

64
DECEMBER
2012

Secular Social Movements Confront Radical Temptations

Francis Ghilès, Senior Researcher (CIDOB)

One year has passed since the Tunisians held orderly and free elections, the first ever since the country became independent from France in 1956. The coalition government which was constituted soon after and is dominated by the Islamist *Ennahda* party has made progress on drafting a new, democratic constitution but it has met strong opposition as it attempts to gag the media, the judiciary and the trades union. The attack by the militias of Ennahda, the *Comités de Protection de la Révolution* on the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) headquarters, Place Mohammed Ali in the heart of the capital on 4th December as the union was celebrating the anniversary of death of its founder, Ferhat Hached, is symbolic of a broader incapacity of the Islamist party to dialogue with key sections of Tunisian civil society. The way in which it has managed the economy has proved very amateurish. As a result, the economy is drifting badly and becoming ever more hostage to politics. Unemployment and the trade deficit are both rising and the government's lack of economic policy is threatening to derail any hopes of recovery.

The trade union is playing a growing role

Headline news is dominated by the government's attempts to impose censorship on the media, its very lax policy towards hard-line Islamists who are never shy of threatening university teachers and rectors, trying to take over mosques and destroying shops sell-

ing alcohol. Beyond headline news which often focuses on the Salafists, one key player is gaining power by stealth. UGTT was founded in 1946 and has influenced the country's politics and economics ever since. The union boasts over 500,000 members, mostly in the state sector – 80 regional offices and 19 different sector groups. During the fight for independence in the early 1950s, UGTT played a decisive role and its charismatic secretary general, Ferhat Hached, was assassinated by the right wing French group *La Main Rouge* on 5th December 1952.

After independence in 1956, the sheer dominance of the ruling *Parti Socialiste Destourien* on public life made UGTT the focus of lively debates if not opposition to government policies. Its daily *Echaab* was open to many new ideas. The major social and political crises of January 1978 and January 1984 pitted the unions against the government of the day; hundreds of demonstrators were killed in both cases. In the second instance, the uprising started in the south and spread north to Tunis, as happened in 2011. Two wings have usually vied for influence

at UGTT, one prepared to accommodate the government of the day, the other more inclined to defend the rights of its members in upfront fashion. The union has remained a broad chapel however, its members covering a broad spectrum from hard left to centre right but as the regime became less tolerant of opposition, be it from the working class or the nascent Islamists, UGTT's relatively independent voice was silenced.

Beyond headline news which often focuses on the Salafists, one key player, the trade union, is gaining power by stealth

UGTT's deteriorating relations with the government could greatly influence the outcome of next summer's elections

Amnesty International warns that progress on human rights in Tunisia is "being reversed" in a report last October

Although Tunisian Islamists were the enemies most directly targeted under Ben Ali, many liberals and UGTT members suffered badly during his 23-year old rule

Tunisia's economy is mismanaged and drifting. Average growth of 4.5% since 2000 and 2.7% in 2012 is not enough to absorb new entrants into the job market

The confrontation between UGTT led by Houcine Abassi and the Ennahda-led government started in February this year as thousands of union members protested at the Islamists tactic of having lorry loads of rubbish dumped in front of UGTT branches in an attempt to stop the union protesting against deteriorating social and economic conditions in Tunisia. On August 14th UGTT supporters clashed with the police in Sidi Bouzid, where the protests that eventually toppled Ben Ali started. The trade union was vehement in its demands that young unemployed Tunisians who had been arrested by the police and beaten up be released. The government's incapacity or unwillingness to spell out a coherent economic policy and its proximity to businessmen who were close to the Ben Ali regime has only made matters worse. The government does not hide its preference for very liberal economic policies, but is unconcerned about the informal sector whose unchecked growth will inflict great damage on companies which operate within the rule of law. Police repression has not endeared the government to UGTT militants. Following the attack on their headquarters, UGTT refused to join the official commemoration of Ferhat Hached's murder on December 5th.

Progress on human rights "is being reversed" - Amnesty International

Relations between the trade union and the government have deteriorated sharply . We are fast approaching a watershed in the revolution sparked across many Arab countries by the Tunisian uprising.

UGTT's relations with the government are deteriorating at a crucial moment. The private employer's federation UTICA reached an agreement with UGTT to improve pay and other working conditions and measures to improve the competitiveness of Tunisian workers on the very day UGTT headquarters were attacked. UGTT called for a general strike on December 13th to protest against the attack but called it off at the eleventh hour after the government admitted Ennahda's militias were responsible and agreed to an enquiry to which UGTT will be party. The trade union has thus preserved its independence from all political parties and enhanced its position as a key player in Tunisian politics. The agreement which it concluded with UTICA and which is essential to keeping existing foreign companies in the country and preventing new western investment from choosing Morocco or Rumania, which are more stable countries, in preference to Tunisia, now stands a good chance of being implemented. No wonder Ouided Bouchamaoui, the chair of UTICA expressed growing concern recently about the deterioration of the business climate, a trend which will influence the outcome of elections which are tentatively planned for next summer.

UGTT played an important role as relay of the protests which resulted in the corrupt ruling family of Ben Ali being ousted from power in January 2011. In the months ahead, it could play an equally important role in ensuring that Tunisia becomes a country where different voices are listened to and respected, where the media are allowed to criticise the government of the day without fear of being gagged and where women rights gained

after independence are enshrined in the new constitution. UGTT has no truck with efforts currently under way in the constituent assembly to ban any former member of the ruling RCD party or senior government official who held office before January 2011 from holding office. Such a measure would ban over 1m Tunisians from participating in the country's political life or holding high office. An estimated three hundred private businessmen have had their passports confiscated, which does nothing to encourage a more serene business climate.

Meanwhile violence is escalating in the confrontation between Ennahda forces and opposition parties. Last October, Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia's first post-revolution prime minister – who was very critical of UGTT while in office but now seeks their support, called the death of one of his party's senior officials in violent demonstrations led by *Ennahda* supporters a "political assassination" and referred to the "lynching" of Lotfi Nagedh. The party official's death came as progress on human rights in Tunisia was "being reversed" according to a report published in October by Amnesty International. Last year's elections were widely praised as representing a model transition towards democracy, but new restrictions on freedom of expression, targeting artists, journalists, and critics of the government, writers and bloggers are increasing. The destruction two months ago of the main room with the catafalque of the Sufi shrine of Sayida Manouba in Tunis by

members of a Salafist group fits into a pattern which has seen tombs of Sufi saints destroyed in Timbuktu after Al Qaeda-affiliated groups took over Northern Mali.

The minister of the interior Ali Laâraïdh insisted that Lotfi Nagedh had died as the result of a heart attack. Two days earlier state television suggested that the young men who entered the *zaouia* (shrine) of Sayida Manouba were just thieves. UNESCO condemned that act but no member of the government spoke up. The Tunisian authorities are unable or unwilling to protect individuals from attacks by those believed to be affiliated with Salafist groups while the Amnesty report said it had received reports of torture "many of them from protestors who alleged they were beaten during demonstrations, during arrest or in detention centres." A state of emergency in place since the uprising has been repeatedly renewed, most recently till the end of the year.

Burning the American school in Tunis sullied Ennahda's image

Ennahda, which was banned before last year's uprising, won a plurality of votes in the elections of 23rd October 2011 and now rules in coalition with two smaller parties, including the Congress for the Republic Party of President Moncef Marzouki. The current escalation of violence was sparked by an event which sullied Tunisia's image of quiet revolution and that of Ennahda even more: it occurred on 14th September 2012 when a mob of supporters of Ennahda and bearded flag-burning zealots attacked the American mission and burned the American school in Tunis. A videotape showing the paramount leader of the Islamists, Rashed Ghannouchi, meeting with the same Salafists

who call for foreign investors and tourists to be banned from the country has humiliated a force once seen as unstoppable. The Islamist prime minister, Hamadi Jebali, and Rached Ghannouchi were further humiliated by the success of the conference called on 16-17th October by UGTT. All the major political forces in the country attended, including Ettakatol, a small party which belongs to the government coalition - except the government and Ennahda who saw the meeting as a way of circumventing their domination of the process of writing a new constitution.

The recent drift into violence of what has been to date a relatively peaceful transition from dictatorship has confirmed that the Islamists have organisational capacity, popular support and international connections which their opponents appeared to lack. In Tunisia however, the strength of liberal and leftist reaction is becoming more evident by the day. Such forces were gutted by the founder of modern Tunisia Habib Bourguiba and the former dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Although Tunisian Islamists were the enemies most directly targeted by the latter, many liberals and UGTT members suffered badly during his rule. The strength of their reaction today suggests that many Tunisian men and women are prepared to fight for a modern vision of Tunisia, a country where, in what was then a major innovation for a Muslim country, the constitution of 1861 created a secular supreme court, empowered to review decisions of the sharia courts. Beji Caid Essebsi has succeeded, since Nidaa Tunes (the Call from Tunis), the party he founded in July 2012, in pulling badly fragmented liberal and leftist forces together while the Islamists recent missteps and thuggery have eroded their popularity.

The recent drift into violence of what has been to date a relatively peaceful transition from dictatorship has confirmed that the Islamists have organisational capacity, popular support and international connections

The Rashed Ghannouchi factor

The calculated exercise in ambiguity of Rached Ghannouchi – the true powerbroker in Tunisia today, is worth taking a closer look at. He admires both Nasser and the doctrines of Hassan el Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is a self-professed admirer of the Turkish prime minister and likes to argue that Islam, liberal economic policies and democracy can coexist. Yet, when asked by the *New York Times* at the height of the civil war in Algeria – “Why murder Arab and Muslim intellectuals just because they embrace secularist views?” he answered: “Some of these secularists are the devil’s advocate, they are Pharaoh’s witches. The educated that put their brains and their talent in the service of an oppressive regime have made their own decision. They must bear the responsibility of their choice.”¹ This was tantamount to a licence to murder.

Beji Caid Essebsi’s behaviour in the run-up to last year’s elections was exemplary. Ghannouchi has repeatedly stated in recent weeks that *Nidaa Tunes* supporters “were more dangerous than the Salafists” (notably on the private and widely listened to

Shams FM radio station in Tunis on October 4th). The reaction of the former prime minister to the murder of Lotfi Naguedh was firm but restrained. What Ghannouchi says matters far more than what Jebali opines – after all he is chairman of Ennahda, the prime minister the party’s general secretary. The chairman sees ministers more often than the prime minister and benefits from a diplomatic passport granted by his son in law, who is foreign minister, as well as a presidential style body guard.

Ghannouchi also criticizes the way in which Tunisians mix French and Arabic, thus sullying as he sees it the language of the Prophet. This defence of the Arabic language which primarily takes the form of an indictment of the use of French must be seen in the context of France’s deep complicity with the former Ben Ali regime, its opposition to the bold economic reforms attempted in Algeria in 1989-91 and the exaggerated *parisianisme* of some in the Tunis elite who have consistently ignored their poorer countrymen. His attitude contrasts sharply with that of Algeria’s most famous modern writer, Kateb Yacine, who proclaimed at the height of his country’s violent struggle to throw off French rule in the 1950s: “*le Français est mon butin de guerre.*”

A few months ago, the Tunisian government appointed a former police officer of Ben Ali, Lotfi Touati, to run the state-owned *As-sabah* press group, prompting the journalists there to go on strike,

some on hunger strike. The first ever general strike of journalists in the history of the country followed last month. Businessmen who were very close to the former *Mafiosi* Ben Ali clan are now advising the government.

Tunisia’s economy is drifting badly

The country’s economy meanwhile is drifting. Rising unemployment and food prices will radicalise political and social actors in Tunisia. The current account deficit, for the second year amounts to more than 7.5% of GDP. Although foreign investment has held up well until recently, investors, both domestic and foreign are beginning to hold back and capital flight appears to be increasing. Subsidised products such as milk increasingly find their way to Libya while Algerian petrol, cheaper its Tunisian counterpart is increasingly available. The risk of Tunisia turning into a bazaar economy is increasing. Since January 2011, the international community, not least Europe and the US have strongly backed Tunisia. In 2011 the country received \$1.3bn of external financial support. The government has obtained \$485m of loan guarantees from the US and a \$600m samurai bond from Japan. It is to issue \$635m of Islamic bonds, a first in the history of Tunisia next year. The World Bank has just granted a budget support loan of \$600m. This is a far cry from Ghannouchi’s often stated fears of rejection by the international community. Although GDP

1. Conversations: Sheik Rachid el-Ghannouchi; *An Islamic Fundamentalist Abroad talks freely of Limits on Freedom*. Interview by Youssef Ibrahim, *New York Times*, January 9, 1994

will probably rebound by a modest 2.7% according to an IMF report last October (the government suggests 3.5%), that is hardly noteworthy when compared with the 1.5% decline of last year. Average growth since 2000 has been a modest 4.5 %, not enough to absorb new entrants onto the job market.

Early last summer the respected governor of the central bank, Mustafa Nabli was sacked at the insistence of the Tunisian president. The Administrative Reform minister Mohammed Abbou resigned because “the government had refused to give him the authority to investigate corruption cases and overhaul the public sector.” The minister of finance, Houcine Dimassi, an independent appointed by Ettakatol and considered an independent resigned accusing the government of being “more concerned about winning votes than about the health of public finances.” The departure of such highly respected people and the endless ongoing cultural wars have made such measures much harder to implement. Nor will the appointment of a man close to Nahda to run the National Institute of Statistics instil greater trust in official figures. Standard and Poors downgraded Tunisia last spring – in September it lowered the note of the country’s banking sector which is now in the “high risk countries” or category 8 – the BICRA method used to evaluate the banking sector takes into account economic and industrial risk and is grade 1 to 10. Tunisia is now in the same category as Kazakhstan and Nigeria.

Twenty thousand new jobs have been created in an already over-bloated civil service and given to cronies of *Nahda*. Such behaviour does not augur well for the future of free speech and good economic management.

As it attempts to sell some of the assets confiscated from the former president’s family such as the local Kia Motors concession or Ennakl, an importer, the authorities will be holding their breath but overall private investors, especially foreigners are playing a game of wait and see. Tunisian companies are doing well in Libya and in neighbouring Algeria where an estimated 1000 operate.

Violence is likely to increase if regional disparities keep growing. On 29th November a large part of the 40,000 inhabitants of Siliana deserted their impoverished town for 24 hours after violently clashing with the police who used buckshot against the demonstrators, the fiercest protests since the salafists and Nahda supporters attacked the US embassy in Tunis two and a half months before. Poor Tunisians have quite lost faith in the government’s capacity to deliver jobs and stable food prices which are rising at an annual rate of 5.5%. The head of state himself, whose small party is allied with Ennahda, is now voicing serious criticism of what he views as the government’s incompetence.

Ghannoushi’s exercise in calculated ambiguity is inflicting grievous damage to the management of the economy, which also has to face strong European headwinds – the EU remains Tunisia’s major external market. Some foreign companies have cut staff and production, most are holding back new investment in existing factories or green field plants because of insecurity and growing uncertainty. A few small Tunisian private owners have closed down and moved to Algeria and Morocco. Wided Bou-

chamaoui said last week end that the Tunisian economy “was in a state of emergency” and pointed to the danger the informal sector represents for the country. UGTT meanwhile is only too aware of the danger the informal sector, which supports Nahda, represents for its members. UGTT leaders are convinced that Ennahda’s aim is to destroy the union as the independent social force it has been since 1949. Both far left political parties and supporters of Nidha Tunes have defended UGTT against the government. Repeated attacks by salafists and the government against UGTT risks provoking further violence. Nahda’s official credo is one of economic liberalism and privatisation but, as its sister parties across the Arab world, it has never come up with a realistic platform which addresses the problems of a modern economy. Tunisia’s has dropped from the 59th to the 73rd rank between 2010 and 2012 in the list of the most corrupt nations published by Transparency International.

The high hopes of the revolution of January 2011 have not brought more jobs for many Tunisians. The fall of Ben Ali It has ushered in a period of greater freedom of expression but those gains risk being reversed. No one disputes that Islamists must be able to exercise their rights alongside other political forces – many Tunisians remain fervent supporters of Ennahda. A primary argument for accepting and even advocating the rise of Islamists in Tunisia, as elsewhere in North Africa is that only they will be able to confront the radicals in their ranks and guide them into the mainstream. The Islamist’s lurch between mollifying and confronting the Salafists, let alone trying to control their hard line militia members, may be ascribed to their inexperience - or cynicism. But confronting UGTT is most unwise – it is a force to be reckoned with. If Ghannoushi, who is the true puppet master of Tunisian politics, alienates UGTT further and shies away from serious economic thinking, Tunisia will enter into uncharted political and economic waters.