

# The anti-socialist politics of Tunisia's official "opposition"

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1 February 2011

On January 28, the Ettajdid ("Renewal") movement held a public debate in Paris on the recent mass uprising in Tunisia that forced out the former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Ettajdid, the former Stalinist Tunisian Communist Party, is one of the official "opposition" parties in Tunisia. Its leader, Ahmed Brahim, serves as the interim regime's minister of higher education.

Since the mass uprisings, which began after the December 17 self-immolation of a young Tunisian worker in protest against desperate social conditions, the "opposition" has pretended to be in solidarity with the masses. In fact, they have served as an instrument of the Tunisian ruling elite and the provisional government dominated by Ben Ali's old cronies. They have tried to bring mass protests against the interim government to an end and to stabilise the state in the interests of the Tunisian bourgeoisie and the major imperialist powers, including the United States and France.

The speakers at the Paris meeting expressed their support for the interim government, citing a recent cabinet reshuffle. They declared that the interim government will be able to establish democracy in the country.

In concealing their position of support for the remnants of Ben Ali's regime, the speakers at the meeting declared: "[Ettajdid] supports a political process that will ensure the democratic transition based on conditions formulated by Ahmed Brahim during his participation in the January 16 interim government and his exercise of ministerial functions."

They unabashedly declared their loyalty to the global financial aristocracy, calling for measures to calm the political situation and reassure the banks. They explained that broader participation by political parties

in government would "reassure the people and investors" to "ensure the return of economic activity at a sustained rhythm to guarantee the stability and security of the country." Such language could be used by any US government operative.

The Tunisian uprising has spread across the North Africa and the Middle East, with hundreds of thousands of workers and students protesting against dictatorships and appalling social conditions. Over the past few days, Egypt has been rocked by a social uprising against US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak.

From the beginning to the end of the meeting, the speakers made no mention of or reference to the events in Egypt or any appeal for solidarity action with Egyptian workers. The subject of Egypt only came up once, when the chairperson complained that there were fewer participants than in a previous meeting, "due to a pro-Egypt demonstration. It's an unfortunate coincidence."

Their debate was exclusively focused on stabilising the existing Tunisian state, discussing how the interim government should handle the situation. They declared that Ettajdid's role is to propose solutions and actions for "democratic transition."

They explicitly opposed the perspective that the mass working class uprising in Tunisia should fight for socialist policies. One speaker bluntly declared: "In Tunisia we are not dealing with a proletarian revolution. We cannot demand the nationalisation of the banks and of industries. But it is a transition for democracy. We are going in the right direction. Things must continue as is."

They insisted that the only perspective for the movement was "to reform the constitution as it exists."

The speakers were clearly straining to hide the gulf separating their counter-revolutionary policies from

revolutionary socialism. They absurdly falsified the character of the October 1917 revolution in Russia, claiming that the Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, had established power based on the remnants of the bourgeois Provisional Government.

They also defended Tunisia's trade union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). It is widely acknowledged that the UGTT had long been an ally of Ben Ali and supported his free-market reforms. In fact, the UGTT opposed the mass uprising at its outset and is now backing the interim government as it seeks to repress continuing protests.

The speakers of the Ettajdid made a few references to the UGTT's previous collaboration with the Ben Ali's regime, as they cannot ignore this fact. However, they claimed that the UGTT had now changed its mind and would support the masses, adding that it was "an important player" in Tunisian politics.

The bankrupt policies of Ettajdid are rooted in their history as a Stalinist, anti-Marxist party. The Ettajdid movement evolved from the Tunisian Communist Party, founded in 1934 as an offshoot of the French Communist Party—which was by then politically controlled by Joseph Stalin and the Kremlin bureaucracy.

The regime of Habib Bourguiba, Ben Ali's predecessor, illegalised the party in 1962 but legalised it in 1981. In line with the Stalinist "two-stage" theory of defending the national bourgeoisie in developing countries, the Tunisian Communist Party identified itself as a national-democratic organisation that sought unity between all "patriotic classes." In 1988, it signed Ben Ali's National Pact.

After the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, it repudiated any association with communism. In 1993, it became the Ettajdid movement. Under Ben Ali, Ettajdid won two seats in the legislative elections of 2009. After the popular uprising ousted Ben Ali, who fled the country on January 14, Ettajdid joined the interim government formed on January 17.

Since the uprising against Ben Ali, Ettajdid has proclaimed its full support for the interim government, while cynically issuing occasional criticisms in an attempt to preserve a limited "oppositional" coloration. Shortly after Ben Ali fled and the interim government was established, Ettajdid's France coordinator Rabeh

Arfaoui told *Le Monde* that he had full confidence in it: "We are against the politics of the empty chair. We trust the integrity of the current government, which will know how to react if there is a danger to democracy. Its mission is to prepare elections in six or seven months. So now, let's go forward!"

As the mass protests escalated against the interim government, Ettajdid retreated, cynically threatening to pull its leader, Ibrahim, out of the interim government unless it removed RCD ministers from the cabinet. This was only phrase-mongering, however. Though the RCD ministers did not leave the cabinet, Ibrahim decided to stay on.

On January 28, Ettajdid issued a statement praising the interim government for including "national figures known for their great competence and integrity." It added that it was confident the interim government would fight to "prevent any regressive attempts to turn the situation back."



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