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Summary: The assassination of leftist leader Chokri Belaid on February 6, apparently by Islamists, has brought into the open the long-simmering conflict that has pitted the ruling Islamist Ennahda Party against leftists, trade unionists, and secularists, who have staged the first general strike in 40 years and the largest street demonstrations since the 2011 revolution -
- Editors

Tunisia on Razor's Edge after Assassination of Chokri Belaid

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February 6, a Day of Infamy

The cowardly assassination of Chokri Belaid has thrown Tunisia into its biggest crisis since the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011. Gunned down as he left his home on the morning of February 6, apparently by Islamist militants, Belaid was one of the country's most famous labor lawyers and leftist leaders. Known for having defended the Gafsa phosphate miners against state repression after their 2008 strike under the old regime, Belaid had been a prominent member of the secular left for decades. He was a lifelong Marxist who was a leading figure in the Popular Front, founded last summer as a potentially large grouping of leftist and secular forces. Having already served time under the old regime, Belaid was not intimidated by the death threats he constantly received from Islamists, with some imams openly calling for his assassination in their sermons.

Within hours of Belaid's death, crowds of youths gathered to protest in the center of Tunis outside the Interior (Police) Ministry, calling for the government to resign. The response was less verbal but more direct among the working classes. Demonstrators burned down the offices of the ruling Ennahda Party in working-class towns like Gafsa, Kef, and Sidi Bouzid. The latter was where the 2011 revolution began, after street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself to death to protest police harassment and economic oppression.

Ennahda's top leadership professes a moderate Islamism based upon tolerance and democracy, albeit in an overall conservative direction, in terms of both economics and culture. But leftists and secularists accuse it of playing a double game by tacitly

supporting physical attacks on them by radical Islamists. According to the regime, these violent attacks stem from radical Salafists outside Ennahda, but leftists and secularists point out that arrests almost never follow these attacks, suggesting, at the very least, that Ennahda may be using the Salafists to do its dirty work, in an effort to marginalize its opponents. (One exception to this atmosphere of impunity occurred in the wake of the Salafist attack on the U.S. Embassy in September, when huge pressure came down on the government from imperial Washington, and about a hundred Salafists were arrested.) Belaid and some leftists have gone further, however, accusing the “Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution,” a group associated with Ennahda, of actually perpetuating many of the attacks on and threats against secularists and leftists.

Ennahda itself seems to have undergone internal schisms in response Belaid’s assassination, with Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali calling for all government ministers to resign and be replaced by politically neutral technocrats until the new constitution, still in progress, can be completed and ratified. Jebali seemed to be in a minority within Ennahda, however, most of whose leaders rejected his proposals. But with Ennahda controlling a plurality but not a majority of seats in the parliament, the outcome remains unclear.

February 8: Mourning and Commemorating the Life of Chokri Belaid

The protests and mourning over Belaid’s assassination reached their peak on Friday, February 8, with a nationwide general strike and massive participation in the funeral procession in Tunis.

Tunisian workers, who knew Belaid as an old friend and supporter, turned out in huge numbers for the one-day general strike called by the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). The UGTT also announced that its general secretary, Hocine Abassi, had been receiving very specific death threats by telephone ever since the assassination of Belaid.

The strike shut down airports, schools, shops, trams, buses, and government offices. It constituted the greatest labor outpouring since the 1978 anti-austerity demonstrations, far more significant than the two-hour general strike called by the UGTT during the 2011 revolution.

On the streets of Tunis, over 50,000 people braved cold and rain to mourn Belaid. Chants included “Bread, water, but not Ennahda,” or “Ghannouchi, assassin,” a reference to

Ennahda Secretary General Rachid Ghannouchi, and even, “The people want another revolution.”

Crowds began to gather early in the morning at the funeral march’s point of origin, the house of culture in Djebel Jelloud, the impoverished neighborhood in which Belaid grew up. The cortège was accompanied all along the way by mournful ululating chants by women, who attended in very large numbers. (The march also had an immense level of security protection from the military, with helicopters flying overhead. This was no small gesture on the part of a military command that, as in Egypt, is not very enamored of the Islamist movement. At the very least, it was a form of pressure on Ennahda to cede some of its control in favor of Jebali’s proposal of a government of technocrats.) At the cemetery, youths from the nearby slums could not restrain themselves, and they began to throw stones at the police, who teargassed the entire crowd. Unwavering, the vast crowd stood its ground until the end of the ceremony.

In his funeral oration, Belaid’s political comrade Hama Hemmami issued a watchword for the future: “Tunisians, come together. The revolution continues.”

Smaller but significant demonstrations also took place in Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid, where hundreds of marchers chanted “Assassins” and “Chokri you can rest, we will continue your struggle.”

The next day, Ennahda members and Salafists held their own demonstration in Tunis, targeting France as the force behind the secularists and leftists who had marched the day before. “We do not accept this alliance of the left, of the old regime, and of France,” declared one demonstrator. But their demonstration only attracted a few thousand.

Growing Tensions between Islamists and the Left

Two years after the 2011 Tunisian revolution, the economic crisis has deepened, with unemployment estimated at 18%, up from 13% in 2011, with the youth unemployment rate much higher. A deep class division has arisen between the Islamist leadership and the working classes and rural poor. As U.S. Middle East scholar Juan Cole wrote, “One reason the UGTT called the general strike is that the religious right ruling party, Ennahda, has since the revolution made a strong partnership with the private Tunisian business sector, and has been unsympathetic toward, and sometimes has repressed, workers’ strikes

and movements” (“Why Tunisia’s Arab Spring Is in Turmoil,” *Informed Comment*, Feb. 9, 2013 <http://www.juancole.com/2013/02/tunisias-spring-turmoil.html>)

On the positive side, the developments since the revolution have begun to create new relationships between working people and intellectuals, both of which oppose the Islamist agenda.

In October 18, at Tatouine, demonstrators supporting Ennahda launched an attack on a meeting of the secular liberal Nida Tounès Party, resulting in the beating to death of Nida Tounès leader Lofti Naugedh. Afterwards, some Ennahda parliamentarians called for the release of those arrested from among the mob that attacked Naugedh. While Ennahda Secretary General Rachid Ghannouchi has adopted a relatively tolerant, democratic stance, at least in public, many were disturbed by a video of his private meeting with Salafists in October, in which he seemed to show them a surprising degree of sympathy. For his part, the old, more hardline former head of Ennahda, Sadok Chourou, did not mince words, calling for the corporal punishment of the secularists who clashed with the Islamists in Tatouine.

In November, riots sparked by poverty and despair broke out in Siliana, an agricultural town. Among the demands was the dismissal of the Ennahda provincial governor, with the powerful UGTT union federation taking the side of the protestors against the Ennahda government. Eventually the governor was dismissed after five days of clashes in which more than 300 people were injured.

In December, police had to separate Islamist and secularists as they staged separate demonstrations in Tunis to commemorate the 1952 assassination by forces linked to the French military of the prominent trade unionist and anti-colonialist leader Farhat Hached.

Over the past year, secular political figures, intellectuals, and cultural figures have faced mounting physical threats and attacks, including death threats, from Islamists.

One very recent example concerned Belaid himself. February 2, a meeting he organized in Kef was disrupted by Islamists, whom he publicly accused of being members of the Ennahda-linked Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. This was Belaid’s last public utterance before his assassination.

Chokri Belaid: A Revolutionary Son of Tunisia

Chokri Belaid's personal history exemplifies that of a whole generation of Tunisian revolutionaries. Born in 1964 in Tunis's impoverished Djebel Jelloud neighborhood, by the 1980s Belaid had garnered attention as a student leader and orator, with Marxist and Pan-Arabist leanings. In 1987, he was imprisoned for six months. For many years, he was associated with an underground Marxist-Leninist party, the Tunisian Communist Workers Party, which attained legal status only after the 2011 revolution. The group has since gone through some major changes.

In 2008, when the mass strikes broke out in the Gafsa phosphate mines, a struggle given little attention by the semi-official UGTT, Belaid was there, leading the group of lawyers who defended the workers against the terrible repression from the Ben Ali regime that followed. Today, these strikes are widely considered to have been the harbinger of the 2011 revolution.

During the 2011 revolution itself, Belaid was in the midst of everything, alongside his political comrade Hama Hemmami, today the best-known surviving leader of the Popular Front. Critical of both the liberal democrats and the Islamists, Belaid gained many enemies, but also a great deal of popular respect for his eloquence and his courage. A frequent guest on various television programs, Belaid was unsparing in his attacks on the reactionary wing of Ennahda, which he blamed for the atmosphere of violence and intimidation experienced by secularists and leftists. This earned him outright threats from militant Islamist preachers and on dozens of Facebook pages, as well as veiled threats from Minister of the Interior Ali Areed, an Ennahda member, who publicly blamed Belaid for the violence at Siliana. Videos in which radical Islamists called for Belaid to be killed have also been circulating for many months.

Hope for the Future

As in Egypt in recent months, if not more so, the split between the secular and leftist forces and the Islamists in Tunisia is by now irrevocable. As in Egypt as well, it is the secular and leftist forces that seem to be gaining strength of late, as the Islamists in power since the 2011 revolution have disillusioned many of those who supported them or who at least saw them as better than the old regime and thought they should be given a chance at state power. In Tunisia, however, labor and the organized left are much stronger than in Egypt, as are secular trends among the population as a whole. This suggests that the

tragedy of Belaid's assassination could in the end lead to some new openings for the kind of politics for which he gave his life. If that is the case, will Tunisia again, as in 2011, be the bellwether of the Arab revolutions as a whole?

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