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Tunisia

"The mobilisation can weaken or even directly challenge the government"

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This interview with Jalel Ben Brik Zoghlami, leader of the LGO, was conducted by Dominique Lerouge on November 30 and December 14 2012.

Two years after the beginning of the "Arab spring" where are we?

It is a revolutionary process for dignity, liberty and social justice.

What has fundamentally changed is the relation of the population, essentially the popular classes to the regime and to politics. The people have lost their fear of the dictatorships. And this is something the Tunisians share with their brothers and sisters of the Arab region.

The first specificity of Tunisia is its specific history marked by:

- the importance of the organised working class inside the UGTT,
- the weight and a certain experience of the popular and working class left,
- the gains at the level of women's rights.

The second specificity results from the elections of October 2011. They led:

- on the one hand to the setting up of a government dominated by the fundamentalists of Ennadha,
- on the other to the pursuit of struggles and mobilisations of the popular sectors faced with the failure to consider the demands which lead to the outbreak of the revolution.

This combination opened up a new phase of the revolutionary process marked by the reorganisation of the democratic, workers' and social movement. The latter is in frontal confrontation with a neoliberal fundamentalist government supported by the US, the EU and Qatar.

Today we are at a crossroads:

- on the one hand, faced with a plan for the liquidation of the revolution,
- on the other, faced with real possibilities of advance, towards a popular, democratic and anti-imperialist regime.

Even if the current government is in the hands of Ennadha, the latter have not succeeded in getting a grip over the working class, the unemployed graduate youth, the students, women, the populations of the deprived regions, the poor of the popular neighbourhoods, the artists, the peasantry, the petty bourgeois layers and so on. Very much to the contrary, we are seeing a strong remobilisation of these diverse sectors.

What has changed at the level of democratic rights?

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We have won the freedom to express ourselves and organise. These rights have been imposed on the ground, before being recognised in legislation. Under the government of Caïd Essebsi, which had preceded that led by Ennadha, Tunisia ratified several international Conventions concerning notably women's rights and democratic rights. There was also the installation of parity on electoral lists. It was notably demanded by the women's movement, the UGTT and the parties of the left. Ennadha had to accept it.

The game is not yet over. The Ennadha regime, on the ground and through its constituent majority, manoeuvres energetically to bring the legal system, press, public space and administration under its diktat. The democratic movement, hand in hand with the UGTT and the combative youth, fights tooth and nail to defend and expand rights and democratic space. We are seeing big mobilisations against the attacks of the government from the social movement, the UGTT, journalists (on October 17, 2012, they led a general strike for the first time in Tunisia), the judges and so on.

What has changed at the social level?

The successive governments since the fall of Ben Ali have followed the same neoliberal economic choices, in liaison with international capital. Inflation is high, and there are around 200,000 more people unemployed than at the time of Ben Ali. As for the development of the regions of the interior, we face an almost total absence of state and private sector investment. So poverty is increasing, The new partnership agreement with the European Union will deepen the neoliberal policy, increase the destruction of the economic tissue, and above all will attack agriculture.

What about the situation of women?

Today women are facing an offensive by Ennadha and the Salafists to push them out of the public space. Certain currents are even campaigning to threaten the freedom of woman to choose their husband, the age of marriage, as well as the ban on polygamy. We note that in the section on human rights, the new agreement with the European Union refers to the international Conventions, but with the hypocritical blessing of the Europeans, there is an exception on women's rights, in not mentioning the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In the context of the writing of the future Constitution, Ennadha seeks to replace the notion of equality between men and women by that of "complementarity".

How have struggles developed over the past two years?

Since December 1, 2010, we have been in a revolutionary process which has been like a switchback. The struggles were particularly significant between December 17, 2010 and February 27, 2011: Ben Ali had fled, and the two Ghannouchi governments which followed him had to resign. Significant advances were imposed, like the ban on Ben Ali's party and the election of a constituent assembly.

After February 27, 2011, struggles for social rights took place, essentially in the mining basin as well as in regions of the interior like Sidi Bouzid or Siliana. In posts and telecommunications, the state had to withdraw its plans. Then the situation changed: many activists concentrated on the elections, initially planned for July 2011, and finally taking place in October. Then the mobilisations resumed, beginning in the mining basin. Not a day passed without a strike or a demonstration, even in small localities. Mobilisations notably took place around wages.

Incapable of resolving the social and economic problems, the government has from early 2012 tried to attack the backbone of the social movement, the UGTT. That led to big mobilisations in its defence, and the regime had to back off. The struggles also affected precarious workers, subcontracting as well as the unemployed graduates in the Union des diplômés-chômeurs (UDC).

Mobilisations have also taken place for the defence of civil liberties, including freedom of expression. Tunisia has seen its first general strike of journalists. A victorious strike in particular took place at one of the main Tunisian newspapers against the director imposed by Ennadha.

The fight for the defence of women's rights has notably been marked by significant street demonstrations, on August 13, 2012, the anniversary of the promulgation of the Personal Code recognising an extended legal equality for women in 1956.

That said, significant differences exist between sectors since they do not all have the same experiences of struggle. This is evident between the regions. Some regions are very much in advance of others, like for example that of Sidi Bouzid and numerous towns in the interior.

Inside the working class certain sectors are more combative than others, like posts, telecommunications, teaching or public health where strikes also affect doctors.

Social struggles have above all concerned the sectors organised by the UGTT. In the public sector the government has been forced to negotiate nationally, and wage increases have been won. Advances have also taken place in the private sector.

At the end of November, in the region of Siliana, big popular mobilisations took place, supported by a general strike called by the regional UGTT. Fierce police repression followed, with more than 200 wounded in the initial days. This radicalised the population of Siliana and gave rise to big mobilisations of support in all regions. These mobilisations can open real perspectives, to weaken or even directly challenge the current government.

What repression has been used against the social movement and activists?

Repression is especially significant in the regions of the interior. It is organised by three types of forces:

– First the state apparatus of the Ben Ali period, which remains intact. Martial law remains in force, giving the police and army important powers. That allowed a strong-arm intervention in Tunis on April 7, 2012, against a demonstration by unemployed graduates. The same thing was repeated two days later against a demonstration for the defence of democratic rights. In recent months, the police intervened violently in the regions of Menzel Bouzaane, Hencha, Gabes, Djerissa, Kasserine and elsewhere. And in a horrible way in Siliana.

– There has been a multiplication of intimidation. Left activists or sympathisers have been arrested. Certainly, there have been mobilisations which succeeded in having them released, but the threat of being brought to court continues to weigh on their heads.

– Repression is also exercised by the militias of Ennadha, organised at the local level and claiming to act "in defence of the revolution". In particular they attack the political meetings and demonstrations of the UGTT. They bear responsibility for the death of a leader of Nidha Tounes during a demonstration in Tataouine, in the south of Tunisia.

– The third instrument of repression is constituted by the Salafists and jihadists. They have declared a "holy war" against the UGTT, democrats and women who do not respect Sharia. These are violent groups who sometimes confront the police. They have established their law in some popular neighbourhoods, and their first victims are women and the poor. They are at the heads of demonstrations attacking certain artists.

What balance sheet do you make of the government led by Ennadha since autumn 2011?

If this government took the baccalaureate, it would have scored zero in every subject. It has neither the competence nor the necessary experience. Ennadha's leaders have spent years in prison or in exile. They did not expect the old regime to fall. They didn't believe it was possible to overthrow it and were ready to negotiate with it. They have shown the people that they practiced the same clientelism as Ben Ali's party.

On the social level, they boasted of being able to create 500,000 new jobs, and we have 200,000 more unemployed. In terms of relations with international capital, Tunisia constitutes a key player. The country has suffered from structural adjustment plans which have impoverished it, destroyed a great part of its economic tissue, through hundreds of thousands of people into unemployment, with some of them having to take to the seas, often dying there.

The government has made the same economic choices as Ben Ali. It has even gone further than him in negotiating a partnership agreement with the European Union. The parties in government are increasingly criticised. They are isolated on questions like the independence of the judiciary. The same goes for the organisation of the elections scheduled for 2013, where they are in conflict with the Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'Homme (LTDH – Tunisian Human Rights League), the parties of the Popular Front, the parties of the centre and so on. As for international policy, the government is also very much criticised for its alignment with Qatar or the Western countries, notably the USA.

What are the relations between Ennadha, the Salafists, and the jihadists?

A small part of the Salafists and jihadists are linked to the Wahabists or to Al-Qaeda. Some have been to fight in Afghanistan. But the others, above all the youth, generally are at the service of the Ennadha strongmen. They are manipulated by them as well as the political police, to attack women, artists, the UGTT and so on.

In particular we see them going into action when the police and army have difficulties in dealing with mobilisations. But they also confront the forces of order when the government is in difficulty at the social and economic level. Fundamentally and strategically, nothing fundamental distinguishes these three currents. But Ennadha is by far the biggest numerically, with ten times more members than the Salafists and jihadists put together.

What balance sheet would you make of the past attitude of the organisations of the political left? Why did the January 14 Front break up in 2011?

Before the elections, the different components of the January 14 Front did not have a good appreciation of the relationship of forces. The main organisations very much overestimated their influence. With their heads turned by the role accorded to them by the media, some thought that it was possible for them to make an electoral breakthrough running on their own.

The result of the elections of October 2011 was a real cold shower. Then, discussions took place and the organisations have begun to work together. The first reason is that the activists who had participated in the January 14 Front had a long tradition of working together since the time of Ben Ali, for example inside the UGTT, the UDC, on student or feminist questions, or inside the LTDH. Their links were strengthened in the first revolutionary phase from December 17, 2010 to February 27, 2011. The second reason for this rapprochement is the gravity of the current situation. The third is the need, in this context, to confront the two blocs around Ennadha and Nidha Tounes.

What would be your initial balance sheet of the new Popular Front?

Today the Popular Front has an undeniable presence, notably in the most advanced sectors of the working class. It is present in all the regions, among the unemployed graduates, as well as in a series of organisations like the UGTT, the LTDH or the Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates (ATFD – Tunisian Association of Democratic Women).

Since it was founded, a coordination has been created in which numerous independents participate. The meeting organised on October 16 was one of the most significant that Tunisia has seen since the elections of October 2011. Even if it has few financial resources and no offices, the Popular Front is present in most of the social movements and mobilisations, where its activists sometimes play a leading role.

Its platform is democratic, progressive, anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal. It explicitly demands parity between men and women. For the first time, the activists making up the Front pose the problem of taking power, on an anti-neoliberal and anti-fundamentalist orientation. It is a broad workers' and popular front which, for the LGO, prepares the way for the UGTT to then play such a function. The Popular Front is fully involved in the democratic and social mobilisations. And it will run lists at the 2013 elections. These two aspects are complementary.

What do you expect from the World Social Forum which will take place in Tunis in March 2013?

This Forum should be an effective time to express loudly the rejection of neoliberalism as well as the diktats of the EU and the USA. We expect a significant presence from all the movements opposed to neoliberalism and fighting for the emancipation of oppressed peoples.

On December 13, 2012, Tunisia was due to experience its second general strike since independence. The strike was called off on December 12. In what context was the strike call made?

Just before there were the mobilisations in Siliana. After weeks of mobilisations organised by the regional UGTT, the latter launched an appeal for a strike on November 27 which led four days later to fierce repression. On December 1, the government partially backed down, notably by dismissing the governor, whose departure had been demanded.

With the Islamist attack on the UGTT office of December 4, the plan by Ennahda to unleash violence against the UGTT became apparent. All the more so inasmuch as it was the sixtieth anniversary of the killing of Farhat Hached, the great leader of the national movement and the trade union movement. Choosing this date was something that was resented by the population.

The UGTT immediately organised regional strikes in Sfax, with around 50,000 demonstrators, Tozeur, Siliana, and so on. On Sunday big meetings took place where there had been no strikes. As usual, the bourgeoisie and above all the most coherent elements among them, namely the army and police, have used a very common device: calling for national cohesion saying that blood had flowed and a great danger threatened the country. They also launched a hate campaign against the UGTT, according to was damaging national cohesion and the economy of the country. It was in this context that the UGTT decided the next day to call a general strike for December 13.

On what basis did the UGTT leadership cancel this strike?

Certainly, the administrative ban on militias wasn't obtained. But the main thing is that Ennahda and the government

were exposed. They recognised that the UGTT had been attacked, and they denounced this attack. They also accepted the constitution of a commission of enquiry.

The UGTT showed that it did not only defend the immediate interests of the working class or the union, but also liberties and the Tunisian people against the violence of the fascist militias of Ennahda. At the same time, the UGTT pushed to the limit the contradictions inside the bourgeoisie, whether in the opposition or in power, and even inside Ennahda. Following the cancellation of the strike, the UGTT did not appear as an adventurist leadership, striking for the sake of striking, but as a leadership which defended the Tunisian people against violence. The government has been shown a yellow card: if it recommences such attacks, a general strike will then be legitimate in the eyes of all. Beyond the ban on militias, the possibility of overthrowing the government would then be open.

The UGTT emerges from this trial with a reinforced social and democratic weight and strength. To reassure its activists, Ennahda wishes to put over the message that the UGTT backed down, whereas it was them that backed down. It would be a serious error to say the same thing as our enemies.