

Tunisian regime creates electoral commission amid mass strikes

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17 May 2011

Last Monday, the Tunisian interim government announced the formation of the independent electoral committee to oversee the July 24 election of a constituent assembly, which is to oversee the drafting of a new constitution.

This came after the regime repressed mass anti-government protests against reports of a threatened army coup, should the Islamist Ennadha party come to power. After anti-government protest broke out on May 5, the regime imposed a curfew, which is still in force. It is reported that a 25-year-old man was killed by troops on May 8 and at least 600 people were arrested in the four-day protests.

The electoral committee was elected by Tunisian interim government Higher Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution and the Democratic Transition (Political Reform Commission), chaired by law professor Yadh Ben Achour. This body approved the creation of the committee in April. The electoral committee consists of 13 members including lawyers, academics and other professionals.

Last week, Prime Minister Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi said that election could be delayed due to technical difficulties. Speaking on state television, he said, “If the reform committee says there would be technical difficulties that would be another probability to look at.” He also told AFP that the elections could be postponed if their “credibility” demanded it.

Whether or not the election takes place, the Tunisian masses can expect nothing from this election. After the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, events have exposed the fraudulent character of the interim regime and its reform government. Their role is to carry out the policies demanded by the Tunisian ruling elite, in conjunction with global banks and the Western imperialist powers.

The regime’s plans to possibly delay the election are shared by financial markets, which fear the possible consequences of such an election, were the ongoing wave of strikes and sit-ins to continue until July. Richard Segal of banking group Jefferies told Reuters: “Markets however would probably be more

forgiving of a small delay and might actually prefer it.” He added, “The country is not giving itself much time to hold the new elections and therefore a technical delay would be understandable.”

Tunisia has witnessed an explosion of strikes and workers’ protests in recent weeks, as workers continue to press demands for jobs and better wages. The establishment Tunisian daily *Le Temps* wrote: “The period of democratic transition is marked by uncontrolled movements with sometimes excessive demands, with sit-ins, demonstrations and occasionally stormy protests, looting and insubordination—movements that hurt State authority, dissuade investors, threaten social cohesion, and weaken the national economy, which they threaten to bring to its knees.”

Recently, British Gas Tunisia (BG), Tunisia’s largest natural gas producer, threatened to shut down its plant after a week-long protest by local residents, demanding jobs, who blockaded factory operations. Last week, it was reported that protesters blockaded BG employees for 48 hours before being cleared out.

Staffs at Tunisia Catering Company, subsidiary of Tunisair, went on strike demanding the return of their enterprise to the parent company, Tunisair. Last week, staff organized work stoppages and sit-ins at the airport of Tunis. The strike has continued for almost one month at Monastir airport.

Because the necessary capital is controlled by wealthy Tunisians and major international banks terrified by the revolutionary struggles against the dictatorship, however, the country’s social situation getting worse, with rampant unemployment and soaring poverty.

Le Temps cited Professor Nouri Mzid: “We face a profound crisis affecting the labor market and the status of people who are employed. ... Over more than 20 years, Tunisia has not been able to cut its official unemployment rate, which has stayed between 13 and 15 percent.” In many Tunisian provinces, unemployment is even higher.

According to *Le Temps*, “for university degree holders, the

unemployment rate is on the order of 36 percent in Kef, Siliana, Kairouan, and Kasserine, 42.4 percent in Jendouba, 44.4 percent in Sidi Bouzid, 44.8 percent in Gafsa, and 47 percent in Kébili.”

The goal of finance capital and the Tunisian state machine is to give enough time for the unions and various petty-bourgeois ex-“left” parties to suppress workers’ struggles and give a pseudo-constitutional fig leaf to cover the functioning of the Ben Ali state machine.

These organizations are implicated through their negotiations with the UTICA employers’ federation and the state regime itself, in the context of the reform commission set up by the interim regime after mass protests ousted Ben Ali in January. The commission contains the UTICA, European Union-backed human rights groups, the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Labour) union, and the official “opposition” parties like the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement.

Though the Maoist Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hamma Hammami did not participate in the commission, it is backing the commission and its policies.

The pro-state character of the reform commission was laid out by Ben Achour in an April interview to *Le Monde*. Speaking about the Commission, he said: “A council to protect the revolution, with political parties and civil society groups, was created and conceived of as a sort of tutor for the government—which could have led to a crisis and a parallelism between two power centers, one of them institutional, the other revolutionary. The body over which I preside is the synthesis of these two orientations.”

The unions and petty-bourgeois parties never had any intention of functioning as a revolutionary alternative, however, and are functioning in close collaboration with the state. Last week, Interim Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi met with political parties and trade unions officials who made no criticism of regime’s crackdown against the protesters, but expressed their support for the recently formed electoral committee.

After the meeting with Essebsi, UGTT Secretary General Abdessalem Jrad—a long-time Ben Ali supporter—told the Tunisian TAP news agency that the UGTT’s “final aim” was to “help this Government best carry out its difficult mission.” The UGTT is itself a major part of the pro-imperialist establishment, having backed Ben Ali’s free-market reforms. When mass protests broke out last December after the self-immolation of Tunisian university graduate Mohamed Bouazizi, the UGTT refused to call strike action against police

repression.

Major investors are hoping that the UGTT and the petty-bourgeois ex-“left” parties will be able to politically throttle the working class and re-establish profitability for the bosses.

Tunisia has been invited to participate in the forthcoming G8 summit in Deauville on May 26-27. Ahead of the summit, international bankers, financial institution, business leaders, academics and officials in various fields including trade, telecommunications and energy have called for investment in Tunisia. They jointly published a communiqué, titled “Invest in Democracy” on their web site (<http://investindemocracy.net>), due to appear in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* ahead of the summit.

The communiqué says, “We are confident that the establishment of democratic institutions will be a major factor in improving the attractiveness and the economic performances on medium and long term.”

It adds, “The investment opportunities, the restructuring, the level of qualification of the workforce, the mastery of new technologies and the geographical proximity to Europe make out of Tunisia an economic partner that will share with Europe ... in the coming years, the new Tunisia will be one of the most attractive economic centers of the Mediterranean.”

Since Ben Ali left power, the interim government and its policies are supported by major imperialist powers, in particular France, which backed Ben Ali’s repression until his regime was ousted.

On May 14, French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s Special Adviser Henri Guaino met with Essebsi to prepare Tunisia’s participation in the summit. After the meeting with Essebsi, Guaino told TAP they would see “what the G8 can propose to Tunisia to help it deal with the difficulties it faces. France is ready to help Tunisia by all means.”

French companies are increasingly seeking to develop their investments in Tunisia. On April 27, UTICA met with the MEDEF French business federation. It reported that the meeting was “an opportunity to showcase the characteristics of Tunisia after the revolution, and to reassure French investors while inciting them to further develop their investments in Tunisia.”



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