

# Murder of secular politician sparks mass protests in Tunisia

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Mass protests and attacks on the ruling Islamist Ennahda party offices broke out throughout Tunisia on Wednesday after the assassination of Chokri Belaïd, a prominent Tunisian secular politician and opponent of the Tunisian provisional government. He was shot in the street at 12.30 p.m. as he left his home in Tunis, by a gunman on a motorcycle. Many have accused the Ennahda Party of the crime.

Four opposition parties—the Popular Front, the Republican Party, Al Massar and Nidaa Tounes—called for a general strike and suspended their participation in the Constituent National Assembly in protest. This strike appears set to begin on Friday when Belaïd's funeral will take place and the main trade union, the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) has also called for a general strike.

Chokri Belaïd, 49, was the general secretary of the Movement of Democratic Patriots, one of the 12 members of the Popular Front coalition led by the Workers Party of veteran Maoist Hama Hammami.

Belaïd's wife, Besma Khalfaoui, blamed Ennahda saying that the authorities had ignored her husband's pleas for protection during four months of death threats. The Tunisian news site Kapitalis commented that Belaïd had often accused Ennahda of “its plan to assassinate its political opponents and denounced the flooding of the army and the state apparatus by Ennahda.”

Ennahda's leader Rached Ghannouchi asserted to Reuters that his party had nothing to do with the attack and that “the Ennahda Party is totally innocent of the assassination of Belaïd.”

By 1 p.m. on Wednesday, just half an hour after the killing, reports were coming in of crowds attacking Ennahda offices in Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia and Sfax, Gafsa, Kasserine, Béja and Bizerte. Three thousand

were demonstrating in Sfax. In Tunis at 4 p.m. AFP reported “An armoured vehicle is firing salvos of gas while demonstrators are using waste bins, café tables, barbed wire and barriers to build their barricades.”

Hundreds of people surrounded the vehicle carrying Belaïd's body through central Tunis chanting “the people want the fall of the régime”. Other slogans heard on demonstrations throughout the country were “We'll live on bread and water but not with Ennahda”, “Ennahda is a torturer of the people”, “Vengeance, vengeance” and “the people want another revolution.”

Protests continued throughout Thursday, and in the center of the capital of Tunis, hundreds of youth stormed and ransacked a police station, throwing furniture, files and equipment into the street. In the southern town of Gafsa, hundreds of stone throwing demonstrators confronted riot police firing tear gas.

According to the BBC, shortly after news came in that “the army had been deployed in Sidi Bouzid, the birthplace of the Arab revolution”, prime minister Hamadi Jebali announced the formation of a non-partisan government of technocrats to run the country until elections can be held, “working for the national interest.”

Sinisterly, the Tunisian *L'Economiste* reports: “Jebali called on Tunisians to suspend their demands and protest movements for some months, in the interests of the country”, expressing the fear of a new revolutionary wave.

Such an unelected government could only be a dictatorship combining Islamist and secular representatives of the bourgeoisie and allies of imperialism directed against the increasingly restive working class and the youth, who see that their revolution, which overthrew the dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali two years ago, has not improved their

social conditions or democratic rights.

The tensions between the bourgeois forces which usurped their revolution are reflected by the fact that the government has been unable to cobble together such a group of technocrats at least since the outrage caused by the brutal repression of the protests against poverty in Siliana last October. At the time, a widespread mass uprising against the government was headed off when the UGTT called off a general strike.

By Thursday, Jebali's own Ennahda party repudiated his call for a "non-partisan" cabinet of technocrats, declaring that the country still needs a "political government" based on the results of the October 23, 2011 elections.

The Ennahda government, like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohamed Morsi, works closely with the US and European imperialist powers to stifle and crush revolutionary uprisings in the working class. It supported the NATO war in Libya, thus assisting the imperialist grab for strategic energy and mineral resources of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Ennahda Party was elected on 23 October, 2011, with 42 percent of the popular vote and rules in coalition with two small secular parties, but the Constituent Assembly has been unable to draw up a constitution and organise parliamentary elections.

French president François Hollande, at present engaged in a neo-colonial intervention in Mali, stated in a communiqué on Wednesday: "France is worried by the rise of political violence in Tunisia and calls for respect for the ideals expressed by the Tunisian people during their revolution."

The four parties calling for a general strike and a boycott of the Constituent Assembly are engaged in a cynical manoeuvre designed to maintain control of a mass movement which rightly sees the assassination of Belaïd as an attack on the working class. The pro-capitalist Nidaa Tounes is led by Béji Caïd Essebsi, 86, a long-serving official under the dictatorial régimes of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

The so-called Popular Front of 12 "left" groupings led by the Maoist Workers Party of Hamma Hammami provides a left cover for the UGTT and both secular and Islamist bourgeois parties. Its main concern is to prevent an independent revolutionary socialist movement of the working class.

When the UGTT called off the general strike on December 13, Hammami stated: "It's not possible to assess the UGTT's decision to cancel the general strike. Was it a good decision or not? ... it's still too early to judge."

During the Siliana crisis, when President Marzouki called for a government of technocrats, he volunteered to participate in it "once a programme had been agreed."



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