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Tunisia

The political lefts in the picture

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In contrast to Egypt, left forces in Tunisia have been able to maintain continuity over several decades, even clandestinely. The main reason for this is the existence, since just after the Second World War, of a powerful trade union movement, which played a decisive role in the fight for independence and allowed left forces to partially protect themselves from the effects of repression. Some of these debates resemble those in other countries, starting with relations with the existing regimes.

1. The origins of the left

Promising beginnings

After the first world war, left reference points only really existed among a minority of the population of European origin. [1] This left was located in the extension of the European and above all French socialist tradition. In 1920, the majority of the Socialist Federation supported the Russian Revolution and became the section of the Communist International, favouring Tunisian independence in 1921. [2]

Simultaneously, a significant number of indigenous employees began to organise in trade unions. Finding no place for themselves in the local extension of the French CGT, or in the Tunisian nationalist movement of the period, in December 1924 they founded own trade union federation, the Confédération Générale Tunisienne du Travail (CGTT – Tunisian General Confederation of Labour), including notably dockers, and rail and tram workers. Immediately the CGTU and the Tunisian Communists gave them full support, including their spokesperson Jean-Paul Finidori. The road was opened to the development of a radical left converging references to Communism, class struggle trades unionism in the French tradition, and an embryonic Tunisian trades unionism of nationalist orientation.

But two major obstacles rapidly emerged to derail this nascent process:

– Colonial repression saw the founders of the CGTT and their French supporters thrown into prison, including the spokespersons of the CGTT and CGTU, who were then exiled.

– The abandonment of the demand for independence by the Communists, who took on the name of the Parti communiste tunisien (PCT – Tunisian Communist Party) in 1934, aligned to the turn in this area made by the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Stalinised Communist International.

A supplementary step was taken in 1945 when, in the context of the French government in which the PCF participated, the Communist leaders opposed the idea of independence, favouring instead autonomy inside the French Union. This explains why the left identifying with Communism and the national movement followed separate paths for some decades. The same was true in Egypt.

From the 1930s onwards - political leadership passes into the hands of the Neo-Destour

The party founded by Bourguiba in 1934 did not seek to break with colonialism but to reform it. [3] Nor did to seek to break with capitalism, instead hoping to introduce certain improvements. This party became hegemonic inside the

national movement and most of the indigenous trade union activists joined it. In 1946 the latter founded their own trade union under the name of the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT – Tunisian General Union of Labour). The latter played a decisive role in the struggle for independence and subsequently absorbed what remained of the trade union structures founded by the French. This was a major and lasting difference with Egypt where trades unionism was lastingly eradicated in the early 1950s.

It isn't astonishing in these conditions that a symbiosis existed after independence (1956) between the Neo-Destour and the trade union movement. Thus there was an alternation of periods of cooperation and of conflict between the Destourien regime and the UGTT.

The trajectory of the Socialist and Communist parties

After independence the parties of the left were in a pitiful state.

– The members of the SFIO, who were almost all European, left Tunisia and this party disappeared,

– As for the PCT, the departure of most of its French and/or indigenous members of Jewish origin was partially compensated for by increased support from young Tunisian intellectuals.

The marginalisation of the political left facilitated the installation of an authoritarian regime. Between 1963 and 1981, Bourguiba's party was the only one authorised. The only real counterweight was the UGTT with whom the regime alternated phases of seduction and repression. The margin was then narrow for the construction of an alternative left policy.

Banned in 1963, the PCT was legalised again in 1981. It then experienced an evolution comparable to that of the former Italian Communist Party. Starting from 1993, it no longer identified with Communism but rather the centre left, and took the name of Harakat Ettajdid (Movement of Renewal). Its opportunism towards the regime continued. In 1999, the general secretary of Ettajdid said: "We maintain the best relations in the world with President Ben Ali. We have gone beyond the conception of an absolute and Manichean duality between power and opposition. Because we are dealing with a national regime which is realising great reforms, under the reforming impulse of President Ben Ali. Today we are for both support and criticism"... "I support Ben Ali, so I would never be a candidate against him, I claim my support and my participation in the national consensus, and I consider that there is no alternative to President Ben Ali". [\[4\]](#) It should be said that after its 2001 congress, Ettajdid took its distance from the regime and presented a candidate at the presidential elections.

2. The emergence of radical lefts from the mid-1960s

As in Egypt, a new generation which had not really lived through the struggles for independence became active from the mid-1960s onwards. It was the product of a break with, on the one hand, Bourguibism, and on the other the PCT.

These new lefts had as a common matrix "Perspectives" which was launched in 1963. This current, born at the time of the Vietnam War and the development of the Palestinian resistance, became increasingly Maoist from 1967 onwards. After university activism, the former students began to work and some became trades unionists, in particular in teaching the banks, the post office and health sectors.

The political lefts in the picture

Perspectives split in the mid 1970s. Three durable currents then emerged. That led by Ahmed Néjib Chebbi broke with Maoism and gave birth in 1983 to the Rassemblement socialiste progressiste (RSP – Progressive Socialist Rally) which in 2001 became the Parti démocrate progressiste (PDP – Progressive Democratic Party) around which Al Joumhourî was constituted in 2012.

It should be noted that a small Trotskyist current initially chose to be active inside the RSP before founding the OCR (Organisation communiste révolutionnaire – Revolutionary Communist Organisation) in the 1980s. Broken by repression, this current survived from 2002 to 2011 under the form of an informal network.

The two big currents of the radical left: Watad (Patriotes démocrates – Democratic Patriots) and the PCOT

Two big currents originating from Perspectives explicitly identified with Marxism-Leninism:

– Cho'la (The Flame), which then gave birth to the Democratic Patriot (Watad) movement;

– *Al Amel Tounsi* (The Tunisian Worker), a newspaper published in Arabic from 1969 onwards, from which the PCOT (Parti communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie – Workers' Communist Party of Tunisia) emerged in 1986 – this took the name of Parti des travailleurs (Workers' Party) in July 2012.

Some divergences between these two currents were of an ideological nature, with Watad identifying with Mao's China and the PCOT with the Albania of Enver Hoxha. Other, more lasting, divergences were linked to different positions at the trade union level. In January 1978 a general strike was murderously repressed, and this was followed by a wide scale attack on the UGTT. Bourguiba arrested its general secretary, Habib Achour, then replaced him with a trusted crony, seeking to pull the federation into line.

Watad activists demanded the return of Habib Achour and fought for the resumption of trade union life on legitimate bases. They published 6 clandestine issues of the newspaper *Echaab* (The People). This courageous attitude explains to a great extent the significant weight of the Democratic Patriots inside the UGTT for some decades. [\[5\]](#)

Those who created the PCOT in 1986 are sometimes accused of not having acted in the same way at the time, and of having continued to work inside union structures which had been totally annexed by Bourguiba. This would be one of the reasons why the PCOT subsequently had less influence than Watad inside the UGTT.

A third divergence concerned whether or not to maintain a party political form under the dictatorship. In the 1980s, the Democratic Patriots effectively dissolved their party, hoping thus to insert themselves better in the trade union milieu and rebuild the UGTT on a clandestine basis. The current then represented by the PCOT chose rather to maintain its clandestine party structure after 1986, come what may.

In 2005, a part of Watad decided to return to the party tradition by founding the PTPD (Parti du Travail Patriotique et Démocratique – Democratic and Patriotic Party of Labour). Among its main leaders were Abderazak Hammami (who died in 2016) who moved towards the centre-left, and Mohamed Jmour, who was in 2012 among the founders of the PPDU and the Front populaire.

One of the divergences between the PTPD and the PCOT concerned the alliances the two political families had concluded during the last five years of the dictatorship. The PTPD and PCOT had separately oriented towards parties located to their right.

The PCOT worked inside the coalition of October 18, 2005 which demanded democratic rights, including the end to repression against the Islamists. This included Ennahdha, the PDP, the FDTL, and the CPR led by Moncef Marzouki. It should be recalled that in Egypt links also existed from 2001 to 2010 between the Revolutionary Socialists (Trotskyists close to the British SWP) and the Muslim Brotherhood. [6] Meanwhile the PTPD participated in the "Alliance for Citizenship and Equality" formed in 2009 with Ettajid (ex-CP) and the FDTL (social democratic). This sought to negotiate a reform of the regime with Ben Ali.

Although the radical political left managed to survive underground, it remained numerically weak and poorly structured (except for the PCOT) and marked by sectarianism. A part of this left tended to drift towards the centre, like for example a wing of the PTPD and the PSG (Parti socialiste de gauche – Left Socialist Party) which split from the PCOT in 2006 [7]

The appearance of a current identifying with social democracy

In 1994, the FDTL (Forum démocratique pour le travail et les libertés – Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties) was founded under the leadership of Moustapha Ben Jaafar, a former activist in the MDS (a split from Bourguiba's party). Legalised in 2002, the FDTL was not represented in the Assembly. It sought in vain to negotiate a reform of the regime with Ben Ali, together with Ettajid and the PTPD. The FDTL simultaneously participated in the Coalition of October 18, 2005 with the PCOT and Ennahdha.

Before 2011, the FDTL only had observer status in the Socialist International: the official section was the PSD of Bourguiba then the RCD of Ben Ali (In Egypt, Mubarak's PND was also a member of the Socialist International!).

3. The revolution of 2011 and afterwards

The left and the new activist generation

In Egypt, the revolution was carried out by youth, and they continued to be the locomotive until July 2013. If the same was initially true in Tunisia, activists from the preceding generation quickly got involved. Many of them belonged to the left wing of the trade union and associative movement, and some were also members of left organisations.

In contrast to Egypt, a political and associative continuity stretching back several decades existed in Tunisia, to a great extent due to the protection afforded by the existence of the UGTT. Often teachers or lawyers, the leaders of the political left who had for a long time been active under the Ben Ali regime rapidly came to the forefront in 2011. They brought their capacities of analysis and organisation, but also their habits acquired from their time underground of turning inwards, sectarianism and fragmentation. In other words generational renewal proved problematic for the left, as did its feminization.

After January 14, 2011, there was an expansion of political organisations, on the radical left notably:

– A second Democratic Patriot organisation was set up around Chokri Belaïd in March 2011 (MOUPAD),

– A small Trotskyist organisation was founded in January 2011 by former OCR activists under the name Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (LGO – Workers' Left League).

Alliances in flux

With the installation of democratic liberties and the end of the persecution of Ennahdha the aims of the coalition constituted on October 18, 2005 by the PCOT with Ennahdha, the PDP and the FDTL were fulfilled. The break between the left forces and the Islamists was then definitive. [8]

After January 14, 2011, the dialogue with Ben Ali advocated by the "Alliance for Citizenship and Equality" coalition set up in 2009 by Ettajdid, the PTPD and the FDTL was no longer relevant, and the PTPD broke with Ettajdid and the FDTL, who participated in the transitional governments led by former Ben Ali supporters.

The disruption of these two alliances opened the way to a regrouping of the political forces who had long worked together to overthrow Ben Ali and who rejected any compromise with the remnants of the old regime. From January 20, 2011, a first attempt at regrouping was made under the name of the January 14th Front, including the PCOT, several Watad currents (including the PTPD), the LGO and several Arab nationalist organisations. In Egypt, a left regrouping also emerged following the fall of Mubarak. [9]

But after the peak reached with the fall of the second Ghannouchi government on February 27, 2011, the mobilisations dropped off. Essebsi, a former cadre of the Bourguiba regime and the early Ben Ali era, used the carrot and stick with aplomb. He notably succeeded in replacing the "National Committee for the Protection of the Revolution" with a "High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution of Political Reform and Democratic Transition". This brought together the commissions set up by the Ghannouchi governments and personalities from a wide range of political, trade union and associative networks (including the Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'Homme (Tunisian Human Rights League) and the Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women).

The January 14 Front broke up over what attitude to take towards the High Instance:

- The PCOT refused to be involved with it, saying its goal was to torpedo the National Committee for the Protection of the Revolution.
- For Watad, Mohamed Jmour (PTPD) and Chokri Belaïd (MOUPAD) participated in the High Authority.
- Simultaneously, the pendulum which had pushed the Watad forces leftwards began to swing the other way: in April- May 2011 they participated in preliminary negotiations with centre forces with a view to constituting a "modernist pole" in the elections then planned for summer. Even if this centre-left alliance project had collapsed by June, these different approaches explain to a great extent the break-up of the January 14 Front.

The tradition of sectarianism then came to the fore. Each of the main left organisations became persuaded that it would realise a breakthrough at the elections and impose its hegemony on the others. At the October 2011 elections, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Jmour were candidates in the same constituency!

In these October elections, Ennahdha won 41.5% of the seats with 37% of votes cast. A certain demoralisation then affected the live forces of the revolution. Left political activists who had fought for years were all the more bitter that their organisations had obtained such dreadful results.

The hard search for political independence

The political lefts in the picture

The need to unite faced with the violence of the Islamist offensive again pushed the left organisations to seek unity. Such a coalition would have no meaning without the participation of at least the two main currents, Watad and the PCOT, and at least some of the Arab nationalists. Several obstacles had first to be overcome, notably:

- The distrust which existed towards Watad following their ambiguities in relation to the centre-left, as well as the accusations of bureaucratism made concerning some of their trade union leaders;
- Distrust towards the PCOT because of:
 - a supposed desire to impose its hegemony, all the more so since it was the only left force having a real party tradition,
 - its alliance with Ennahdha between 2005 and 2010 in the context of the October 18th Coalition,
 - a trade union orientation privileging the construction of its political current to the detriment of the mass character of the trade union,
 - a tendency to confuse agreement with compromise at the trade union level,
 - its propensity to treat union leaders it disagreed with as bureaucrats, notably those from Watad. [\[10\]](#)
 - its mistrust of activists identifying with authoritarian Arab nationalist governments.
- the difficulty of the main organisations in dealing with smaller forces – such as the LGO, Tunisie verte or the RAID-ATTAC association, as well as independents, on a basis of equality;
- the limited capacity of the existing organisations to allow youth and women to play a full role.

At the level of political orientation, a decisive political clarification came in summer of 2012 with the breakup of the PTPD. The left wing of the PTPD (Jmour), which rejected any alliance with Nidaa, then merged with Chokri Belaïd's MOUPAD inside the PPDU (Parti des Patriotes démocrates unifiés – Party of United Democratic Patriots). The right wing maintained the name of PTPD and oriented towards the centre-left.

A new attempt at a left regrouping was now on the agenda. Opposing Ennahdha, while refusing also to ally with any forces originating from the old regime, most left and Arab nationalist forces united in October 2012 to form the “Front populaire pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution (Popular Front for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution)” whose slogan “neither Ennahdha, nor Nidaa” summed up their position. Participants included the Democratic Patriots of the PPDU, the PCOT, the LGO, two Arab nationalist organisations, the ecologist group “Tunisie verte” and RAID (Attac and Cadtm in Tunisia). Some founding organisations subsequently left the Front, such as Tunisie verte, the MDS and the small Democratic Patriot current often designated under the name of Revolutionary Watad. The social democratic current Qotb joined the Front in June 2013.

The Popular Front has since October 2014 been the third biggest political force in Tunisia, with 15 deputies as against 5 previously for its constituent organisations. However, the Front only has 6.9% of deputies with 3.6% of votes in the parliamentary elections and 7.8% at the presidential vote. The situation is very different from Egypt, where the left organisations remain numerically weak and have not succeeded in building stable coalitions. After the

seizure of power by the Egyptian military in summer of 2013 the left has been subjected to an intense repression which has left it with less influence than before 2011.

Since its creation, the Front has been periodically subject to the temptation of a centre left orientation of alliance with Nidaa. This was reflected after the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi by participation in a Front de salut national (FSN – National Salvation Front) alongside Nidaa during the second half of 2013, which led to great discontent inside the Front and some resignations.

Starting from January 2014, the Front renewed its initial orientation. This was reflected notably by the following successive positions:

- On January 29, 2014, the refusal of its deputies to vote confidence in the neoliberal Jomaa government which succeeded that led by Ennahdha.
- On December 11, 2014, the affirmation of the need to combat both Nidaa and the Marzouki-Ennahdha duo in the second round of the presidential election.
- Refusal at the end of 2014 to vote for the 2015 finance law and the subsequent budget.
- Refusal in January 2015 to vote confidence in or participate in the Nidaa-Ennahdha government.
- Refusal in June 2016 to participate in the national unity government proposed by Essebsi.

But the positions of the Front are still not exempt from oscillations and ambiguities. The Front deputy Fathi Chamkhi says, for example: “There was in 2014 an intense debate inside the Front populaire around the question of electoral alliances: a part of the Front participated in the “useful vote” wave and was favourable to a broad anti-Ennahdha electoral alliance”. [\[11\]](#)

The small social democratic current “Qotb-Le PÃ´le”, which has no deputies, argued in October for a positive response to the advances of Nidaa (26). A part of the PPDU, which has four deputies, had the same position. The deputy Mongi Rahaoui said for example: “We are disposed to work with those who take into consideration the most important elements of our programme”. [\[12\]](#) A similar debate broke out in June 2016 with Essebsi’s proposal to constitute a “government of national unity”. Contrary to the position of the Front, Mongi Rahoui notably stated that he wanted to become a minister in the government led by Nidaa and Ennahdha, before finally backing down.

Although from the beginning of 2014, the Popular Front has progressively returned to its initial position rejecting both the Islamist right and the right led by the remnants of the old regime, this has not been done without turbulence and tension. In late 2014, the Front had for example been close to a split: the two LGO deputies had announced in advance that they would not vote confidence in the government led by Nidaa or vote for its budget, whatever decision would be taken by the Front. In the end, Nidaa having opted for a governmental alliance with Ennahdha, the Front was able again to decide unanimously in favour of independence from the government.

Following the defeat in August 2016 of the manoeuvre by President Essebsi seeking to have the Front participate in the government led by Nidaa and Ennahdha, an intense media campaign was launched against the Front, fed by the incessant statements of Mongi Rahoui. Despite its organisational weaknesses and its difficulty in establishing a programme, the Front is the only left political force which has a real existence. All attempts to construct a force to its left have failed.

The impasse of policies of allegiance to the dominant parties

– **The Parti du travail de Tunisie (PTT – Party of Labour of Tunisia)**. This party was set up in May 2011 around two UGTT notables, Abdeljalil Bédoui and Ali Romdhane. The PTT, which proclaimed its wish to become the political extension of the UGTT, rapidly disappeared from circulation.

– **Ettajdid (subsequently Massar)**. In line with its previous attitude, Ettajdid (which had succeeded the PCT in 1993) did not call on January 14, 2011 for the fall of the regime, but rather an honourable exit for Ben Ali under the form of a negotiated transition. After January 14, Ettajdid participated in the two governments of Ghannouchi, Ben Ali's former prime minister (alongside the PDP of Chebbi and the FDTL of Ben Jafaar).

After March 17, these three parties participated in the High Authority. Ettajdid then set up a “Modernist Pole” with Mustapha Ben Ahmed (a trade union official who would later join Nidaa Tounès, then split from it in December 2015), the PSG (subsequently the PS, a small rightist split from the PCOT which in 2012-2014 allied with Nidaa inside the Union pour la Tunisie), the Parti républicain (which merged in April 2012 with Chebbi's PDP to form Joumhourî), Riadh Ben Fadhel (who joined the Popular Front in June 2013 with a small social democratic current, “Qotb”). Preliminary negotiations to include the PTPD and the MOUPAD broke down in June 2011. At the elections of October 2011, the “Pôle démocratique (Democratic Pole)” elected 5 deputies then broke up in the following months.

Ettajdid then launched, on April 1, 2012, a new formation called “La Voie démocratique et sociale” or “El Massar” together with a part of the PTT and independents from the “Modernist Pole”. In 2013-2014, Massar participated in the Union pour la Tunisie grouping led by Nidaa (together with the PTPD, the PSG and briefly Joumhourî). However, Massar obtained neither deputies nor ministers in October 2014.

Following the same orientation, Massar responded favourably in June 2016 to the proposal to enlarge the coalition government led since February 2015 by Nidaa and Ennahdha (31). Massar thus finally obtained a minister in August 2016.

– **FDTL-Ettakatol**. After January 14, the FDTL became the official section of the Socialist International, following the expulsion of Ben Ali's party on January 17, 2011. In line with its hopes in 2009-2010 of negotiating a reform of the dictatorship with Ben Ali, the FDTL participated in the two transitional governments led by Ben Ali's former prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi. It then hitched itself to the wagon of Ennahdha after the latter's victory in the elections of October 2011. The President of the FDTL-Ettakatol became president of the Assembly, and its party had some ministers in the governments led by Ennahdha in 2012-13.

– **The disastrous balance sheet of the vassal parties**. The balance sheet of the parties who allied with one of the two dominant parties is catastrophic. The party of Marzouki (CPR) and that of Ben Jaffar (FDTL-Ettakatol) governed with Ennahdha in 2012-2013. The result was that Marzouki's party went from having 35 deputies in October 2011 to having 4 four years later. As for Ettakatol-FDTL, it went from 20 to 0 seats. The same goes for those who allied with Nidaa (led by cadres from the old regime): the PDP-Joumhourî's 16 deputies were reduced to one in October 2014, and the lists supported by Ettajdid-Massar went from 5 to 0.

[1] In Egypt also, the workers' movement was barely present among the indigenous population immediately after the First World War.

[2] The minority, which opposed independence, took the name of Tunisian Federation of the SFIO (section française de l'Internationale socialiste – French section of the Socialist International).

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[3] Habib Bourguiba was the the country's leader from independence in 1956 to 1987 see [his Wikipedia entry](#).

[4] Quotations from the book by Nicolas Beau and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi *Notre ami Ben Ali*, La Découverte, Paris 2002, pp. 75-76.

[5] The activists who created the PTPD in 2005 as well as those who founded the Mouvement des Patriotes démocrates (MDP or MOUPAD – Movement of Democratic Patriots) after January 14, 2011, mostly came from the Watad tradition.

[6] Between 2001 and 2010, a kind of unity in action developed between the Revolutionary Socialists and some young Muslim Brotherhood members. The RS and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood participated together in the “Cairo meetings”.

[7] Violently opposed to the alliance made by the PCOT with Ennahdha inside the Coalition of October 18, 2005, the PSG emerged in 2006 around Mohamed Kilani. It supported the Ettajid candidate in the presidential elections of 2009 then participated with it in the “Pôle démocratique” (“Democratic Pole”) in 2011. Renamed the Parti socialiste (PS – Socialist Party) in October 2012, it participated in 2013-2014 in the ephemeral coalition Union pour la Tunisie (Union for Tunisia) with Nidaa Tounes, Massar (ex-Ettajid), the PTPD and briefly Jomhuri. The PSG/PS had no deputies in 2011 or in 2014.

[8] In Egypt, after having worked for them for some years, the Revolutionary Socialist (RS) explained in spring 2011 that the Muslim Brotherhood had “become counter-revolutionaries”. In June 2012, they nonetheless called for a vote for the Brotherhood’s candidate in the second round of the presidential elections, then again acted alongside them against the repression after the military coup in July 2013.

[9] The Tahalouf grouping was created on January 26, 2011, with the participation of a Nasserite current.

[10] Jilani Hammami, a PCOT leader, says for example: “The great scourge of the left is that every time there are activists who have posts in the apparatus, they aspire to higher positions... The Democratic Patriots are in the UGTT, like everybody for sure! But the problem concerns the trade union choices. They are with the bureaucracy”. In December 2010, “these so called left leaders... said: “we only act in the structures”. Our left Democratic Patriot comrades in the UGTT leadership were against doing anything that went against the will of the UGTT leadership”. See (in French) [here](#).

[11] See “[Normalization](#)” underway in Tunisia.

[12] See (in French [here](#).