



Arab Reform Initiative

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The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia

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The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms was born in 2005 when a consensus was reached among a group of Tunisian political parties and civil associations of diverse, or even contradictory, ideological orientations. It was formed on the basis of common goals rather than on ideological affinities. In spite of repression by the authorities, concerns about Islamism and apprehensions towards the radical left, the members of the coalition believe that there is no way for society to express itself or to regain its dynamism without attaining the basic rights involved in the struggle to resist oppression and arbitrary rule. The formation of the coalition and the choice of a consensual process among such disparate forces as leftists, liberal democrats and Islamists is an indication that the struggle for the rule of law is the overarching concern shared by all opposition forces in Tunisia, a pattern that other opposition forces across the Arab world are increasingly following.

Historical Roots

The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedom was formally established in early December 2005. It expressed the long-cherished hope of the political and civil forces in the country that by rallying around basic claims, a balance could be reached between the ruling party, which had dominated all aspects of political life for half a century, and the opposition forces which remained

disparate and hindered by their internal and external disputes. These forces, though ideologically varied, believed that one of the conditions for society to recover its dynamism and capacity for initiative is to reach a consensus on the issue of fundamental rights, whether political, such as the right to take public action, or legal, relating to the prevention of abuse against themselves or against the citizens.

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To understand the nature of the 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms one must put it in the Tunisian context which for 50 years has been characterized by the total hegemony of one-party over political and social life.

The Democratic Constitutional Union (the *Doustour* Party) has been ruling the country since independence in 1956. The Tunisian political system was established by the historic leader Al-Habib Bourguiba on the principle of the “protective state” that thinks on behalf of citizens whose role is therefore limited to total obedience and the fulfillment of the wishes of the State. The State provided education and social care and drew up development plans without allowing citizens’ participation in any form. Bourguiba’s charisma and historic legitimacy of leading the struggle against the colonial authorities, helped justify giving priority to development over politics to gain popular acceptance. Bourguiba urged the people to wage the struggle of development, which he called the “greatest struggle” (or greatest *jihād*) and he regarded the citizen in any section of society as “a soldier in the *jihād* for development.” He fought fiercely against anyone who questioned the “protective state” and succeeded in deeply rooting the one-party state, using effective control mechanisms that are transmitted within the “party/state” apparatus.

The repression practiced by the “protective state” did not prevent the emergence of civil political forces that rejected the state’s choices. Thus, during Prime Minister Al Hadi Nour’s mandate in the late 1970s and his program of economic liberalization, some political parties began to emerge from within the ruling system and others on the basis of secret organizations. Independent opposition newspapers that endeavored to express views at variance with official positions were also established but then eventually succumbed to pressure exerted by the state. With such political and social dynamism growing in the country, Bourguiba was obliged in 1981, at the beginning of the mandate of Prime Minister

Mohammad Mzali, to recognize political pluralism and lift the ban imposed in 1963, on the Tunisian Communist Party. Two years later in 1983, the Authorities licensed two other political parties and turned a blind eye on unauthorized movements which continued to function and issue statements. While pluralism was recognized, political trials continued however, particularly of Islamists, in three main waves in 1981, 1983 and 1987.

In the aftermath of Bourguiba’s 30-year rule, the new ruling establishment that took over in 1987 tried to codify the role of political parties in a more official way, drafting the Law on Political parties and Associations in 1988. Since then, five parties have been recognized. But the political forces continued to complain about the huge gap between legal theory and actual practice, as the administration refused, in spite of the existence of the law, to license a number of political parties and associations that did not comply with the policies of the ruling party. Today, there are thirteen political parties and associations that meet all the legal conditions and are active in the political arena, but which the administration nevertheless refuses to authorize. The Tunisian opposition and civil society organizations have come to define the system as a legal bureaucracy in which laws are drafted and international conventions are ratified but are not respected, or their implementation is dependent on the ruler’s good will.

The ruling establishment that succeeded Bourguiba lacked the characteristics of its predecessor, in particular the founding leader’s charisma. It therefore began to abandon, gradually but surely, the idea of the developmental and welfare state in favor of a deeply liberal socio-economic orientation. This has been accompanied by an unprecedented spread of all forms of corruption. The authorities, now relieved of their paternalistic protective role, resorted to naked repression. The confrontation with the Islamists in the 1990s showed just how far the regime could go in repressing opponents. This took the form of break-ins, cases of victims

tortured to death, cruel judgments that did not fit the act committed, mistreatment of families in what jurists call collective punishment, continuing to pursue opponents even after they have served their sentence and been released from prison. Such practices have continued, and the reports of international organizations have consistently been filled with testimonies about them in recent years.

The Immediate Causes

The promulgation of the 10 December 2003 Law, known as the Anti-Terror Law, heralded the onset of a new wave of repressive police measures. These continued to escalate until 2005, which was marked by a serious worsening of repression of the freedom of those organizations that continued to cling to their independence. The 6th Congress of the Tunisian Human Rights League was not allowed to convene, nor was the first Congress of the Tunisian Journalists Association permitted to meet. The Board of the Association of Tunisian Judges was replaced after the authorities seized the headquarters of the Association's executive office and dispersed independent judges, ordering their transfer from the capital city to remote areas of the country.

This escalation by the government led to tightening the noose around two main opposition parties, the Progressive Democratic Party and the Democratic Block for Work and Freedoms. The authorities rejected applications by political parties and associations for licenses to operate under the law, leading them to carry on their activities in a semi-secret manner, unable to convene public meetings – even if held in private places – or to organize seminars or forums for discussion and dialogue. The authorities also automatically banned any popular activity called by the opposition and the civil forces. One example is the protest organized by the civil and political forces against the invitation of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to participate in the World Summit on

Information Society hosted by Tunisia in November 2005.

Also in 2005, a confrontation took place with the lawyers who protested for 52 days at the headquarters of the Lawyers' Association in Tunis to demand the release of their colleague Mohammad Abu who was arrested in March 2005 for having written an article on a website in which he protested against the invitation of Sharon to Tunisia. The Abu case has become a global issue around which organizations for human rights, freedom of the press, opinion and expression have rallied, demanding that the Tunisian government release him. Confrontation between the authorities and the lawyers occurred again in May 2006 when the latter organized a protest against the ratification by the Parliament of the Lawyers' Higher Institute Law which was seen by the lawyers as detrimental to the autonomy of the profession and was consecrating the hegemony of the government over it. Their protest action lasted 20 days and included a two-day hunger strike. They also organized a national day of solidarity with the lawyers, and this effort led to intervention by security forces, injuring many lawyers.

The numerous events prior to the creation of the 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms showed that the Tunisian authorities chose the principle of automatically rejecting the repeated calls that many civil and political forces were issuing, and were refusing to treat the political and civil rights cases that had come to light, some of them dating back as far as two decades, such as the political prisoners' issue. The authorities responded to these pressing demands by clamping down on their adversaries to cripple all their movements.

When many political and civil forces came to the common conclusion that all methods of recognized political action had been prohibited, eight national personalities representing various political parties and civil organizations went on a hunger strike on 18 October 2005, one month before the World Summit on Information Society hosted by

Tunisia in November, in order to draw attention to the issue of liberties in the country. Their demands focused on three basic claims: freedom of organization for all; freedom of information and expression; release of political prisoners and adoption of a law on general legislative amnesty.

The three claims were seen as the minimum required, and the strikers were continuously repeating that any solution below these claims would mean that the country was a dictatorship, while the fulfillment of those demands would mean that one could talk about the beginnings of a democratic process. The demands themselves were an indication of a real political crisis. They had been raised by the Tunisian opposition since the late 1970s when some forces began to emerge that believed in political participation rather than the logic of radical regime change that prevailed in the 1960s and early 1970s. All that time, the radical leftist movements mostly consisted of students who were under the influence of revolutionary theories prevailing in the world at that time such as Maoism, Trotskyism, and youth revolts in 1968.

The demands of the 18 October strike forced the chronic Tunisian political crisis out into the open. The refusal of the authorities for many decades to respond to the major calls of all opposition groups led to the conclusion that socio-economic growth had not been accompanied by basic minimal political reform. The strike brought out new realities still unknown to the civil and political forces in the previous two decades, namely:

- * The agreement of representatives of associations and political parties on common demands, which exposed the overlap of civil-social action and political action, and showed that everyone suffers as a result of the closed-door policy adopted by the authorities vis-à-vis all civil and political organizations.

- * The coming together of various ideologically contradictory political movements for the first time in 20 years. In effect, the joint strike was organized by leftists such as the Tunisian Communist Labor Party,

Islamists (including independents as well as some who were close to the prohibited Annahda Movement), and Liberals such as the Progressive Democratic Party and the Congress for the Republic Party – two parties that are open to dialogue with all movements, but radical in their demand for freedoms and the rule of law and institutions. In addition to these movements, some independent individuals participated in the strike motivated mainly by the desire for freedoms and democracy.

The coming together of those movements was an indication of two major changes in consciousness and political behavior in Tunisia. The first was that the Democratic Movement succeeded in breaking the taboos imposed by the authorities since the early 1990s involving a refusal to deal with the Islamists who were regarded as an “imminent danger” that must be opposed by all political forces. The second was that the authorities’ repression, rather than the Islamists, was the real danger. The strikers’ calls were clear in considering that the absolute priority was to oppose the repression that targeted the Islamists first and ended up targeting all independent civil and political forces. They believed that the internal differences should be looked into only after the grip of official repression had been broken.

It was probably this aim that attracted the sympathy of the civil, political, and trade union forces who expressed their support for the strikers and their demands. They regarded the coming together of parties with distinct orientations as marking the beginning of a serious movement that could express the desire of the Tunisian people for change.

From Strike to Movement

The success of the strike at the national level and its international impact pushed the strikers to seek ways of maintaining the momentum. The strike was ended with the announcement of the creation of the “18 October Coalition for

Rights and Freedoms” preceded by long discussions about the movement and its nature.

The characteristics of the new organization were based on the following:

- A **unifying spirit** based on bringing people together rather than excluding them. The organization therefore rid its philosophy of the mentality of atomization that formerly characterized political parties and movements in Tunisia, most of which had in fact been transformed in recent years into little belligerent boutiques even though most of them used the same rhetoric, conveyed the same message, and presented the same demands. This mentality – in addition to the aforementioned repression by the authorities – had contributed to killing off political activity in Tunisia and prevented the emergence of any united and inclusive political strategy that could really bring pressure to bear on the ruling party.

The unifying spirit that dominated the 18 October Coalition was the reason why the Islamists were admitted as one of its components. This was not an easy admittance given all the attempts by the authorities to isolate them and the categorical refusal of left and extreme-left movements – such as the Renewal Movement (former Communist Party that changed its name in 1994), the National Democratic Labor Party (an un-recognized party that was established a year earlier), and the Communist Democrats, classified as extreme-left – to join as founding members, although they were supportive of the strike from the beginning.

- Acknowledging the **right to disagree** as a basis for coexistence between political parties. This acknowledgement is seen as a step forward in political action in the Tunisian arena. It revealed a new conviction that has begun to gain ground, that agreeing on necessary transitory claims does not require the fusion of the founding parties into each other and their transformation into one political and intellectual entity. The specificities of each party were rather stressed and everybody was expected to respect those specificities. Moreover, it was asserted that

mutual respect for ideological convictions is the factor that guarantees the continuity of the new organization.

- **Common political interests instead of ideological slogans.** The 18 October Movement was able to transcend the ideological slogans that overshadowed the efficiency of the political organizations in previous decades and led to marginal confrontations that weakened Tunisian political activity and allowed the authorities to manipulate and aggravate their differences. This was obvious in the 1990s when the authorities drew exaggerated caricatures of the “Islamic Monster” in order to attract the other political forces towards the ruling establishment. Most of these forces later discovered that the authorities had used the Islamic factor to repress all political movements and close the doors on freedom. The importance of this distinction between the ideological and the political becomes clearer when looking back at the origins of the Tunisian political movements, which took shape in traditional molds. The leftists emerged early but were soon divided into contentious factions divided according to the conflicting positions of Marxist thought and practice debated in the world at the time. The nationalist movements of the Nasserite and Baathist schools (the Syrian Baath and the Iraqi Baath) on the other hand, looked to the East rather than at Tunisian reality. Finally the Islamist movement also witnessed divisions between the promoters of “tunisization” and those with a more global vision. The Islamist movement was also affected by the international Islamic currents and political parties.

This ideological entrenchment that characterized all the political movements and the continuous influence of the changes taking place outside the Tunisian arena made it impossible for them to focus on Tunisian priorities and work together for these priorities. Internal differences typically intensified until they reached the level of confrontation. The student environment served

as a microcosm for such confrontations – which sometimes became violent and bloody.

The authorities pursued a strategy of exploiting the contradictions within the various political movements, uniting with some in order to attack others on the premise that the repression was only temporary. This encouraged the idea that a party or movement might “survive” if it distanced itself from the Islamists. The authorities also used to select some of the political cadres that emerged in the course of the struggle, offering them high-level positions in order to co-opt them. This strategy proved effective in undermining political life and provoked divisions within all political factions. Coming up with a common response to the regime’s strategies was a necessary condition for reviving political and public activity.

The Islamic Danger

The 18 October Coalition is trying to build on its basic claims and the principles on which it was founded to (in its own words), “lay the foundations for a democratic transition aimed at ending dictatorship and building the institutions of the state on the basis of democratic legitimacy rooted in respect for the sovereignty of the people, free from any form of tutelage, the practice of democratic succession of leaders, intellectual and political pluralism, and the safeguarding of human rights”. It also seeks to “build a strong civil society that is capable of withstanding and throwing back all attempts at undermining the foundations of the democratic system.” (*From the Founding Charter of the 18 October Coalition*).

In this last point lies one of the basic problematic issues of the 18 October Movement which made some of the left and radical-left parties look at it with suspicion and organize campaigns against it. Those parties objected to joint action with the Islamists who they suspected would forget about democracy as soon as they reach power because they intrinsically do not believe in democracy and

are allying with democrats only to achieve their own goals. This concern was the main factor that pushed the radical leftists to group together in a joint front called “the Progressive Democratic Coalition” which defined its main goal as resisting the re-emergence of the Islamists in the political arena and putting an end to the rapprochement between Islamic and democratic forces. The coalition is centered on the “Renewal Movement” an officially authorized party that includes the National Democratic Party, the Democratic Communists, and the Green Party.

The founders of the 18 October Coalition acknowledged that setting joint political claims with the Islamists does not mean the end of all other differences. They called for a national dialogue to discuss the basic issues and announced the formation of the “18 October Forum for Dialogue” to discuss the differences between the Islamists and the other political movements. The dialogue covers issues that affect the bases of a democratic system, individual and civil rights, gender equality, and physical punishments. It aims at drawing up a “democratic charter” and a “Code of conduct for citizenship” that would be binding for everybody and would protect against the overthrow of the democratic system regardless of which party gains power.

The founders of the 18 October Movement were able to move away from the “Islamophobia” and the traditional feelings of suspicion regarding the Islamists. Three basic considerations prevailed in this attitude:

First, that the exclusion of the Islamists prior to any dialogue with them amounts to passing judgment on their intentions – something that is essentially in contradiction with the bases of democratic political action.

Second, that avoiding discussion of the toughest and most contentious issues with the Islamists reveals a lack of capacity to contend with Islamic rhetoric and to enter the fields occupied by the Islamists.

Third, that the Islamists are part of the political scene. Excluding them, whether by the repressive security means as used by the

authorities or by ideological means, would only make the political situation more complex. It could also impel some of the Islamists to opt for radical solutions instead of joining the democratic movement. On the other hand, engaging and including them would tend to impel them towards realism because once they are convinced of the principle of participation with others in shared political spaces, they will be obliged to look for realistic answers related to the daily life of citizens. The holders of this opinion look to Arab experiences in which the Islamists are participating in the political game such as in Morocco, Yemen, Jordan and Algeria. Turkey remains the best example from a Tunisian perspective because the state secularism pushed the Islamists towards adopting what can be called “the jurisprudence of reality” or political pragmatism in modern terms.

Difficulties and Obstacles

Although the 18 October Coalition has been able to overcome some of the difficulties posed by Tunisian political history, many obstacles remain on both the objective and subjective levels.

One objective obstacle is the tight security blockade imposed by the ruling establishment. The movement has been banned since the first weeks of its existence and its leaders are considered wanted fugitives. This has limited the possibilities of holding the national dialogues planned by the Coalition. Another objective obstacle is the campaigns organized against it by the ideological adversaries of the Islamists that consist more of accusations of treason rather than discussion. It was said, for example, that the reformist demands of the 18 October Coalition are a part of the American agenda for democratic reform in the region, the purpose of which in the first place is to integrate the Islamists into the political game. These allegations are untenable if one considers the structure of the Coalition and amounts to a return to old means that used to fuel the political conflicts between political movements in the seventies and eighties, and

reflects an incapacity to draw a line between politics – as a situation on the ground in which one must deal with the reality that exists in order to change it – and ideology in which fixed principles are derived from a dream and no consideration is given to reality and its specificities.

As to the subjective obstacles that might face the Coalition, they relate to the degree to which the founders are clear on the movement’s objectives. It is true that the founding members share an equal belief in the basic demands and objectives of change, but some differences might emerge between two basic trends concerning the pace of movement. One societal or constitutionalist trend calls for deepening the dialogue over differences and basic democratic principles prior to establishing a joint political platform, especially since the country has never in its history witnessed a democratic experience or the participation in power of political parties that have been striving for years for democracy, as a way to check the sincerity of their slogans. The second trend is the political one which favors the prompt organization of a national democratic conference that would establish the foundations of the desired democratic alternative.

While the 18 October Coalition has been able, through the consensual dialogue-based method it chose for itself, to overcome the subjective obstacles, the objective obstacles can really limit its efficiency because of the disproportionate means of the movement as compared with those of the ruling establishment which resorts to security and coercive methods in an arena abandoned by the citizens decades ago as a result of continuous repression and the criminalization of any public activity.

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