

Tunisia: Elections mask the growing anger from below

Following the revolutionary events at the start of 2011 in Tunisia, in which the country's youth, unemployed and workers overthrew the 24-year long dictatorship of president Ben Ali, elections have recently taken place for a constituent assembly. The assembly is supposed to rewrite the constitution, choose a new interim government, and set dates for parliamentary and presidential elections. The elections saw the victory of the Islamist party Ennahda, which opens a new, complex situation, against the background of a continuing crisis in the economy, and a deep thirst for social change among the masses. The following edited report is from a CWI reporter. The full report can be read on www.socialistworld.net

After decades of dictatorship, and the farcical polls that have characterised all the past elections under Ben Ali's rule, these elections were for many Tunisians the first time in their life to vote in the framework of 'real elections'. This gives an important explanation for the large electoral turnout.

It is clear that the Islamist party Ennahda comes through by far as the first party, leading in almost every region, winning around 90 seats in the 217-seat constituent assembly, with 40% of the vote.

At first sight, this may appear surprising as, at the start of the year, this party was hardly visible in the mass protests, and its role in the revolution has been non-existent.

However, the party has benefited from the lack of a challenging alter-

native on the left, giving the opportunity for Ennahda to fill the political vacuum.

Relying on a network of charitable organisations active in the poorest neighbourhoods and towns, and on huge financial means allegedly pouring in from the Gulf monarchies, Ennahda has campaigned all over the country exploiting people's frustrations by playing on their religious sentiments and on a populist social rhetoric.

"I voted Ennahda because the other parties want 10% of the population to live in luxury while the rest of the population remain in poverty," explained an elderly man interviewed in a French-speaking newspaper.

Fears of a 'hidden' agenda by Ennahda have been reinforced by the fact that some groups of Salafists have flexed their muscles in the recent months, attacking a cinema and a TV station over material they considered blasphemous, demonstrating to demand an "Islamic revolution", and physically attacking left activists and women.

However, Ennahda will lack an absolute majority in the new assembly and will find it difficult to impose a hardline agenda, especially in a country that has just experienced a revolution.

Riots

There was an unexpected breakthrough by the list El Aridha (People's Petition Party). It is led by a millionaire, Hechmi Haamdi - a former Islamist, who then became an open ally of the former Ben Ali regime before turning against him - who owns a TV station, broadcasting by satellite from London.

With a populist programme, he also exploited the fact that he came from Sidi Bouzid, playing on regionalist resentment against the relatively higher living standards of northern coast cities. All this without even putting a foot inside Tunisia during

image not available

the whole electoral campaign.

However, because of the number of obvious irregularities of his campaign, Haamdi's lists have been cancelled in six regions, which has pushed him to cancel all the other lists in the aftermath, denouncing the 'rotten' character of the assembly.

The cancellation of seats led to protests and riots in Sidi Bouzid on 27 October, involving the burning of the regional Ennahda's headquarters. It was in Sidi Bouzid that fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed university graduate, set himself on fire on 17 December last year to protest against abuses under Ben Ali's 23-year-old regime.

"The ruling class will now try to use the 'success story' of these elections in an attempt to close the revolutionary chapter, to bring back politics from the streets to the institutions, from the creative energy of the masses towards a caste of professional politicians, the major-

ity of them having played no role in the revolution whatsoever. But the 'people of the assembly' are not 'the people of the revolution,'" comments Dali, a Tunisian activist.

The impression of relative stability and the hopes of a smooth, orderly democratic transition could be short-lived. Sporadic protests and strikes have continued on a regular basis and a national postal workers' strike to demand wage increases has started.

Tunisia faces a deep crisis, and remains marked by profound social contradictions. Indeed, the daily lives of the Tunisian masses have hardly changed. If anything, they have got worse.

The revolution is far from finished. New outbreaks of struggle are inevitable, as a restoration and stabilisation of the existing economic system can only be done by blocking the masses' aspirations for a new life, that have been awakened by their revolution.

Tony Blair advises Kazakhstan's dictatorial regime

Ken Douglas

Press reports in the past week have revealed a very close relationship between former Labour prime minister Tony Blair and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the dictatorial ruler of mineral-rich Kazakhstan.

Blair is reportedly earning \$13 million a year for advising Nazarbayev who presides over a thoroughly corrupt regime. Nazarbayev rules through a family clique which owns most of the country's wealth. He runs a police state which harasses, imprisons and sometimes kills political activists, tortures prisoners and condemns the majority of its population to poverty (see reports on www.socialistworld.net).

The Sunday Telegraph reported on 30 October that Nazarbayev is hoping that Blair can help him win the Nobel Peace Prize!

Apparently Blair's friendship with Nazarbayev began when he allowed him to hold Blair's baby Leo on a state visit to the UK in 2001. He might do well to think of that moment when he considers the fate of the children of oilworkers in Western Kazakhstan during their ongoing strike to improve their horrendous working and living conditions. Nazarbayev's state forces may

image not available

have been behind not only the murder of one of the workers' leaders but also the rape and murder of a teenage daughter of another.

But for Blair life is cheap. When he was recalled to the Chilcot Inquiry into the invasion of Iraq, which caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, Blair said that it had been worthwhile for the removal of Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. What hypocrisy! It only took a few million pounds to buy his approval of a dictatorial regime in Kazakhstan.

According to the Sunday Telegraph, Sir Richard Evans, an associate of Blair and the former head of BAE systems, is now chairman of Samruk, the Kazakh state company which owns most of the major companies in Kazakhstan

and has about £50 billion in assets.

It comes as no surprise to further learn that the 'Prince of Darkness', Lord Mandelson, has been hired by the company to give speeches at two of its events, praising it for the role it played in rescuing the world economy.

The other two members of the triumvirate at the heart of Blair's 'inner cabinet', his former director of communications and author of the Iraq 'dodgy dossier', Alistair Campbell, and his ex-chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, have also made trips to Astana on behalf of big business.

According to the revelations in the Financial Times (22 October), with the revolutions under way in Tunisia and Egypt, Blair and Campbell advised Nazarbayev to go for an earlier than scheduled election.

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

www.socialistworld.net

The CWI website contains news, reports and analysis from around the world. Recent articles include:

image not available

USA: Which way forward for the 'occupy' movement?

What should the next step be for the anti-capitalist protests?

Ty Moore, Socialist Alternative (CWI, USA)

image not available

Chile: The crude strategy of Piñera's government to discredit the students

New laws to repress social protest.

Celso Calfullan, Socialismo Revolucionario (CWI, Chile)

image not available

India: Maruti Suzuki strike ends

But more battles still to be waged.

Anand Kumar and Jagadish G Chandra (CWI, India)