

Tunisian government begins to unravel

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The murder last Wednesday of the secular, anti-Islamist politician Chokri Belaïd is undermining the government coalition, whose main component is the Islamist Ennahda Party. Ennahda won 89 of the 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in elections held in October 2011 and has ruled with two secular parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the social democratic Ettakatol party.

Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki is a member of the CPR, which announced Sunday it was withdrawing from the government.

Belaïd's widow accused Ennahda of playing a role in the assassination, which sparked mass demonstrations, attacks on Ennahda headquarters and clashes with security forces throughout the country. AFP reported yesterday that the army was out in force alongside the police, and that security forces were still clashing with protesters Sunday night in the mining town of Gafsa and in Sidi Bouzid, known as the birthplace of the Tunisian Revolution. Both towns played central roles in the uprising of workers and youth that ousted the imperialist-backed dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali two years ago.

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, who is also the national secretary and number two figure in Ennahda, announced that he would form a non-partisan government of technocrats to manage the social and political crisis sparked by the assassination. He has said that he will resign if he is prevented from forming such a government.

Four opposition groupings—Belaïd's own Popular Front bloc, the Call for Tunisia party (Nidaa Tounes), the Al Massar party, and the Republican Party—announced that they were pulling out of the National Constituent Assembly and called for a one-day general strike last Friday, the day of Belaïd's funeral. The principal Tunisian trade union federation, the UGTT (Tunisian General Union of Labour) backed

the call, resulting in the first general strike in Tunisia in 35 years.

Reportedly, over one million people took part in Belaïd's funeral procession in Tunis on Friday, many calling for the fall of the Ennahda government and a second revolution.

Ennahda Party leader Rached Ghannouchi rejected Jebali's call for a government of technocrats, as did a majority of the party's parliamentary deputies. They were split, with 56 supporting the party leadership and 33 backing Jebali.

Médiapart's Tunisian correspondent commented: "For a party like Ennahda, which is so unified, this is a revolution, all the more so because Hamadi Jebali had always been so loyal to the party line."

The Ennahda leadership asserts that Jebali does not have the power to change the government and that only the elected parliament can do so. It has vowed to take to the streets to defend "the legitimacy of the ballot box." On Saturday, the day after the funeral, some 3,000 Ennahda supporters in Tunis and 1,000 in Gafsa demonstrated, bearing placards with the slogan: "Defend the legitimacy of the National Constituent Assembly."

Quoting the provisional constitution, however, Jebali's lawyers assert that the prime minister can "create, modify and remove ministers and secretaries of state... after consulting with the cabinet and informing the president of the Republic."

The CPR's ministers who have withdrawn from the government have, like President Marzouki, rejected Jebali's proposal on the grounds that it by-passes the parliament.

The CPR and Ettakol are calling for a cabinet reshuffle that would give key ministries to "independent figures" in the place of Ennahda ministers. In particular, they are asking for the removal of Justice Minister Nouredine B'hiri and the head of

the diplomatic service, Rafik Abdessalem, who is also Rached Ghannouchi's son-in-law.

Much of the bourgeoisie, both secular and Islamist, has swung behind Jebali's proposal. The business journal *l' Economiste* asserts that "the prime minister's initiative and his proposal to form a non-political government of technocrats is a minimum response, but salutary. The rejection of this reasonable solution by his own party is evidence of the internal divisions that are eating away at Ennahda..."

An editorial in the French-language Tunisian journal *Business News* congratulated Jebali: "He finally made his decision and this can only delight us... Hamadi Jebali's Tunisianness overcame his political Islamism."

The revolutionary uprising of 2011 was channeled into parliamentary manoeuvring and constitutional wrangling by the Tunisian bourgeoisie, with the aid of the petty-bourgeois "left" parties and the UGTT. Underlying the present crisis in the political establishment is the fear of the bourgeoisie and its petty-bourgeois allies of a second workers' revolt that will threaten capitalist rule.

Inflation is eroding incomes and unemployment is higher than before the 2011 revolution. Officials acknowledge that in the poorer regions which were the first to rise against the Ben Ali regime, nearly 50 per cent of young graduates are jobless. Pressured by International Monetary Fund loan terms and the collapse of trade with Europe due to the economic crisis, the Tunisian bourgeoisie, Islamist and secular alike, and its imperialist masters are seeking to intensify their exploitation of the masses.

Certain commentators maintain that the main division in Tunisian society is between Islamist and secular parties, or democracy and dictatorship. Their calls for national unity and "a national dialogue" are an attempt to prevent the working class from asserting its own interests. Among those making such a call is the Tunisian banker and business leader Mansour Moalla. Interviewed in *La Presse*, he called for "a referendum on a project and programme of national unity, which must involve all the political parties... the UGTT, the Tunisian Human Rights Organisation and the UTICA [the main business association]."

The leader of the petty-bourgeois Popular Front coalition, the Maoist Hama Hammami, works hand in hand with UGTT leader Houcine Abassi for "national

unity." He defended the UGTT's decision to call off plans for a general strike last December 12 after a nationwide explosion of anger over violent police repression of a protest in the town of Siliana.



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