidents of the work very

## **"We need a second revolution"**

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serious, and who have the right to be recruited by the phosphate company, not counting those who retired early between 1986 and 2000: they were thrown out the door with a very low salary and their rights were not respected. Then it is also necessary that the phosphates company devotes a percentage of the annual profit to develop the region. We are entitled to it. The social situation cannot be pacified without meeting these claims.

In conclusion, I hope that things advance, though - it is my personal opinion - I have no confidence in the current government and the newly elected officials. I hope that the situation will get better, that Tunisia is going to move forward, and that at least we feel that things have changed.

I thank all the friends of Tunisia and the Tunisian people who supported the revolution, and who have supported our country.