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Tunisia

"Bitter victories, but real ones"

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A former president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), Ahlem Belhadj is also a child psychiatrist, a member of the National Union of University Hospital Physicians, affiliated to the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) and is a longtime activist of the Fourth International in Tunisia. Three years after the outbreak of the Tunisian revolt in December 2010, Belhadj still sees an effervescence and a dynamism in Tunisian social struggles that give cause for hope. "The revolutionary process is still ongoing." But there remain only very few of the political perspectives that were opened up by the formation of the Popular Front in October 2012.

In any case Belhadj is pleased that the government dominated by the fundamentalist Ennahda party was ousted from power and that a constitution was adopted that puts a brake on threats to secularism and women's rights.

According to Belhadj, it was absolutely necessary to conduct the struggle against Ennahdha. "I believe in moderate Islam, with progressive interpretations, but not in moderate Islamism." Despite its heterogeneity, Tunisian Islamism with all its different tendencies wants to govern in the name of religion, and to enforce the Islamization of society, with an "Islam which intervenes in the details of personal life," which "rules in the name of Allah" - and from the moment a political player monopolizes religion and governs in its name "it's all over".

Tunisians had a year and a half to form an opinion about fundamentalism in power: its neoliberal economic policy and the agreements that were concluded with the European Union and the IMF, its corruption and its incompetence led to a severe economic crisis, a high cost of living, unemployment, inflation and debt, and it is the poorest social layers that are paying the price. As a physician Belhadj witnesses daily "public health services that are crumbling." Instead of reforming and saving the system, Ennahdha ministers overloaded it with "a huge number of advisers" from their own ranks, and sold off state enterprises at low prices to their relatives. In any case Belhadj sees no economic solution "except in a new development model that will include the entire Maghreb."

The Ennahdha government was ousted by popular protests because of the economic crisis but also because they attacked women's rights and artistic freedom, and they want to impose a model of society that is foreign to Tunisians, such as the agreements concluded with the EU and the IMF. It was ousted because of all these faults - and also because of the violence over which it presided, culminating in the murders of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahm, leaders of the Popular Front. Even though Ennahdha did not itself kill them, according to Belhadj there are a considerable number of links between Ennahdha and the Salafists responsible for the violence against the Left. She cites the example of Ennahdha ministers whose sons are well-known Salafist militants, the Ennahdha militia (the "League for the Protection of the Revolution") which attacked the trade-union movement, and a video that is in circulation where Ennahdha members are seen saying to a Salafist gathering: "Be patient."

The Popular Front

Belhadj believes that it is the lack of theoretical and political clarity concerning the articulation of democratic and social tasks in the revolutionary process and the type of alliance needed (united front?), but also to a great extent the Salafist threats, that led the leaders of the Popular Front - which was in the beginning so promising, bringing together almost all the radical Left - to make an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie, including many of the key figures of the former Ben Ali dictatorship.

The violence and the threats of the Salafists were real, expressing a "well worked-out policy of instilling fear." But the choice made by the leaders of the Front was to respond by accepting the protection of the police, who are always seen as a force of the former dictatorship - because "transitional justice based on truth" remains a task that has scarcely been addressed.

Consequently, the Popular Front, whose formation was "a major achievement", appears, in the eyes of the poorest layers, less of a possible third way, of an alternative to the fundamentalists as well as to the secular bourgeois forces. It quickly became integrated into the dominant order, symbolized for example by it being received by the U.S. ambassador.

Moreover, the fear of Salafist violence is not in fact the only explanation for the rightward evolution of the Popular Front. Belhadj cites other aspects: the organizational weakness of almost all the components of the Front, and especially the "old traditions that had not been revised". Among the parties of the Popular Front you can find everything, including former pro- Albanians, Maoists, Stalinists and nationalists who were admirers of Saddam Hussein. This leads to an ideological confusion that people are not ready to question. Instead, the confusion strengthens the tendency to support a supposed "national bourgeoisie".

The expression of this confusion was the formation of the National Salvation Front by the Popular Front and a bourgeois party, *Nidaa Tounes*, which was open to elements from the former regime. So Belhadj sees the victory over Ennahda as "bitter, very partial, but real." If the result is "to go towards a liberal government," it will turn out to be a "sad victory."

The League of the Workers' Left (LGO), the group of the Fourth International in Tunisia, condemned the Popular Front during its recent congress, while choosing to remain there to fight the battle. Belhadj does not see much hope. Three or four other organizations that opposed the National Salvation Front have left the Popular Front, leaving only the LGO as a small and isolated critical force. A few dozen members, especially young people, have even left the LGO to form another group outside the Popular Front and to try and to try to create a really independent left alliance – but Belhadj is not very optimistic about this perspective either.

Belhadj fears a "difficult electoral process. The level of abstention may be very high, especially among young people." And taking into account the still considerable strength of the Islamists, based on a well-prepared infrastructure - mosques, Coranic schools and generous funding - they remain among the favorites for the upcoming elections with a "risk of regression on election day".

The social movement

There remains the "lively" social movement, especially the powerful trade union, the UGTT. Despite the fact that a large part of the former leadership of the UGTT was a pillar of the regime, Belhadj sees that the confederation is today "the main social force in the country" and that most of the UGTT leaders were activists who resisted Ben Ali. But now it "does not play an independent political role and does not defend the idea of a political power that would represent its base. It is thanks to it that the liberal democrats are now in power."

There has been no reform of the internal functioning of the UGTT - and as a woman in its middle-level leadership Belhadj often sees the consequences of that. The UGTT is "a very sexist sector," she says: 44 per cent of the union members are women, but only between one and three per cent of union leaders are women, and there is not a single woman in the Executive Committee. For demanding parity within the UGTT, Belhadj was called all sorts of names during the congress.

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On the other hand, Tunisia has a rather strong feminist movement, including the ATFD of which Belhadj was president. With the new constitution, feminists have "avoided the worst." The constitution affirms women's right to work, to protection against violence, to parity within the various elected bodies and to equal opportunities. But it "does not guarantee true equality and leaves the door open to different interpretations of women's rights." For example, feminists lost the debate in the Constituent Assembly on the family: they wanted to affirm the right of individuals to freely form families, but the final text asserts that "the family", as the basic unit of society, must be protected by the state. "That is why women accept violence", to "preserve the family."

In Tunisia, the husband remains the head of the family, paternal guardianship remains the norm and there is discrimination against women in the sharing of inheritances. The feminization of poverty continues and is accelerating. And violence remains a huge problem that affects nearly one in two Tunisian women, with no real strategy to fight against this phenomenon. Tunisian law still allows men who rape minors to escape being convicted by marrying their victims - even girls who are 13 or 14 years old.

Furthermore, the Islamists have also seen in the demand for the implementation of the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women an attempt to introduce gay marriage, and they are making that the basis of a campaign against feminists.

This demand is not on the agenda in Tunisia, although the ATFD has demanded the decriminalization of homosexuality and some small LGBT groups and defenders of personal freedoms are beginning to emerge, in spite of intimidation.

Tunis, 15 February 2014