

Low voter registration for the Tunisian Constituent Assembly elections

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10 August 2011

On July 30, with three days to go before the August 2 deadline, only 23.5 percent of Tunisia's 7.5 million eligible citizens had registered to vote in preparation for the elections to the Constituent Assembly, due on October 23. The electoral authority, which had launched the voter registration campaign, on July 1, was obliged to extend the deadline to August 14.

The lack of popular interest in the Constituent Assembly elections is a devastating verdict on the Tunisian Transitional Government's attempts to give itself a veneer of pseudo-democratic legitimacy. With the 41-to-51 age-group making up the largest proportion of those registering, young workers—the driving force of the revolt that forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee on January 14 to Saudi Arabia—have overwhelmingly ignored the poll. This is because the government is widely seen as a continuation of the Ben Ali dictatorship.

Similarly, the trials of the dictator and his wife in absentia for embezzlement have evoked little interest. Threats of long prison sentences and heavy fines are meaningless, because the Transitional Government is making no attempt to obtain the extradition of Ben Ali and his wife from Saudi Arabia. Nor are the main details of the corrupt Ben Ali political machine coming to light.

Béatrice Hibou, research director at the CERi (Centre for International Study and Research) in Paris described the trial as “a masquerade to show something is being done”. She added, “Tunisia is facing a conflict between the social movement and the system, which seeks to perpetuate itself, though relieved of the most excessive forms of predation and repression. In the government, the administration, the justice system, it is largely the personnel of the former régime who are in place.”

Jeune Afrique's Tunisia correspondent Frida

Dahmani wrote that many see “a counter-revolution as being in progress. Those who were at the fore of events on January 14 fear that their revolution is being overtaken”. She quotes blogger Lina Ben Mhenni: “Freedoms are being pushed back, with a return of police violence and media silence”.

Economist Mahmoud Ben Romdane of the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid party—which worked with the Ben Ali régime and is an integral part of the present administration—commented complacently: “We have managed to ‘institutionalise’ the revolution”.

In the July 7 issue of *Jeune Afrique*, Dahmani interviews professor Fahdel Moussa, dean of the faculty of juridical, political and social sciences at Tunis university, who blames on-going social struggles for the economic and social crisis of the country: “This democratic and political evolution has not been accompanied by an economic and social development, because of the social demands. ...The first priority is the reinforcement of law and order, without it credible elections cannot be organised”.

Al Jazeera, on August 1, quoted Maria Cristina Paciella, a researcher at the International Affairs Institute: “‘Tunisians do not trust the system and this can prevent them from participating’, she says, pointing to the many members of the old régime still in a position to influence the election”.

This does not mean that popular opposition has ceased. Strikes and protests are continuous, as none of the social problems underlying the revolt against Ben Ali have been solved; if anything, they have gotten worse. Unemployment has risen from 13 percent to 19 percent, wages are still low and working conditions exploitative, and there is still a lack of decent housing.

A strike of refinery workers is creating fuel shortages. Last Thursday, according to the Tunisian press agency

TAP, in Béja-Nord, unemployed workers demonstrated outside the regional governor's office demanding his resignation because of his failure to resolve joblessness.

Small farmers are angry about low prices paid for their produce by the big business buyers, while inflation was officially measured at 3.1 percent.

The emptiness of the Transitional Government's pseudo-democratic rhetoric is demonstrated by the feverish negotiations of the transitional government to attract investment from French, American and other imperialists. They are anxious to present Tunisia as a country where multinational corporations can make big profits.

On May 17-18, Tunisian interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi made an official visit to France where he had discussions with Prime Minister François Fillon and President Nicolas Sarkozy before the G8 summit on May 26-27, which pledged \$10 billion in economic aid. This was a down payment for collaboration with imperialism in strangling developing revolutionary movements throughout the Arab world.

Speaking on June 8, on the Constituent Assembly elections, 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".

The determination of the Tunisian bourgeoisie to resort to the most brutal, anti-democratic methods to defend their wealth is barely concealed by the campaign for the Constituent Assembly.

Some 100 political parties are contending the election. The Islamist Ennadha party has registered 14 percent voting intentions in opinion polls followed with 5 percent by the middle class Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) which was tolerated by Ben Ali. However, the largest section of the vote is the 70 percent who are "undecided".

The Ennadha Party has reportedly taken over many of the committees for the defense of the revolution which developed in the anti-Ben Ali uprising, as most of the middle-class pseudo-left parties participating in them have been drawn into the Constituent Assembly election process. They are participating instead in a

government body, High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transformation.



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