

Tunisia: The democratic opposition

Monday 17 January 2011, by [KHIARI Sadri](#), [TLILI Olfa](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2002).

In a referendum held on Sunday May 26, 2002, Tunisian President Zine el Abidine ben Ali, in power since 1987, won the right to run for re-election in 2004 and 2009. Under key changes approved in the plebiscite, which drew a 99.52 percent 'yes' vote according to the régime, presidential term limits were removed and the age limit for a presidential candidate was raised from 70 to 75. Ben Ali, 65, therefore now has two more chances to stand for office after his third term expires in 2004. The Tunisian regime has long been accused by international human rights organisations of suppressing political and press freedoms.

Sadri Khiari is a founder member of the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) and part of the leadership of Raid (Attac Tunisia). He has been forbidden to leave Tunisia for the past ten years. Here he expresses his personal view of the situation in Tunisia after the referendum. This interview was carried out by Charlotte Daix for the French revolutionary socialist newspaper, 'Rouge'.

Q What is the state of the democratic opposition?

Sadri Khiari - Crushed by repression, the opposition had progressively disappeared since the early 1990s until the setting up of the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) in December 1998 and the hunger strike by the journalist Taoufik Ben Brik.

Since then, despite the persecutions, associations and parties have been set up, others have found a second breath, declarations and publications have been circulated clandestinely or on the web, public meetings have been held, others forcibly dispersed. These initiatives still only involve a few people, but the number of participants continues to grow.

The referendum which allowed Ben Ali to modify the Constitution - which forbade him from running as a candidate in the elections of 2004 - led to a politicisation and even a radicalisation of the discourse of the democratic opposition. The question of human rights remains central but the challenging of the regime and its institutions takes on more and more prominence. Thus the demand for a constituent assembly is now broadly shared. If the convergences are strong inside of the opposition, divergences continue to exist. There are two lines:

Charfism [1] which presents itself as opposed to the Islamicists, privileges the search for channels of negotiation with the regime, relying on an internal evolution of the latter, with a little push from the Europeans;

Marzoukism [2] has a clearer perspective of rupture with the current regime, considering that it is possible to find points of agreement with the Islamicist movement in the struggle against the dictatorship without falling under its hegemony.

Other currents claim to represent a third way but in truth whatever they think they are polarized along one or the other of these lines. The unification of democrats that some call for can only happen today on a somewhat charist basis.

Q Is the repression still as strong?

A Yes, arrests, tortures, trials, beatings in broad daylight, persecutions of all sorts are part of the everyday life of the oppositionists. There are today nearly a thousand political prisoners. Some, like the Islamicist leader Ali Laaridh, have been held in isolation for 12 years. They have all been condemned to long years in prison following farcical trials, like Hama Hammami, the spokesperson of the PCOT. [3] Last week, the most well known of the 'cyber democrats', Zouhayer Yahiaoui, known as Ettounsi, was arrested. He could be imprisoned for years. The goal of the operation is to stop the internet becoming a space of contestation, which it is already for a growing layer of youth which radicalises through online forums.

Q What are the links between the trade union movement and the democratic movement?

A At the same time as the rebirth of the democratic opposition a movement of anti-bureaucratic opposition appeared inside the UGTT, the sole trade union federation, until now strictly controlled by the regime. This dissidence has opened breaches inside the trade union apparatus and oppositionists are now represented in some bodies, including the executive bureau. However, their margin of manoeuvre remains weak.

Outside of the far left - very active but muddled and often sectarian towards the democrats - the opposition concerns itself very little with the trade union movement and more generally economic and social questions. Such an attitude does not favour the overcoming of the opposition's major handicap, the weakness of popular opposition.

Over the past three years, there have been riots by school students and unemployed youth in the south of the country and some strikes here and there but without any effect of accumulation. Discontent is growing in nearly all layers of the population but cannot yet express itself in an active manner or organize itself. We need to act so that the social tensions which are on the horizon, due to the current serious economic problems, lead to a real popular mobilization. 'Raid' is trying to stress the capital importance of two things from the point of view of the struggle against the dictatorship:

- the social question, which is increasingly acute with the progress of economic liberalization;
- the insertion of the opposition and the trade union movement in the dynamic of international struggle embodied in the movement against neo-liberal globalisation.

Sadri Khiari

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Hunger strike

Olfa Tlili

Radhia Nasraoui, a human rights activist and a lawyer well known for defending prisoners of conscience in Tunisia, has been on hunger strike since June 26, 2002.

The strike is a protest against restrictions on her right to visit her husband, the Tunisian oppositionist Hama Hammami, who was sentenced to 3 years and 2 months in prison in March 2002 after 4 years spent underground.

The hunger strike has been supported by all the independent associations in Tunis and several of the opposition parties. A campaign of solidarity has also been launched in France. An estimated 1,000 political prisoners are languishing in Tunisia's jails; some of them, like Ali Laraidh, the leader of the Islamicist Party, have been in solitary confinement for twelve years.

The 'war against terror' has increased the dictatorship's margin of manoeuvre; since September 11, military tribunals have been set up to try young Tunisians who have been handed over, often in violation of international conventions on human rights, by the authorities in Italy and other 'brother' countries. Nonetheless, while the government whips up hysteria over Islamicist terror, when the first real manifestation of it came (the attack in April on the synagogue in Djerba), they hesitated for more than 10 days before admitting that it had been a terrorist incident. It is a sign of the weakness of the Ben Ali regime and its inability to deal with crisis situations. All the more reason to demonstrate our solidarity with Radhia Nasraoui and demand the right to life, citizenship and liberty in Tunisia.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV343 - September 2002.

Footnotes

[1] From the name of Mohamed Charfi, former minister of Ben Ali who went over to the opposition.

[2] From the name of Moncef Marzouki, president of the Congress for the Republic.

[3] Communist Party of Tunisian Workers.