

Tunisian political parties resume “national dialogue,” vote on constitution

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As the Tunisian Revolution approaches its third anniversary, Tunisia’s divided ruling elite is resuming its “national dialogue,” aimed at pre-empting renewed mass working class struggles like those that toppled former dictator Zine Abedine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011.

On Friday Tunisia’s national assembly began voting on a new constitution. One hundred and seventy-five out of 184 present lawmakers approved its title and are now voting article by article on the document. After Saturday’s vote, 12 of the 146 articles have been adopted. The final vote on the entire constitution is scheduled for January 14 and must pass with a two-thirds majority.

On December 14, Houcine Abbassi, secretary-general of Tunisia’s main trade union confederation, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), had announced that Mehdi Jomaa would be the new prime minister-designate to form a new caretaker government and to prepare new elections. “With a lot of patience, we overcame difficulties and today we reached consensus over a national figure who will form a neutral government,” Abbassi claimed.

Jomaa’s nomination initially met with opposition from the National Salvation Front (NSF), the main umbrella opposition coalition stretching from stalwarts of the former Ben Ali regime, such as the Nidaa Touns party, to the Popular Front (PF), a gathering of Arab Nationalist and pseudo-left organizations. He is the serving industry minister of the three-party ruling coalition (“Troika”) led by the Islamist Ennahda party.

“National dialogue entered new mazes. It was supposed to be based on consensus,” Nidaa Tounes leader Beji Caid Essebsi said immediately after Jomaa’s designation. Essebsi was Tunisia’s prime minister between February and December 2011 and a long-time official under the dictatorships of Ben Ali and his predecessor Habib Bourguiba.

Hamma Hammami, spokesperson of the PF, and leader

of the Maoist Worker’s Party, told *Mosaïque FM* on December 16 that no consensus had been reached over Jomaa’s nomination, and that his party abstained from the vote. He stated that the PF would not join the new government but would meet with other opposition parties from the NSF to work out their final position.

On December 20, however, the NSF made clear that it would continue to back the “national dialogue.” Nidaa Tounes Secretary-General Taieb Baccouche declared that the main forces of the NSF, Nidaa Tounes and the PF, “have agreed to rejoin the national dialogue.”

After the resumption of the dialogue, Boussairi Bouabdelli, the leader of the Maghrebi Republican Party, summed up the plans of the Tunisian ruling elite and its petty-bourgeois “left” supporters: “We have agreed the new government, the election date and the new constitution will be ready by January 13 so we celebrate on January 14, the third anniversary of the revolution.”

What is cynically presented as a path to democracy or even to achieving the goals of the revolution is in reality a desperate attempt by the Tunisian ruling elite to overcome its political crisis and cobble together a technocratic interim government deeply hostile to the social and democratic aspirations of the working class, the main force behind the revolution.

In October the Troika and the NSF had agreed upon a “road map” setting deadlines for finishing the draft of the new constitution, nominating a new prime minister and a new technocratic government and preparing fresh elections next year. The roadmap was worked out by the so-called “quartet” initiative headed by the UGTT and Tunisia’s employers’ organization (UTICA).

The willingness of the rival political factions of the Tunisian bourgeoisie to continue the dialogue comes against the backdrop of a deepening economic and social crisis in Tunisia and the entire region.

A recent *Al-Monitor* analysis warned: “Considering the

new political climate there is less room for the chronic gripes about unfulfilled expectations. According to a November poll conducted by the ‘Social Science Forum’, 89 percent of Tunisians complain that their ‘standard of living was better before the revolution’. This is the stuff of which dangerous frustrations are made.”

The article concludes: “Ending the impasse became the only option. After months of unyielding attitudes, the main political parties were ready for compromise, however painful. Ironically, events in Egypt helped bridge the gaps. To Islamists and secularists alike, it became obvious that the ‘Egyptian scenario’ could not be replicated in Tunisia.”

In Egypt, toppled Islamist president Mohamed Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood refused to form a national salvation government with the army as a mechanism to better control the working class. When mass working class anger against Mursi exploded in late June last year, the army and its liberal and “left” supporters organized a coup to pre-empt an uprising in the working class.

Ameur Lariadh, president of Ennahda’s political bureau, stated in a recent interview: “What happened in Egypt carried weight. It encourages compromise and discouraged the foolish temptations by coups.”

Having observed that the ever-intensifying crackdown by the Egyptian junta has failed to stabilize the situation, the Tunisian ruling elite—at least for the time being—is engaged in a national dialogue to work out a better mechanism to suppress the working class and prepare fresh attacks against it.

Jomaa, who is not affiliated to any political party, personifies the reactionary character of a technocratic government that could emerge from the “national dialogue.” He was appointed to the government in February 2013 after the murder of secular opposition politician Chokri Belaid by suspected Islamist extremists, in order to ride out growing popular outrage against the Islamist government.

As industry minister in the cabinet of the current Prime Minister Ali Larayedh (Ennahda), he stands for the continuation of all the pro-imperialist and anti-working class policies of the Ben Ali regime by the Islamists. In June, the Troika signed a \$1.7 billion standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) committing itself to austerity measures, including a 5 percent cut in public spending. The government also declared that no wage increases can be expected in 2014.

Jomaa himself has close ties to imperialism, having worked for Western multinationals such as American

Hutchinson Aerospace and French energy giant Total.

According to the French daily *Le Monde*, “the designation of Mehdi Jomaa was the result of external pressures, particularly European and American ones.” It revealed that “a substantial meeting was held in the beginning of this month [December] between a set of European and American ambassadors, in which they agreed in supporting the nomination of Jomaa.”

The *Tunis Times* reported that leaders of the Popular Front met with US ambassador to Tunisia Jacob Walles on December 24, “in light of the outcomes of the national dialogue.”

The PF’s ties to US imperialism and its open alliance with remnants of the Ben Ali regime within Nidaa Tounes expose its thoroughly counterrevolutionary character. Only days after the meeting with Walles, Hama Hammami made clear in a lengthy interview with the Lebanese *al-Safir* newspaper that the Popular Front is willing to back the installation of another reactionary, law-and-order government.

“The coming days, or the coming weeks,” Hammami warned, “will shape Tunisia’s future. There is no doubt that, despite our dissatisfaction with what happened last Saturday [the selection of Jomaa], there is one guaranteed result: Mr. Ali Laarayedh’s cabinet will inevitably leave. This, in itself, is a positive and significant step and a key demand.”

He added: “The government has a program to be implemented. It includes security-related dimensions, i.e. fighting terrorism and reforming the security system. These are matters of urgency.”



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