

New prime minister in Tunisia

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Following the resignation of Tunisian Prime Minister Hamad Jebali, President Moncef Marzouki last week approved as his replacement the nominee of the governing Islamist Ennahda party, Ali Larayedh, currently the minister of the interior.

Jebali resigned after the president of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi, rejected his proposal to dissolve the present government and assemble a new non-partisan cabinet of technocrats under Jebali's leadership. Jebali made the proposal following mass demonstrations and a one-day general strike called to protest the February 6 assassination of secular, anti-Islamist politician Chokri Belaïd. The new government under Larayedh must be accepted by the president and ratified by the parliament. Since Ennahda has only 89 of the 217 deputies, this will require the support of secular parties, by no means a foregone conclusion. Belaïd's widow had accused the Ennahda Party of playing a role in the assassination, which sparked attacks on Ennahda headquarters and clashes with security forces throughout the country. Hundreds of thousands of people took part in Belaïd's February 8 funeral procession in Tunis, many calling for the fall of the Ennahda government and a second revolution.

Ennahda was split over Jebali's proposal. Jebali is the party's number two figure, having served as its general secretary for 18 years. He was overruled by Ghannouchi and Ghannouchi's supporters. Such an open split in a party that normally projects an image of monolithic unity is testimony to the depth of the political crisis in Tunisia as a whole.

On resigning, Jebali expressed the fear of the entire Tunisian ruling class that the country was becoming ungovernable. He said: "Our people are disillusioned by the political class. We must restore confidence." He added that the government had to do "its utmost to ensure that the state continues to function." *Jeune Afrique* on February 19 reported that Jebali had said he

would lead another government only on the condition that there was "a return to law-and-order, a halt to political violence, a struggle against price rises, freedom of expression, employment stimulous and regional development." He called for the disbanding of the violent Ennahda-dominated Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR) and demanded of the Constituent Assembly the rapid organisation of elections—policies which, since the Ennahda government was elected in October 2011, his administration had failed to carry out.

His replacement, Larayed, has been bitterly criticised for the failure of his security forces to identify or punish perpetrators of violence against secular critics of the regime by Salafists close to Ennahda and the LPR. Under Larayed, police attacked and wounded many protesters in Siliana last December, sparking riots in towns throughout the country and demands for his resignation.

The assassination of Belaïd brought to a head a political, constitutional and social crisis that has been developing since the election of the Constituent Assembly over a year ago. That body has failed to draw up a constitution.

Ghannouchi mobilised all of the resources of Ennahda for a "million people demonstration" in Tunis on February 16 to defend "the legitimacy of the ballot box," but the turnout of some 10,000 people revealed his personal isolation and that of his party. *Kapitalis* commented that the sidelining of Jebali shows that Ghannouchi "wants an increase of tension... in order to put off the elections indefinitely so as to enable the Islamists to reinforce their grip on the state apparatus."

The crisis takes place under conditions of extreme social tension and continual localised uprisings. Unemployment stands at around 18 percent, and incomes have been hit by a 10 percent inflation rate. Tunisia's economy contracted by 1.8 percent in 2011

and has grown only marginally since.

Last week, the rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded the Tunisian government's credit rating from BB to BB- due to political instability, a decline in tourism, and "the financial crises facing many of its European trading partners." This was the third downgrade since the workers' revolt that overthrew the imperialist-backed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011.

The downgrade will render more difficult the government's current negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a €1.3 billion loan.

The bourgeois media and parties are seeking to endow Jebali with democratic credentials, despite his role in betraying the aspirations of the workers and youth who overthrew Ben Ali and repressing social protests.

AFP reported on February 20: "Hamadi Jebali has certainly acquired popularity among the opposition parties, the employers and the trade unions (social partners)... He has also won the respect of Western governments. The European foreign affairs head Catherine Ashton on Wednesday spoke of Jebali's 'great statesmanship.'"

SamiTahri, spokesman for the UGTT (General Tunisian Union of Labour), Tunisia's principal trade union, deplored the fact that Jebali had been forced to resign, declaring that "the UGTT... had strongly supported Hamad Jebali's initiative."



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