

Interview

Tunisia: An ongoing revolution

Thursday 14 April 2011, by [BEN BRIK ZOGHLAMI Jalel](#) (Date first published: 19 February 2011).

Interview with Jalel Ben Brik Zoghalmi, a lawyer and one of the leaders of the Ligue de la Gauche Ouvrière (LGO - Workers' Left League). He was formerly a leader of the- Organisation Communiste Révolutionnaire (OCR, Revolutionary Communist Organisation, Tunisian section of the Fourth International). He was interviewed by Jan Malewski on February 19, 2011, before the fall of the Ghannouchi government.

Jan Malewski - Since December 2010 the Tunisian masses have overthrown the dictator Ben Ali and given the signal for revolt throughout the Arab world and beyond. Back in November, this would have seemed impossible... What happened in your country?

Jalel Ben Brik Zoghalmi - I think that we are in a process that you would call revolution, a social revolution, social, democratic and national. It is an anti-system revolution and it is a revolution for national dignity. In its Tunisian dynamic, as in its Arab dynamic, it is a permanent revolution. Since January one of the essential slogans — and it is not us who have raised it! — has been “Uninterrupted revolution, Ben Ali out!”

The essence of our revolution can be summed up in three slogans: work, freedom and national dignity. It is a revolution which began by the symbolic gesture of a young graduate who immolated himself. He symbolised these young graduates, without work, who take the road to Italy and Europe before it is closed off. Young Mohamed Bouazizi symbolised these completely crushed youth. After his gesture it was the explosion, the eruption of the masses, above all young people from the “forgotten” deprived regions, — Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Gafsa, and so on — and the popular neighbourhoods of the big cities, Tunis, Nabeul, Sfax and Sousse. It was always the youth who began the struggle. The Internet has played a prominent role at the level of the media —in Tunisia there are 1.8 million network subscribers, once again predominantly young people.

How have these youth in revolt been able to confront the police state?

When it was said that this revolution had no leadership, it is true. There was no political leadership. But there was a “rearguard”, that is points of support for the eruption of the masses. When the youth revolted and confronted the system directly, they had to confront repression. Then they fell back, to regroup and organise their defence, in the branches of the rank and file structures of the Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT - General Union of Tunisian Workers). In these regions, which are not heavily industrial, they found above all teaching trades unionists, who had been students in the 1980s, who had emerged from the student movement of that time influenced by the radical and nationalist left. In the 1990s, the black years of Ben Ali's repression — there were forty deaths under torture, 30,000 political prisoners —they were in the trade union movement, not so

much as politically organised activists, but with their political baggage, above all that of the radical left. Who were they? Leaders of our organisation or those close to us, or other groups of the radical left, those of the January 14th Front, which comprised thirteen parties essentially of the far left and nationalist organisations.

Your organisation, the Ligue de la Gauche Ouvrière, was founded during the struggle.

Yes, the Ligue de la Gauche Ouvrière was set up during the revolution. But its activists did not come from nowhere. They were very well known leaders in the trade union, associative, feminist world, known in the political confrontation with the regime, youth leaders known in the cultural movement, well known organisers who were at the head of the movement in Sidi Bouzid, union leaders in primary education or in posts and telecoms. Some of them came to us from the Organisation Communiste Révolutionnaire, the Tunisian section of the Fourth International, which broke up following the repression, because it could no longer go forward in its form of organisation. In 1990 there were 40 sentencing of youths — the oldest was 27, the youngest 16. It was a very hard blow. The OCR was an organisation of revolutionary youth, which had a clear position against the regime and against the fundamentalists, for a popular workers' orientation. It was also clearly opposed to the brutal police state repression of the fundamentalists — it was rare then, even the other friends of the far left and the democrats didn't say it. Let me make it clear, we always struggled against the fundamentalists — who wanted a state which would be anti-woman and anti-worker, who today go hand in hand with the character the most hated by the working class, Mohamed Sayah, a leader of the Néo-Destour who repressed the general strike of February 1978 alongside Ben Ali — but we have never accepted this repressive police state regime.

You have stressed the role played by trade union militants, the heirs of the student movement of the 1980s who were not in their great majority considered as the political opposition to Ben Ali.

We don't forget that when the Western media spoke of the opposition in the Tunisia of Ben Ali, they spoke of my imprisoned brother, Tawfik Ben Brik, they spoke of Moncef Marzouki, when the police broke his glasses... and also of me when I was refused my passport. But they didn't talk about two strikes! Nor of that of the 100,000 primary and secondary teachers, when the Israeli delegation came to Tunisia, nor the general strike of the UGTT. The media talk of a microcosm — a courageous microcosm — but not of the role of the working class. Why? Because this microcosm did not constitute a danger. A successful democratic rally would have a maximum of 250-300 people, of an average age of between 50 and 55!

What was the role of the trade union movement in the fall of Ben Ali?

The political history of Tunisia cannot be understood without considering the role of the Tunisian workers' movement and the trade union movement since 1924. It is a specificity in the Arab region. An independent trade union movement has existed since 1924. It was strengthened by the creation of the UGTT in 1946. The regime of Bourguiba, from 1956 to the 1970s, was an alliance between Bourguiba's party (the Néo-Destour) and the leaders of the UGTT. The health programme of 1958, the education programme of 1958 and the industrialisation programme of 1964 were the product of the UGTT programme of 1955 and were applied by ministers who had been the general secretaries of the UGTT. Even the question of women's liberation is closely linked to the workers' movement. The first to demand the total equality of men and women was Tahar Haddad in 1929, very linked to the Tunisian workers' movement and to the leader of the first independent union, Mohamed Ali El Hammi.

What really transformed the relationship of forces in favour of the revolution were the three regional

strikes, called by the UGTT. On Wednesday January 12 in the Sfax region, on Thursday January 13 in the regions of Kasserine, Kairouan, Sousse and Monastir and on Friday January 14th in that of greater Tunis. Inside the Administrative Commission of the UGTT, which called these strikes, the union bureaucracy — weakened by the destruction of its historic bases— was faced with very strong unions led by comrades essentially of the radical left - the primary and secondary education teaching unions, which are very strong, together with nearly 100,000 members, whereas the whole membership of the UGTT is 517,000 members, that of posts and telecommunications, that of doctors and public health, the leaders of the regions of Ben Arous, Jendouba, and so on. The union bureaucracy was obliged to take account of the radical unionists. The revolutionaries inside the UGTT called for a general strike, the bureaucracy had to give way before this pressure and this led to successive regional strikes, allowing the movement to build itself little by little. These strikes led to the flight of Ben Ali which took place on the day of the general strike in greater Tunis.

Today in Tunisia, unlike in Egypt for example, we do not have to organise the working class, we have an organised working class, whose essential sectors are under the leadership of the radical left. Their most high profile representative is a comrade of the Workers' Left League. The dynamic of the working class currently is to fight against this bureaucracy.. That is why the union bureaucracy refused to enter the government, because it was afraid of its radical base. But, without being part of it, it supported the second government, still more linked to the international institutions.

Inside the UGTT there is a big rank and file radicalisation. The general secretary has understood it and has announced he will leave his post at the next congress, in two years. He has said that he will respect article 10 of the statutes — abrogated at the Djerba congress in February 2002 — which stipulates that no member of the executive can hold office for more than two terms. That means that eight of the members of the current executive would have to go. With the revolutionary situation there is not only a big radicalisation but also a huge mood to demand democracy in all the institutions.

The fall of Ben Ali opens a new stage, the regime is weakened but not overthrown. The Ghannouchi government is weak, but holds on.

Ben Ali and the RCD have been overthrown. The regime has done everything possible to continue Ben Alism without Ben Ali, to make us believe that the only corrupt people were the Traboulsi and Ben Ali families. In fact corruption is linked to all the dominant families. Currently we face two big problems. First, Tunisia was not a system of civil bureaucracy or single party dictatorship, it was a police dictatorship. The militias are not then the militias of the RCD party and have not collapsed with this party. They are linked to the leaders of the police who had a grip on the parallel market. This leads today to these sort of death squads linked to the police and also to smuggling. Secondly it is a country which is very dependent on the European Union and also Sarkozy's France and Berlusconi's Italy. Ben Ali became in 1987 the representative and baton of the structural adjustment programme, imposed in 1985, with the crisis of the Bonapartist system of the aging Bourguiba. He came to power to confront a strong trade union movement. To apply the SAP, the international institutions chose someone who was head of security during the strike of 1978. Ben Ali was neither Hafez el-Assad nor Nasser, he was not a dictator with his own programme, he was a specialist in repression put in place to force through the programme imposed by the international institutions — the World Bank, the IMF — and by France. Because the essence of the Tunisian economy is closely linked to French capital. In the immediate, it is necessary to confront the debt, there is a schedule of payment in April of 480 million dollars. It is a highly iniquitous debt.

What are the current debates in the revolutionary movement?

We have begun to speak of a transitional programme in Tunisia, of urgent tasks and transitional

tasks. Among the urgent tasks there is the total dismantling of the RCD party and the police state institutions, the question of work for the unemployed, the nationalisation of all the properties of the families linked to Ben Ali under the control of the workers, the cancellation of the debt, taxation and so on.

At the same time there is a proposal at the level of the institutions, that is to create a National Congress for the Defence of the Revolution with all the organisations — trade unions, human rights organisations, parties and above all the autonomous committees of organisation which exist in the insurgent towns and villages. The discussion goes from the demand for the overthrow of Ghannouchi and his government — and I believe he will be obliged to quit — to that of the demand for a new government chosen among all the components of the Congress, so that there is a government whose task would be to legislate on the current, democratic, national and economic questions and to prepare genuinely free elections to the Constituent Assembly. I believe that this is completely realistic. Even if the relationship of forces does not allow the overthrow of this government, this weight of popular representation inside this Congress will weigh on it and would allow proposing, controlling, and blocking and so on. we advance the Constituent Assembly and at the same time a democratic popular workers' government. In Tunisia that could be done in the form of a popular and democratic UGTT government.

We need a congress of the mass movement with a broader representation, not only the UGTT executive but all the union federations and regions. At the same time we need to structure in each region, locality and sector committees genuinely linked to the popular masses. That would give the true popular forces control and initiative.

You spoke of autonomous committees of organisation. What form do they take?

These are structures which have begun to be built in the struggles. First in Sidi Bouzid, in Menzel Bouzaïane, in Agareb, in Thala and so on. Where there were serious confrontations against the police and the repressive administration of Ben Ali. People organised for their demands and to defend themselves against the attacks of the police and against repression. That led with time to a popular organisation and a local leadership.

Afterwards, with the fall of Ben Ali, there were attacks by the militias and sections of the police to spread fear. People organised across Tunisia to defend their neighbourhoods, schools, public services. That led to neighbourhood defence committees. The ruling party ran the neighbourhoods.. When it collapsed, the people were obliged to run the localities themselves, and the offices of the RCD became the offices of the people of the neighbourhood. They met, discussed and as there was a big politicisation, everybody talked about the government, its choices, links with ministers with Ben Ali, with France, with the USA and so on. In all the neighbourhoods the people have chosen to meet in these former RCD offices and to create Houses of Defence of the Revolution. In some neighbourhoods spontaneous forms of organisation endured, and in others a leadership was elected. The village committee became de facto the municipality. It is a process of self-organisation to meet vital needs — to organise everyday life, defend oneself from the militias involved in smuggling, the RCD, the police, and so on at the same time as a will to discuss the social, political and other questions.

As with any form of struggle and self-organisation, it is combined and uneven. It is very linked to the degree of radicalisation. It varies between regions, sectors and times of struggle. But the essential point is that they are beginning to take root in the country. Certainly in Agared, Thala, Menzel Bouzaïane, some neighbourhoods of Tunis There are forms of self organisation also emerging in the public establishments and institutions, linked to the intervention of trades unionists and workers to get rid of the most corrupt managers and replace them by the most competent. For example at

Tunisie-Télécom they have demanded that the 30 % privatised portion of the company is renationalised and that the most corrupt directors with the most indecent pay levels are removed. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the workers demanded that the Minister not return to the ministry, because he had given the image of Tunisia as a lickspittle of French imperialism. In the Ministry of Youth and Sports there was a movement to get rid of the most corrupt. The Ghannouchi government tries to oppose this, talks of anarchy, the danger of collapse of the economy, of the threat of losing the most qualified specialists, but the workers know that they are only the most qualified in corruption! All these so called highly qualified people are there for two reasons - corruption and to be in the service of the structural adjustment programme of the European Union the IMF and the WTO. For this, for sucking our blood, they are super qualified!

The self-organisation you mention has also spread to the media?

Historically, under Ben Ali, the press was not only controlled by Abdelwahab Abdallah, the Tunisian Rasputin, but was above all under the direction of the special services of the political police, of which neither the head nor the personnel have been changed. Until now the directorates of the governmental or private newspapers have been closely linked to the political police. That goes also for the television and radio. But in many newspapers there are movements, the workers and journalists impose their committees to have more freedom and to control the administration. There are more demands and more attempts at control on the part of the workers and the trade union, in the biggest national TV channel and also in some newspapers — in Sabah, in Al-chourouk. However for the moment, the two private TV channels, above all Berlusconi's NessmaTv, whose boss is closely linked to the political police and the Ben Aliists, have not been affected.

You mentioned the objective of a Constituent Assembly... what is the link between this objective and the self-organisation of which you spoke?

The demand for the Constituent Assembly was historically a demand raised by a few radical left groups. Even most of the activists of the revolutionary left were not interested. The people had not heard it mentioned before, they didn't even know what it was. The parties and organisations did not talk about it. Since the fall of Ben Ali, the initiative has been taken by the January 14th Front — which brings together the essence of the organised forces of the far left, the radical left and some nationalist groups which have links in all sectors and regions and have relations with union militants and young activists. The people began to discuss the Constituent Assembly. In Tunis everywhere, in the factories, schools, neighbourhoods, in Kef, Sidi Bouzid, Agareb, Thala... the people begin to advance the slogan of the Constituent Assembly: "No to Ghannouchi! No to the presidential regime! For a Constituent Assembly!"

I think that this demand, whether successful or not, constitutes the demand which articulates all the democratic demand, It also takes up the social demands. The more it is borne in the popular committees, the more it is linked to these local and regional committees of self-organisation, the more it will be a popular constituent assembly and not that of bigwig parliamentarians.

Finally, what is the situation of the Tunisian revolutionary left?

Today the essence of the Tunisian radical left is unorganised activists. The existing organisations, a dozen of them, do not represent even 10 % of this left which is very present in the autonomous organisations in the neighbourhoods, the unions and so on. Hence the task of building the party which the revolution needs must be taken on in the very course of the ongoing revolution. That isn't an easy task, The organisations of the radical and revolutionary left are emerging from illegality or are setting themselves up. If they attract activists who have until now been unorganised, they lack material resources — office, libraries, means of expression, publications. We hope that all those in

the international revolutionary left who are enthused by our revolution will help us. It is urgent. By way of returning the favour!

P.S.

* Translation: International Viewpoint.

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