

Tunisians distrust upcoming Constituent Assembly election

Kumaran Ira
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The Constituent Assembly election in Tunisia, slated to draft a new constitution, is scheduled for October 23. The elections are widely distrusted by Tunisian workers and youth, who do not support the parties contesting the poll or the imperialist-backed “democratic transition process,” with which the ruling elite responded to the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Ten months ago, the Tunisian working class led mass protests that toppled the Western-backed regime of Ben Ali. This sparked protests throughout North Africa and the Middle East, which led to the fall of the US-backed Mubarak regime in Egypt and continuing protests internationally.

Ahead of the October 23 election, various polls show that over half of Tunisians do not support any political party, indicating mounting popular disillusionment with the political establishment and its fraudulent claim to be leading a “democratic transition process.”

According to an August poll conducted by the Institute of Survey and Data Processing Statistics (ISTIS) and the Tunisian African Press Agency, the dissatisfaction rate relating to Tunisian political parties increased from 64 percent in April to 70 percent in August. The same poll found that over half of Tunisians believe the country’s transition is “incomprehensible.”

Although the interim government extended the voting registration deadline to August 14 and launched a nationwide media campaign encouraging people to register to vote, only half of the 7 million eligible voters registered. Participation by youth aged 18 to 35 and women was particularly low—17 and 13 percent, respectively.

In August, Mohamed Ben Joud, a 24-year-old economics graduate, told Xinhua news agency: “Seven months after Ben Ali fled the country, things are very much the same. The same high rate of joblessness prevails among university

graduates and young people have lost hope in the promises of the revolution.”

In the past months, a number of anti-government protests and strikes in various industries broke out, as masses of people have concluded that the government is desperate to maintain the old order and cannot resolve their social problems. The official unemployment rate stands at 19 percent, and youth unemployment is over 30 percent. Polls found that 61 percent are dissatisfied with the Tunisian economy.

Popular disillusionment with the election is a devastating refutation of the petty-bourgeois ex-left parties, such as the Maoist Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hama Hammami and the Stalinist Ettajdid movement. These forces opposed a perspective of fighting for the socialist overthrow of Ben Ali’s state machine, as part of a broader struggle against imperialism throughout the Middle East. Instead, they argued that workers could obtain the social rights they were demanding through a democratic revolution under capitalism.

With this perspective they joined the so-called Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution and the Democratic Transition, set up by the interim government to oversee the Constituent Assembly elections.

The Commission includes the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), the Ettajdid movement, and the UGTT union bureaucracy (the main prop of the old Ben Ali regime), as well as the employers’ federation UTICA (Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Artisans).

Over 100 political parties will contest the October 23 poll. According to the Tunisian electoral commission, over 11,000 candidates, representing political parties and independents, will contest 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly. The Assembly’s mandate is limited to one year,

ahead of presidential and legislative elections set for October 2012.

The right-wing Islamist party Ennahda is leading in polls for the constituent assembly election, with 23 percent of the vote, followed by center-left parties—the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) with 10 percent and the social-democratic Ettakatol with 9 percent.

A September poll showed that Ennahda would get 80 seats, PDP 40, Ettakattol 30, the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement 6, and the PCOT 3.

Ennahda seeks to exploit mass anger over poverty and growing unemployment in the working class with reactionary measures. Its surge in the polls is a result of the treacherous policies of the UGTT and petty-bourgeois forces like the PCOT, who betrayed workers' revolutionary struggles by promoting the reform commission and the election—which, in fact, has no popular support.

In recent days, violence has broken out between the interim regime and Islamist groups protesting a reactionary decision by Sousse University officials to ban a student wearing a full-face veil from enrolling in university. Ennahda is seizing upon this blatantly anti-democratic decision by the university functionaries to increase its influence.

Ennahda is also seeking to mask the reactionary character of its program by proclaiming its allegiance to both Islam and democracy. Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi told Reuters: "All the values of democracy and modernity are respected by Ennahda. We are a party that can find a balance between modernity and Islam."

The purpose of such rhetoric is to make Islamism palatable to Western imperialism, which is now considering whether it should rely on Ennahda to defend its interests in Tunisia.

Commenting on a recent meeting with Western diplomats, Ghannouchi reassured them he would adhere to policies demanded by the imperialist powers: "We will maintain the relations with our traditional partners such as Europe, but we will seek to improve them in order to get advanced status. But we will try also to diversify our partnership to open up to the United States and Latin America, Africa and Asia, and especially Arab markets."

The French news magazine *Jeune Afrique* commented: "According to sources at the US embassy in Tunis, the Americans could support a coalition between the Islamists and the Destourians [the former ruling social-democrats], the only political forces that could, as they see it, successfully lead the country after the election of a Constituent

Assembly."

The PDP was the official opposition party under Ben Ali, going so far as to sign the 1988 national pact with Ben Ali regime. It supported Ben Ali's free-market policies that drove masses of Tunisian workers into poverty. The PDP is now conducting a campaign falsely claiming it will create jobs and economic development through public investment. At the same time, it claims that it will double foreign investment by relaxing trade regulations—in other words, that it will police the working class and keep wages at poverty levels.

The PCOT, which functions as a main prop of bourgeois order in Tunisia, has played a key role in betraying working class struggles after Ben Ali fled the country and promoted the interim regime intended to initiate democratic measures.

The PCOT signed a joint communiqué with other political parties, including PDP and Ennahda, to support maintaining the interim regime after the October 23 poll for a period of one year, until the legislative election next year.

At a recent election meeting, PCOT leader Hamma Hammami called the Constituent Assembly election "a crucial phase in the realization of the democratic transition process allowing a break with the old regime."

This is a lie. The interim regime is itself composed of former Ben Ali officials, including Prime Minister Essebsi himself. The PCOT's promotion of the imperialist-backed "democratic process" is aimed at suppressing revolutionary struggles and keeping the working class within the bounds of the bourgeois order.



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