

# Former Ben Ali official wins the first round of Tunisian presidential elections

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Béji Caïd Essebsi took first place in the first round of Tunisia's presidential election on November 23, with 40 percent of the vote. With this vote, based on the disillusionment of Tunisia's workers and oppressed masses with the Islamist interim government of the Ennahda party, the entourage of toppled dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is bidding to return to power and attempt to fully restore the old regime.

Moncef Marzouki—supported by Ennahda, which did not field a candidate of its own—came second with 33 percent, advancing to the run-off on December 21.

The 88-year-old Essebsi, who served under Ben Ali and the previous dictator Habib Bourguiba, is the favourite to win the run-off on December 28. His Nidaa Tounes party is a coalition of bourgeois counterrevolutionaries, ex-Stalinists and officials of Ben Ali's disbanded RCD (Democratic Constitutional Rally). These include Mohamed Ghariani, the RCD's last general secretary, and Raouf Khamassi, a close associate of Sakhr el-Materi, Ben Ali's son-in-law.

The Popular Front, a coalition of pseudo-left and nationalist parties, ran as all but official supporters of the old Ben Ali establishment, having formed a National Salvation Front together with Nidaa Tounes earlier this year. Its presidential candidate, the Maoist Hamma Hammami, came third with 7.8 percent of the vote.

The first-round result confirms those of the legislative elections on October 26, where, on a 69 percent voter participation, Nida Tounes with 38 percent of the poll won 86 of the legislature's 217 seats, while Ennahda with 28 percent won 69 seats. Lacking a majority in parliament, Essebsi has not ruled out forming a coalition government with Ennahda or the Popular Front.

The moves to restore the old Ben Ali regime

foreshadow explosive confrontations with the main force in the revolutionary overthrow of Ben Ali four years ago, the working class.

Nidaa Tounes' reactionary programme gives priority to repaying Tunisia's external debt through cuts in social services and subsidies for staple products, and privatising businesses confiscated from Ben Ali's business empire. Aware that such an austerity programme will provoke deep opposition in the working class, particularly in mining areas where the 2011 revolution against Bin Ali began, Nidaa Tounes also calls for stepped-up law-and-order measures. Its ultimate goal is to fully rebuild the authority of the Ben Ali regime's internal intelligence services and police state apparatus.

The coming to power of Nidaa Tounes testifies to the bankruptcy of Tunisian capitalism. It has proven unable to address the aspirations for jobs, democracy, and equality that drove masses of workers and youth into revolutionary struggle against Ben Ali—and triggered the toppling of Hosni Mubarak by the Egyptian working class, a few weeks later.

As the Tunisian uprising began, the WSWWS analyzed it as a world-historic turning point in the class struggle, putting the construction of Trotskyist parties and the struggle for socialism and workers power, in Tunisia and internationally, directly on the agenda. In "The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution," it warned: "The crucial question of revolutionary program and leadership remains unresolved. Without the development of revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali."

Responsibility for the rising influence of the old Ben Ali establishment lies with the forces that blocked the struggle for socialism and the building of a

revolutionary party in the working class. These include the pseudo-left parties in the PF coalition, such as Hammami's Workers Party (PT) and the Pabloite Left Workers League (LGO), and their collaboration with the General Tunisian Labour Union (UGTT) bureaucracy. A bulwark of the Ben Ali dictatorship and its free-market policies, the UGTT looked on in horror during the 2011 uprising and only issued a symbolic, two-hour strike call as Ben Ali fled Tunisia, in a desperate attempt to cover its tracks.

These counterrevolutionary organisations have tied the working class to a perspective of supporting a series of reactionary bourgeois regimes that emerged after Ben Ali's ouster. The result is that, four years later, the conditions of the Tunisian masses have worsened, the country is even more deeply in the grip of finance capital and the International Monetary Fund, and the old establishment, suitably refurbished, is poised to return to power.

Initially, the pseudo-left and the UGTT collaborated with the UTICA employers' organisation and other trade groups in setting up the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) to devise a new bourgeois constitution for Tunisia. Elections to the ANC in October 2011 gave Ennahda the largest group but not an absolute majority. It therefore ruled Tunisia as part of the "Troika," joining with the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, which was internationally affiliated to France's social-democratic Socialist Party.

With Moncef Marzouki of the CPR as president, the Ennahda government imposed reactionary policies and crushed workers' protests. With the support of the pseudo-left, it aligned Tunisia on the reactionary wars that Washington and its European allies waged in Libya and Syria, relying on Islamist proxy forces. Ennahda was widely suspected to be the instigator of the murders in February and July 2013 of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, two officials in the Popular Front.

As the political crisis of the Ennahda government sharpened, Hammami and UGTT leader Hacine Abassi held multiple meetings with US, French and European officials. The UGTT formed the Quartet with UTICA, the lawyers' association, and the Tunisian League of Human Rights, while Nida Tounes and the Popular Front formed the National Salvation Front and engaged

in "National Dialogue" with Ennahda. This led to the resignation of the Islamist government and the formation of an interim technocratic government last January.

The red thread running through the various factional manoeuvres and realignments of the pseudo-left was the opposition of the affluent middle class layers they represent to a social revolution against capitalism. These counterrevolutionary manoeuvres have now aligned them directly with the chosen political vehicle of the old Ben Ali establishment.

In his October 14 interview in the French Stalinist daily *L'Humanité*, Hama Hammami insisted that the central issue in Tunisia was "doing everything to block the rise of religious fascism" and "the return of the men of the old regime."

The struggle against all the representatives of the Tunisian bourgeoisie, including both Ennahda and the old Ben Ali regime, is the central issue, and it must be carried out against the PF itself. Hammami's attempts to distance his party from the other main parties of the Tunisian bourgeoisie reek of bad faith.

Hammami worked with the Islamists and now is allied to the old regime through his joint participation with Nidaa Tounes in the National Salvation Front. He himself recognised that "we were at the origins of the constitution of a front of national salvation, gathering forces from the left all the way to liberal democrats"—that is, Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes.

The rising influence of the old, hated Ben Ali establishment is a devastating verdict on the bankruptcy of such unprincipled pseudo-left manoeuvring. The critical task facing the working class and youth in Tunisia remains the construction of a Trotskyist vanguard party, a section of the ICFI, to rally the deep opposition in the working class to a struggle for political power.



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