

French government promotes pseudo-left opposition parties in Tunisia

Kumaran Ira
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After the assassination of Tunisian opposition politician Chokri Belaïd last month, France's Socialist Party (PS) government is promoting the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left forces of Tunisia's Popular Front. Paris is promoting the Tunisian pseudo-left as the most reliable guarantor of its imperialist interests and as a tool to contain intensifying working class opposition to the Tunisian regime.

Belaïd, the leader of the Unified Democratic Nationalist party, was a co-founder of the Popular Front. Paris condemned the assassination of Belaïd, who was shot dead outside his home in Tunis on February 6. The assassination triggered protests and riots across the country, as opposition parties accused the ruling Islamist Ennahda party of being responsible for the killing.

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali was forced to step down on February 19, after fellow Ennahda members opposed his attempt to appoint a non-partisan, technocratic government—a proposal backed by the Popular Front.

Denouncing Belaïd's assassination as an attempt to undermine democracy in Tunisia, French Interior Minister Manuel Valls pledged his government's support for his co-thinkers. Valls told *Europe 1* radio: "The president of the Republic [François Hollande] condemned the assassination of Chokri Belaïd who was a democrat, and we must ourselves support these democrats for the values of the Jasmine Revolution not to be betrayed."

Accusing the Islamists of carrying out the killing, Valls added: "We must really be conscious of the damage caused by despotism, of this Islamism and obscurantism which today denies values and in particular seeks to shut Tunisian women in behind a veil. There is an Islamic fascism which is rising everywhere, but this obscurantism must obviously be condemned, as it opposes the democracy for which the Libyan, Tunisian, and Egyptian people have fought."

Valls' claim that he cannot condone Islamist violence or obscurantism is profoundly cynical. In fact, Paris worked closely with reactionary Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces to topple the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and now supports similar reactionary forces in Syria in a neo-colonial war to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

Behind Valls' cynical rhetoric stand the shifting political and

geo-strategic interests of French imperialism. Not only is Paris trying to contain rising working class opposition in Tunisia, but it is also fighting a war in Mali against Islamist groups, under the guise of a "war on terror," in order to advance its corporate and strategic interests against its rivals, such as China.

Valls' comments testify to the fact that French imperialism seeks to rely on the services of petty bourgeois pseudo "left" tendencies, which function as stooges of imperialist powers, suppressing working class opposition to war and social inequality.

Paris is angry at the Ennahda government's reluctance to do its bidding. Unlike neighbouring Algeria, the Tunisian government declined to open its airspace to French warplanes bombing Mali. After France attacked Mali in January, Tunisian presidential spokesman Adnan Manser said that Tunisia does not support France's war in Mali or any military intervention in that country. (See, "France-Qatar tensions rise over Mali war, Tunisia")

There are also renewed working class struggles in Tunisia, sparked by social inequality and unemployment, which is around 18 percent—the factors that triggered the 2011 revolution. The financial markets and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are pressing for further free-market reforms. Reuters reports that Tunisia has been attempting to reassure the IMF and to obtain a \$1.78 billion loan. However, the mission has become more challenging since Belaïd's assassination, amid increased political tensions.

Economic expert Radhi Meddeb said that Tunisia must adopt drastic reforms in order to end the economic crisis. "But such reforms require a national debate and consensus," he said.

In the polls, the Popular Front is emerging as the third political force behind the Ennahda and the right-wing *Nidaa Tounes* (Call of Tunisia) coalition of former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi. According to a recent poll taken for the upcoming general elections in June, the Popular Front has increased its score from 7.9 to 12.2 percent, whereas Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes fell below 30 percent, 29.4 and 29.8 respectively."

Should the Popular Front win more influence through the elections, it will continue these anti-worker policies in alliance with the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) labour

union, which is close to the Popular Front.

UGTT Research Department director Nasredine Sassi said: “The UGTT has nothing against the IMF. The secretary general received Christine Lagarde and delegations from the World Bank in these very offices. We know the country can no longer survive outside the global system but we are trying to guide policy in the right direction.”

In promoting North African pseudo-left parties, French imperialism is relying on forces that it has tested thoroughly during and after the so-called “Arab Spring”—the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Tunisia and in Egypt in early 2011 that toppled the Western-backed dictatorships of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak.

The ruling class was able to maintain capitalist rule only due to the counter-revolutionary role of the pseudo-left tendencies. These forces included the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) in Egypt and the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hama Hammami, now known as Tunisian Workers Party—a leading organization in the Tunisian Popular Front. By supporting various bourgeois “left” forces and promoting elections overseen by forces in the old regime, they prepared the installation of reactionary Islamist regimes hostile to the working class and to the revolution.

The Popular Front is an alliance of twelve petty bourgeois pseudo “left” parties, officially formed in October 2012. It includes the Tunisian Workers Party, the Democratic Patriots’ Movement of Chokri Belaïd, the Pabloite Workers Left League (LGO), and a smattering of pan-Arab, Nasserite, Ba’athist, and Green organizations.

Most of these parties participated in the so-called January 14 Front created after the fall of the Ben Ali regime on January 14, 2011. After the Ben Ali regime fell, mass protests continued, calling for the resignation of the “national unity government” of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, a key ally of Ben Ali.

With the Tunisian bourgeoisie paralyzed by the upsurge of the masses, the petty-bourgeois forces of the January 14 Front sought to tie the working class to the pro-capitalist UGTT—a key prop of the Ben Ali regime.

The UGTT plays a central role in policing the working class in Tunisia, having collaborated closely with Ben Ali to implement free-market policies. Ben Ali used to honour the UGTT every year on Labour Day. The UGTT supported the Ben Ali regime throughout the revolution, only calling a symbolic, two-hour strike as Ben Ali fled Tunisia on January 14, 2011—with the country in the throes of revolution.

The UGTT sent three ministers to serve in the national unity government set up by the regime after Ben Ali fled, but it pulled them out of the government amid continuing mass protests.

The January 14 Front broke up as its constituent parties supported the reform commission, set up by the interim government and tasked with drafting a new constitution to

create a legal basis for capitalist rule in Tunisia. The petty-bourgeois “left” parties hailed the commission, which comprised various bourgeois parties, the UGTT, the UTICA employers’ federation, and numerous middle class professionals. Hammami described it as “a victory of the people and the revolution” at the time.

The Popular Front parties are active in the UGTT and insist that it should play a prominent role in the Popular Front. Jalel Ben Brik, the leader of the Pabloite LGO, insisted: “For the LGO, [the Popular Front] must be based on a popular workers and democratic front, whose backbone must be the UGTT.”

After Ben Ali’s fall, the pseudo-left parties promoted illusions that the Constituent Assembly would resolve the problems facing the working class, ending poverty, providing jobs, and launching a democratic transition. They therefore provided tacit support to the Islamists of Ennahda, who won the election and formed a coalition government with secular bourgeois parties such as the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol.

The petty-bourgeois “left” parties backed the Ennahda government after its election—as it carried out right-wing policies demanded by the Tunisian ruling elite and the financial markets, and violently suppressed working class strikes and protests.

Amid rising popular opposition to Ennahda a year ago, Hammami bluntly said: “We do not want to bring down this legitimate government, but we call upon it to respect its promises and realize the objectives of the revolution.” Hammami called for the masses to “put pressure on the government to realize the objectives of the national collectivity.”

The Popular Front has extensive ties with European pseudo-left parties, such as France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA)—who are ardent defenders of imperialism, supporting war and austerity. On February 8, NPA leader Alain Krivine attended Belaïd’s funeral, holding long talks with Popular Front leaders.

A week later, a delegation of French officials led by the PS’ Elisabeth Guigou, the President of the French National Assembly’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, made a two-day visit for talks with Tunisian political parties. Her trip began with a wreath-laying ceremony at Belaïd’s grave and a meeting with Hama Hammami.

In line with the NPA, the Popular Front supports the imperialist proxy war in Syria, with Hammami calling for “the departure of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.”



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