

Tunisia: Chokri Belaïd murder could trigger a second revolution

Ilona Szemethy, Vienna Fri, 08/03/2013 - 15:04

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In early February, Tunisia was shaken by the brutal assassination of Chokri Belaïd, general secretary of the Party of United Patriotic Democrats, which identifies its politics as Marxist-Pan-Arabist, and heads a popular front alliance.

Chokri Belaïd, a lawyer from a working class background who still lived in a working class area, had defended workers in the Gafsa mining basin under the dictatorship of Ben Ali and was an unsparing critic of the three party coalition government commonly known as the Troika. This is headed by the Ennahda party, which gained 41.47% in the 2011 elections, and initially included the Social Democratic party and the liberal ?Congress for the Republic?, CPR but the latter has just left the coalition.

Islamist extremists had repeatedly threatened Belaïd's life and Salafist clerics had pronounced fatwas, (religious judgements), declaring him no longer a Muslim and calling for his assassination. He was gunned down on February 6 as he left his house to go to work. As news of the political murder spread, angry crowds began to gather in front of the Interior Ministry. Massive demonstrations marched through many towns and in several the offices of the Ennahda party were ransacked. In the capital, Tunis, its headquarters were set on fire.

On February 8, the day of Chokri Belaïd's funeral, the opposition parties and the biggest trade union, the UGT, called for a general strike and some 1.4 million people took to the streets, from a total population of only 11 million. For the trade union, this was to be "a peaceful strike against violence". However, in Tunis, the army intervened - supposedly because of fear of rioting. The demonstrators chanted "the people want a new revolution", making it clear that they would continue Chokri Belaïd's struggle.

Naturally, the Ennahda party has distanced itself from any responsibility for the assassination. Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali first forced his own government to resign and then tried to establish a "government of experts" but was then himself forced to resign after failing to get his own party, Ennahda, to agree to it.

In answer to the protests, Ennahda organised a counter-demonstration but the result was pitiful: no more than 15,000 turned out. What was supposed to be a display of mass power actually demonstrated how much support the Ennahda party has lost in recent months.

The background to Belaïd's assassination was increasing attacks on meetings and local branches of the secular opposition, on the trade unions, and women's organisations and other social groups. These have been blamed mainly on the so-called "League for the Defence of the Revolution", an ironic name for militias which attack the progressive and oppositional forces which made the revolution. In fact, they are the spearhead of a creeping counterrevolution being carried through by the supposedly moderate Ennahda, which repeatedly compares itself to the Turkish AKP.

There have also been terrorist actions by the Tunisian Salafist groups who have attacked artists, journalists, theatres and art exhibitions as well as burning synagogues and mausoleums of venerated Muslim saints. They have attacked various American institutions including the US Embassy.

In an action which badly misfired, they denounced as un-Islamic the 'Harlem Shake', the video clip dance 'meme' which was performed in many Tunisian high schools in February. The fact that the minister of the interior threatened students with expulsion and their teachers with dismissal only politicised and spread it as a protest against forced cultural 'illumination' and repression of the free self-expression of youth.

The Constituent Assembly, elected in October 2011 in the first free elections since Ben Ali, was charged with formulating a constitution within one year and organising parliamentary elections. Neither task has been fulfilled. It is noteworthy that young people organised a 'Harlem Shake' outside the Assembly, carrying signs which read 'where is our constitution??

In fact, the Constituent Assembly is also in deep crisis, many elected members have stood down and the opposition has announced a temporary suspension of cooperation. The suspicions of Tunisia's youth and trade unionists against the government and the Constituent Assembly are well grounded. Though the governing party has warned of the country falling into "the trap of criminality" and of chaos and unrest throughout the country, what they really fear is that another 2011 wave of angry protests by the mass of the population could force them out of power.

But these scare tactics have not fooled most Tunisian people. On their banners they write "Clear out!" just as they did two years ago when they overthrew the dictator Ben Ali, but now the demand is aimed at Ennahda. Its leader, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, has responded to the comparison of the current situation with the revolution of 2011 by arguing that Chokri Belaïd was no Bouazizi and he himself no Ben Ali. He should not be so sure of himself!

The country which unleashed the Arab Spring, is now seeing a renewed protest movement. The people of Tunisia had hoped for a better life after the revolution but in reality their economic and political situation has scarcely changed. There is still massive unemployment, the police are as harsh as ever, food prices rise in keeping with the general inflation and the government replies to protests with more repression, many demonstrations have been banned or forcibly suppressed.

The old corrupt agents of US and EU imperialism were thrown out by the revolutions across the Arab world but they were replaced by new reactionary puppets of capital. None of the governing parties will actually resolve any of the burning problems of the poverty-stricken people. On the contrary, Ennahda in particular has been pursuing a radical neoliberal economic policy. Unlike other reactionary religious parties, they have not presented themselves as anti-imperialist but have tried openly to sell off the Tunisian economy to foreign investors in order to strengthen their own position.

The Tunisian working class and youth, however, have not forgotten the lessons of their past struggles: in the last year there have been numerous strikes, rebellions and demonstrations across the whole of Tunisia in defence of their rights.

One of the biggest protests, largely ignored by the Western media, was a five-day all-out strike by the highly exploited workers in Siliana in December and January 2012, demanding a living wage and employment contracts but this protest, too, was brutally suppressed. The trade union, which had led the protests, eventually came to an agreement with the government and stood down any further protests, thereby betraying the justified uprising of the militant workers.

That, however, did not mean the end of protests. The economic situation continued to worsen and the Tunisian working class has shown that it has both the courage and the will to continue fighting for a free and worthwhile life.

The democratic revolution of 2011 brought the Tunisians and other Arab peoples a formal freedom but that is now threatened by the reactionary Islamists as well as by neoliberal forces. A second revolution is indeed necessary, working people and the youth must turn against the whole system of global capitalism and its imperialist exploitation. This must include their Tunisian representatives, the present regime.

The Tunisian revolution, like others across the region, has huge unfinished democratic tasks
? disbanding the brutal police forces inherited from the old regime and replacing them with a popular militia of workers and youth and smashing the Islamist gangs.

expropriating the wealthy parasites who grew fat out of the corruption of the old regime and handing over their lands and property to the poor.

- Arresting not only those accused of directly murdering Belaïd but all those who incited his murder.

- Releasing all remaining political prisoners and putting their persecutors and torturers in jail after sentencing by popular courts of justice.

Tunisians should not forget the famous saying of the French Jacobin revolutionary, Saint Just, ?a revolution which stops halfway digs its own grave.?

To really complete the Tunisian revolution it is necessary for the working class and the unions to launch an all out general strike to force out the government, dissolve the do-nothing Constituent Assembly and elect a new one democratically, under the protection of the workers and revolutionary youth. Its members should be delegates, recallable by their electors. A revolutionary provisional government should make its priority addressing the material needs of the people with programmes of public works on urgent socially necessary projects, funded by taxing or expropriating the rich as well as European and US big business interests.

The Tunisian revolution, which began as a democratic one in January 2011, must be completed by uprooting all the repressive machinery of the dictatorship and by enacting all the democratic demands of workers and youth. But, to meet the burning needs of the people for jobs, food, land, health and education services and women?s rights, a social revolution against capital is necessity. Only a socialist revolution, which overthrows the capitalist class, foreign and native, and builds a system based on workers' councils can solve the problems of the underpaid workers, the unemployed youth and the poverty stricken population of the towns and the countryside .

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