

Tunisian interim government delays Constituent Assembly elections

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On June 8, the interim Tunisian government decided to postpone the Constituent Assembly elections to October 23. The postponement of the election, initially due on July 24, was approved by a majority with the support of the political parties, after they had reached an agreement with the government, the High Commission for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, and the electoral commission.

The election's ostensible purpose is to elaborate a new constitution for the Tunisian regime, shaken by the revolutionary struggles of the Tunisian workers after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December. These struggles forced President Zine El Abedine Ali to flee on January 14.

Confirming the postponement of the election due to "technical difficulties" at a meeting, provisional Prime Minister Beji Caïd Essebsi stated: "What is important is that the government should organise free and transparent elections to protect Tunisia's reputation and maintain the brilliant image of her revolution."

The provisional government still fears the social opposition and the explosive strike waves that threaten foreign investment. Recently, there have been several strikes, including, among others, Tunisie Telecom workers, commercial truck drivers, customs officers and la Société tunisienne du sucre—the Tunisian Sugar Company workers.

Essebsi demanded, "It is absolutely necessary to break with every kind of strikes and protests in preparation for the organisation of democratic, free and transparent elections on October 23." He added that "the economic and social situation that the country is experiencing can no longer tolerate such disturbance, especially confronted with the deterioration of the main economic sectors."

Essebsi's speech shows that his main fear is that, through their struggles, the workers will expose the fraudulent character of the so-called constituent process. He intends instead to wait and hope to exhaust the workers' struggles—hoping that the new constitution will be able to give a fake democratic façade to the remnants of the Ben Ali regime.

Essebsi's anti-working class manoeuvring has been supported by all the forces of the old official and pseudo-official "opposition," with which the regime is negotiating the "constituent process."

Ghazi Gheraïri, a member of the High Commission for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition, stated: "The Constituent Assembly is the best democratic choice for elaborating a new constitution and shaping the future of the country."

He explained that the Constituent Assembly "will be tasked with elaborating a new constitution and carrying out the legislative role of parliament, notably debating the state budget bill for 2012, promulgating laws, adopting international agreements and making sure that the present government's international commitments are followed up."

The postponement of the election met with the support of parties such as the Democratic Progressive Party, the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid Movement and the Islamic Ennahda Party. These parties participate in the High Commission, which also includes the bosses' organisation UTICA, the UGTT union, and various middle-class associations.

Ennahda, which had formerly supported the July 24 election date, stated: "We consider that the position of the government on this election is encouraging and we

are responding to it positively.”

Ettajdid’s general secretary, Ahmed Ibrahim, said: “What is important is to organise transparent and credible elections. As political parties we must respect that date, put an end to all the exaggerations and accusations, and take on our responsibility for the good of this country.”

The petty bourgeois parties are also supporting Essebsi’s decisions. This is the case with the Communist Party of the Tunisian Workers (PCOT). Since the fall of Ben Ali, the PCOT has supported government policies—collaborating with the provisional government to prevent the workers’ demands from developing into an open struggle for power against the official political establishment.

Hamma Hammami, the PCOT spokesman, asserted: “We are in agreement with that date because we will have enough time to prepare the necessary material, and the legal and technical conditions required for the organisation of the vote.”

According to the official TAP news agency, Hammami “explained that the most important thing for the POCT is not the organisation of the elections, but establishing democracy in the country, on solid foundations. He pointed out that what is expected of the transitional government today is that it guarantee all the appropriate conditions for the Independent Higher Body for the Elections so that it can achieve its timetable for this election, and carry out the urgent political reforms, notably the freedom of the press, as a guarantor of free and credible elections.”

With these comments, the PCOT provides a political cover for the transitional government, the product of the former Ben Ali regime, and a defence of the Tunisian bourgeoisie and its relations with imperialism. The idea put forward by the PCOT that such a government could install democracy is completely wrong.

While the political forces are trying to stabilise the capitalist regime, the provisional government is reassuring the businessmen and investors of the imperialist powers that they will have continued access to cheap, exploited Tunisian labour. After discussions with the French bosses’ organisation MEDEF last month (see “Tunisian interim prime minister visits

France ahead of G8 summit”), Essebsi went on to meet top American officials.

On June 9, Essebsi took part in a forum organised by the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce (TAAC). He paid tribute to the political parties and “civil society” for having come to an agreement on the postponement of the election and for their support for the political reforms.

He added: “The quality of Tunisia’s human resources, and the place which Tunisian women occupy in the political and economic domain, are factors which strengthen Tunisia’s chances of successfully achieving the democratic process.”

At a time when Paris and Washington are continuing to bomb Libya, next door to Tunisia, Essebsi lauded US foreign policy. He praised “the American administration, whose foreign policy has radically changed, in the light of the popular revolutions which the region is experiencing at the moment, has expressed its willingness to support Tunisia financially and to authorise the access of its products to the American market.”

The United States is also seeking to increase its investments in Tunisia. US Senators John Kerry and John McCain, together with Senator Joseph Lieberman, are preparing a bill granting economic assistance to Tunisia and Egypt. However, Kerry and McCain had to put off a business trip planned for June 24—during which they would have been accompanied by executives of General Electric, Boeing, Coca-Cola, Bechtel, ExxonMobil, Marriot, and Dow—allegedly due to mechanical problems with their plane.



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