

# Tunisian political parties organize “national dialogue”

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Since the beginning of October, Tunisia's divided ruling elite is engaged in a “national dialogue” stretching from the Islamist-led government to the pseudo-left opposition parties. It is desperately seeking to find a way out of a deepening political and economic crisis which has been paralyzing the country for months and threatens to provoke a renewed outbreak of mass working class struggles similar to those that brought down long-time dictator Zine Abedine Ben Ali in January 2011.

On October 5 two parties of the three party ruling coalition (Troika), the Islamist Ennahda and the social-democratic Ettakatol, agreed upon a “roadmap” which is supported by overall 21 parties. The Congress for the Republic (CPR), the party of Tunisia's interim president Moncef Marzouki, reportedly refused to sign the agreement so far, claiming it had not been included in the discussions.

The signatories include most parties of the National Salvation Front (NSF), the main umbrella group of the liberal and pseudo-left opposition. It was established at the end of July and includes most prominently the Union For Tunisia and Popular Front alliances.

The main party of the Union for Tunisia is Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), a right-wing bourgeois party gathering various businessmen and stalwarts of the former Ben Ali regime. Its leader is the 86-year-old Beji Caid el Sebsi, Tunisia's prime minister between February and December 2011, and a long-time official of the dictatorships of Ben Ali and his predecessor Habib Bourgiba. The Popular Front is a gathering of various Arab nationalist and pseudo-left organizations dominated by Hama Hammami's Maoist Worker's Party which also includes the Pabloite Workers Left League (Ligue de la gauche ouvrière) led by Jalel Ben Brik Zoghلامي.

According to the roadmap, the signatories will agree on “an independent national figure” to head and nominate a new, technocratic government within three weeks. The

roadmap also sets a four-week deadline for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) to finish its work to draft the new constitution, finalize the electoral law, and choose an electoral board to prepare fresh elections next year.

The roadmap was prepared by the so called “quartet” initiative made up of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), Tunisia's employers' organization (UTICA), the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH) and the Order of Advocates.

For months the quartet has mediated between the different parties to find a way out of the political standoff. Initially Ennahda had rejected any concessions to its political rivals and repeatedly vowed to stay in power to “continue its mission.” However, on October 3 the Islamists agreed to a national dialogue following a meeting between the UGTT's secretary-general Houcine Abbassi and Islamist leader Rached Ghannouchi.

Ennahda's willingness to compromise comes amidst a deepening political and economic crisis in Tunisia and throughout the entire region. Tunisia's largest Islamist party won the first elections after Ben Ali's ouster in 2011 but has become increasingly under pressure and isolated in recent months.

A recent study by Zogby Research Services (ZRS) reflects the growing mass opposition with the Islamist-led government. According to the study two-thirds of the population “feel their country is moving in the wrong direction”, while less than one-third of Tunisians say that “the government has been effective in addressing priority concerns like: expanding employment opportunities, dealing with the high cost of living, and protecting personal and civil rights.”

Almost three-quarters of all Tunisians said that the current government was “dominated” by Ennahda, with the same number believing that Ennahda “was not committed to the goals of the revolution”.

Amongst broad masses of workers and youth the Ennahda-led government is increasingly hated due to its anti-working class and pro-imperialist policies.

In June it signed a \$1.7 billion standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) committing itself to fresh attacks against the working class. Finance minister Elyes Fakhfakh (Ettakatol) recently announced on state radio that “the government has begun implementing austerity measures including a 5 percent cut in public spending, after the budget deficit reached seven percent [of gross domestic product] now.” He also declared that no wage increases can be expected in 2014.

The murders of the two Popular Front leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi—allegedly carried out by Islamist extremists—on February 6 and July 25 this year have further undermined the government and sparked a series of mass strikes and protests against it. Leaders of the opposition have repeatedly accused Ennahda of being responsible for the killings, claiming that it is strengthening and supporting violent Islamist groups.

The crisis in Tunisia was further exacerbated by the US-backed July 3 military coup in Egypt that toppled Islamist president, Mohamed Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Mursi had repeatedly rejected the formation of a national salvation government to curb growing working class anger against his regime. When protests exploded on June 30, Egypt's liberal and pseudo-left organizations – who had closely coordinated with remnants of the old regime in the so called Tamarod campaign – played a central role in channeling the mass protests behind the army.

Ennahda, which has close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, clearly feared the possibility of a similar development in Tunisia. After the coup in Egypt, Mohammed Omar, a member of the political bureau of Ennahda warned: “What happened in Egypt is a real threat to democracy because we saw the overthrow of a legitimate President. I don't think any country is secure now from what happened in Egypt.” Political analyst Youssef Oueslati told Reuters: “The Brothers in Tunisia may face a similar fate, especially in light of an unprecedented rapprochement between divergent political currents in the opposition to remove Islamists from power.”

However, as the Egyptian military is failing to stabilize the situation despite its campaign of bloody repression, the Tunisian bourgeoisie is opting for a “national dialogue” to create better conditions to control the working class and push through the planned austerity measures.

International media immediately hailed the signing of the roadmap and the plan to form a broader government of national unity. The recent issue of *The Economist* praised Tunisia's politicians for choosing “compromise over conflict, avoiding the brittle polarization between Islamists and their critics that now so dangerously embitters Egypt.”

An October 11 editorial of the London-based *Think Africa Press* noted: “The roadmap has the support of the majority of Tunisia's political actors, including major secularist groups Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front, increasing its likelihood of success. This will reduce sector-specific strike risks (particularly in phosphates mining, energy, and transport) and the risk of politically destabilizing protests over the one-month outlook, as long as the national dialogue process begins within two weeks.”

As it is expected that the dialogue will be fraught with conflicts, the pseudo-left forces are anxiously reassuring the ruling elite to support its attempt to form a more stable government and prop up capitalist rule in Tunisia.

After meeting interim president Marzouki last Thursday, Hamma Hammami declared that “the Popular Front will attend the national dialogue of political parties proposed by the president of the republic,” stressing “the interest of the country to work out a clear roadmap for the remaining transitional stage.” According to Tunisian news agency TAP, he pressed for “urgent solutions” as “the crisis now shaking the country required to form a government of national skills able to manage the remaining transitional period.”



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