

Tunisian Reform Commission defends capitalist regime

Kumaran Ira, Alex Lantier
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On March 26 Tunisia's Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution and the Democratic Transition was enlarged from 70 to 130 members in a closed-door session.

This cynical move—bringing in more women and youth affiliated to official “opposition” parties and various Internet bloggers—aimed to provide political cover against charges that the body is controlled by figures of the former regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

This is part of an ongoing struggle between the Tunisian working masses and the ruling elite, who are attempting to maintain capitalist rule and their corrupt, lucrative relations with foreign imperialism. Ben Ali was ousted January 14 after a month of mass popular protests. This helped spark revolutionary struggles in Egypt leading to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and protests throughout the Middle East.

The Commission was set up by the Tunisian government in response to mass protests that led to the ouster of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, a former Ben Ali appointee, on February 27. Protests of over 100,000 people had demanded Ghannouchi's resignation and the formation of a new regime. (See: Tunisia prime minister resigns amid mass demonstrations)

On March 3, acting President Fouad Mebazza—another former top official under Ben Ali—announced the formation of the Higher Political Reform Commission, subsequently renamed the Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution and Democratic Transition.

He said, “We declare today the start of a new era ... in the framework of a new political system that breaks definitely from the deposed regime.” He announced that the commission would draft a new electoral code

and a new constitution. This will be presented to a constituent assembly to be elected July 24.

The commission is headed by law professor Iadh Ben Achour. After its formation, he said: “The aim of this committee is to establish a free state that responds to the revolution of Tunisian people and allows all citizens and political parties to express their opinions.”

In fact, as events were to show, the Commission was a talk shop for Tunisian business interests and their accomplices among the unions and official “opposition” parties, attempting to shut down working-class protests and create a new legal basis for capitalist rule in Tunisia.

This did not prevent Tunisia's unions and petty-bourgeois parties, such as the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hamma Hammami and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement, from praising the establishment of the commission.

Hammami described Mebazza's maneuver as “a victory of the people and the revolution.” He even suggested that it should have longer to do its work—during which it officially controls the future political constitution of Tunisia—claiming that the 4-1/2 month deadline between the setting up of the commission and the elections was “too short.”

The leader of Ettajdid, Ahmed Ibrahim, said that Mebazza's decision is “a victory for everyone, a victory for Tunisia.”

The UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Labor) trade union issued an official statement praising a decision “that places Tunisia on the road to liberty and democracy and institutes a clear mechanism for political life in the country.” The UGTT assistant general secretary, Ali Ben Romdhane, told AFP: “The program is clear, there are no more blurry parts.”

In fact, the ruling elite and its servants in the petty-

bourgeois pseudo-“left” were trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the workers. However, events increasingly made clear the character of Mebazza’s initiative: creating a central location for the Tunisian bourgeoisie and its political agents to plot against the revolution.

The Commission consists of business leaders, union bureaucrats and various official “opposition” parties. It includes representatives of the UTICA (Modernization Movement of the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Artisans), Tunisia’s main business federation; the UGTT; and numerous federations of middle-class professionals including doctors, lawyers, journalists, and notaries.

The political parties represented on the Commission include the Progressive Democratic Party, the official pro-capitalist opposition under Ben Ali; the Ettajdid Movement; the Islamist Ennahda Movement; and smaller parties.

The Commission meets in the buildings of Tunisia’s Economic and Social Council—the organization set up in 1956 when Tunisia became independent—to organize negotiations between business groups, the UGTT trade union, and regional and professional groups.

The political fiction on which the council is based is the claim that these forces represent a break with the Ben Ali regime. Thus, in a March 21 interview on *AllAfrica.com*, Achour commented: “not being compromised by association with the former régime—that is the fundamental criterion that governed the choice of the members [of the commission], including those proposed by the political parties.”

This is a crude lie. Whatever the individual histories of the people sitting on the Commission, the organizations they represent are organs of the Tunisian ruling class and its collaboration with foreign imperialism. UTICA has overseen Tunisia’s explosive development as a cheap-labor capitalist economy, whose intense exploitation of the working class created the riches on which the Ben Ali kleptocracy was based.

As for the main political parties present on the commission—the PDP and Ettajdid—they signed the 1988 national pact with the opposition, becoming officially recognized cogs of the Ben Ali machine. The UGTT, for its part, endorsed Ben Ali’s candidacy in the dictatorship’s bogus presidential “elections” and refused to endorse the recent protests against Ben Ali

when they began.

Events rapidly showed the commission had no popular support. On March 23, the commission met behind closed doors, amid popular demonstrations outside. Objections were raised in the press that the commission did not include sufficient numbers of women, youth, or representatives of the poor, mountainous western regions where protests began in December.

Subsequently, UTICA president Hamadi Ben Sedrine let slip the counter-revolutionary plans motivating his organization’s negotiations with the unions and middle-class groups. He said, “I dedicate myself to re-establishing order in the country’s economy, at least in the private sector, as long as the executive bureaus of the UTICA and the UGTT get together around a table in the company of the minister of social affairs, and that all sides make definite engagements.”

Sedrine demanded that the UGTT help him put a stop to “work-to-rule actions, excessive demands, and all occupations of workplaces by workers, who often resort to such practices that aim to internally sabotage the firms employing them by laziness and inertia.”

He explained that breaking working-class opposition was critical to secure the backing of major foreign investors: “Laurence Parisot, the president of the France’s MEDEF business federation, will come to Tunisia at the end of May. How can we discuss the maintenance and growth of French investment in Tunisia if this atmosphere of anarchic demands continues to prevail in the private sector of our country?”

Under these conditions, the recent enlargement of the commission—primarily by tripling the number of representatives of political parties, so that each representative also has a corresponding female and a corresponding youth representative—is a cynical fraud. It aims to give the commission a new face, without changing its class character: a counter-revolutionary assembly of the entire political establishment, aiming to end the struggles of the working class in Tunisia.



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