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Tunisia

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Interview with Ahlem Belhadj, Tunisian child psychiatrist and activist for democracy and social rights, especially women’s rights.

What overall balance sheet can we draw ten years after the Tunisian uprising?

The Tunisian revolution has not met the expectations of the young and the less young who supported it, but there is still this flame of change, this energy to make demands, to continue to make demands, to mobilize to improve this or that thing, this interest in public affairs (each political act is analysed, commented on). All Tunisians participate in this.

At the overall level, the balance sheet of ten years, we can say that what happened in 2011 and since is far from meeting our expectations, whether economically, socially, or politically. The few gains that we have had are still significant: we have freedom of expression, a democratic alternation in power, free and transparent elections - apart from the financial control of elections, it’s the same everywhere but with us it is not at all controlled. And also, a constitution which guarantees freedoms, equality, social and economic rights. But when it comes to social justice, economic and social changes, real reforms, we’ve seen nothing.

This decade has been the decade of political Islam, which has been governing continuously since the 2011 elections, often in alliance with figures from the former regime. They have allied themselves in different ways each time, and in the face of this the left has been unable to assert itself, to carry forward the demands arising from 2011.

The root causes of the revolution are therefore still there ...

For my part, I tend to say that it is a revolutionary process that is still ongoing, based mainly on the scope of social movements and social mobilizations, but also political demands, which remain radical: social justice, distribution of wealth, and opposition to all those who want to appropriate and divert the aspirations of 2011, first and foremost political Islam.

The deep waves are still there, they still animate the popular Tunisian heartlands, with many social layers, because apart from some democratic gains the results are not there. We currently have an explosive economic situation, a national debt ratio that exceeds 90%, the impoverishment of many layers of society, a disengagement of the state in terms of health and education ... An unprecedented economic crisis, with a social crisis of magnitude, an increase in the unemployment rate. In addition, there is corruption, which is wreaking havoc, the increase in the parallel economy which represents more than 50% of the Tunisian economy: economically and socially, we are short of everything.

Politically, there is great instability. If we correlate it with the revolutionary process, it shows that there is no equilibrium yet, that there is something that continues to make things move in Tunisia. Every three or four months we have a new government. I’m in the health sector, we have had 17 ministers since 2011! This political instability indicates the regime’s failure to stabilize things, whether those from the old regime or their allies in political Islam, the two allied forces of the counter-revolution in Tunisia. They have failed to establish a stable regime.

Didn’t Ennahda’s commitment to the neoliberal and counter-revolutionary agenda cause internal tensions and rifts with their popular electorate?

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It is clear that Ennahda, and it has been thus from the start, has pursued utterly neoliberal policies, coupled with horrific level of corruption, which people see and recognize today. This translates into the level of votes, they lost a lot: if we calculate in numbers of voters, they lost a lot, they have barely a third of the votes they obtained in 2011. Their policy has been a fiasco: the past decade is one of Ennahda’s failure to pursue its policies, be they ideological/religious or economic. They had promised to create 500,000 jobs and nothing has been seen, despite their unlimited adherence to neoliberal policies and international bodies which they have tried to charm on several occasions.

This has created rifts inside Ennahda and led to discontent among his constituents. The internal fissures were manifested by some criticism and a few resignations, but the Ennahda movement remained able to keep a certain unity within, and above all to play a double game: they side-lined the most ultra, the most radical elements internally, and they supported, outside, the Coalition of Dignity, al-Karama, which has quite a few elected officials and seats at the moment, which is a rotten and conservative far right, but which is today the radical wing on which Ennahda relies.

The current crisis, I believe, is no longer the crisis of Ennahda’s legitimacy, but rather the crisis of the absence of an alternative, with the inability of the left forces – like the centrist forces - to organize and propose an alternative.

PS:

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