

Tunis: A tale of two World Social Forums

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The WSF needs updating for a post-Arab Spring, post-Indignado world, writes Nick Dearden. The problems and the possibilities were both on show in Tunisia.

The Tunisian World Social Forum has been the most energetic, lively, youthful forum held in recent years. You could be in no doubt that this country is living through an incredible awakening, where all questions about the future are still unanswered, all possibilities open.

Ferocious debates were held on the role of Islam in this renewed society, the liberation of women and sexuality, imperialism and trade unionism – not to mention debates which got completely out of hand on Western Sahara and Syria. At any point on any day, half a dozen impromptu demonstrations were held on a variety of subjects, mostly to the sound of revolutionary hip hop.

The forum was plastered with pictures of anti-imperialist 'heroes', some more savoury than others. Pride of place was taken by Chokri Belaid [1], the left-wing opposition leader assassinated only weeks before the forum was held. Belaid pulled together a range of parties and factions into the Popular Front and gave many activists here hope in a radical future government.

The fundamentalist Islamic Salafist group also made an appearance to argue their case against the secular radicals. Among the more unusual stalls were those of the Iranian government, Brazilian oil company Petrobras and USAID (the latter left rather quickly after a demonstration against them).

In the youth space – constructed of tents previously donated by the UN – three stages played host to a range of music, from electronic Arabic folk to three self-conscious looking teenagers playing alternative rock covers (with pretty good guitar work).

Alive with ideas

For all of Tunis' laid back, French ambience – a world away from the noise, pollution and confusion of Cairo – Tunisia's youth are alive with ideas, and don't fit neatly into any expectations you might have of them.

For debt activists, Tunisia has particular interest, owing to its national assembly's decision to audit the debts run up under dictator Ben Ali [2]. This is a direct challenge to France and the IMF, eager to make new loans to the government to allow it to repay and recycle the odious debt of the past, and use these new loans to impose economic conditions on Tunisia. An IMF package is believed to be in the final stages of being discussed – a debt audit provides the first step in a very different direction.

The politics of the potential audit are made all the more exciting by the offer of help from Ecuador, the country which held the first official debt audit in the world and used the audit to declare its debt illegitimate and secure a multi-billion dollar write-off. Ecuador's government has recently declared another audit, of its investment treaties which often act as 'corporate rights' charters, preventing the government interfering in the profit-making of transnational corporations in order to protect

peoples' rights [3].

For Tunisia to follow some of Ecuador's policies would be a real nail in the coffin of neoliberal economics. It would also be a blow to the French government, already smarting at Tunisia's refusal to allow its airspace to be used for the French war in Mali. But nothing is certain here. Many activists express real frustration that things have not moved faster.

Rethinking and updating

By contrast with the Tunisian energy, the 'non-Tunisian' World Social Forum (the bit of the event where many European, Latin American and Asian activists spent much of their time) felt bland and well past its sell by date. Geographically somewhat separated from the area where most Magreb issues were discussed (a problem created by the organisers), the space was more like a giant policy seminar than the vibrant coming together of activists and groups intended.

The World Social Forum was initiated in 2001, an expression of the anti-globalisation movement - which brought unaccountable institutions of global 'government' like the IMF and WTO into the mainstream of protest - as a way of bringing people together to forge new alliances and strategies for change.

Today, too many sessions are dominated by the same speakers who have been making the same speeches for 15 years, with little progress made on reaching out to new movements and building comprehensive alternatives, despite a constant refrain that 'we need to better connect up' our issues and organisations. Even within the international section, language and national groups often stuck together. One astonishing meeting looking at the European Central Bank was dominated by German activists who didn't even mention the crisis in Greece.

The World Social Forum was formed long before the movements of the Indignados or Occupy, with their focus on participative decision-making and 'taking politics to public spaces'. Probably the best aspect of this WSF was the handing over of an outside space to a group of international activists from Occupy and the Indignados, working with local groups, as the Global Squares Movement [4].

Starting off as a European hub, the space became more and more Tunisian, eventually moving to the centre of town where an assembly of thousands of people came together, the vast majority of contributions being in Arabic.

During the lifetime of the World Social Forum, very significant victories have been won by the networks formed and nurtured here. The World Trade Organisation and the Free Trade Area of the Americas were stopped in their tracks. Food sovereignty and a ban on genetic modification are now enshrined in many countries constitutions. The right to water and the rights of peasants are now recognised by the UN.

Yet despite these victories, we face a mountain of injustice, with crises of the environment, of the economy, of militarism and war, in many ways worse than they were 15 years ago. As new revolutions bring a new generation of activists into the global justice movement, the WSF needs a major rethink to equip it for these challenges. More focus on participation, on planning, on open spaces, on genuine learning rather than regurgitating truisms. At a national level there needs to be a better way of ensuring new activists can come and take control of the forum - a limit on how often any one individual can attend would make an interesting guideline.

Activists should look forward to the continuing of the revolution in Tunisia and the start of the revolution in the World Social Forum.

Nick Dearden

P.S.

* From Red Pepper:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/tunis-a-tale-of-two-world-social-forums/>

* Nick Dearden is the director of Jubilee Debt Campaign.

Footnotes

[1] See from Think Africa Press, available on ESSF (article 28301), [Tunisia - The Poet and Politician: Who was Chokri Belaid?](#).

[2] <http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/Tunisian3720government3720to3720audit3720debts+7813.twl>

[3] See on ESSF (article 28302), [Oil companies force Ecuador to take another step forward in Audits.](#)

[4] <http://www.global-square.net/>