

After the Tunisian election what next?

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It is too early to predict the future of democracy in Tunisia, writes Samir Amin, but ‘only the rapid crystallisation of a radical left wing, going well beyond the demand for proper elections, can allow the resumption of a struggle for a change worthy of its name’.

The Constituent Assembly that resulted from the elections in Tunisia at the end of October will be dominated by a right-wing block that brings together the Islamist party An-Nahda and the numerous reactionary groups that until very recently were associated with deposed President Ben Ali’s regime. These are still around and, known as ‘Bourguibists’, have infiltrated the ‘new parties’! They all buy in unconditionally to the market economy, such as it is in Tunisia; in other words a dependant and inferior capitalist system that is part of the imperialist globalisation dominated by European and US monopolies. The imperialist powers-that-be, in particular France and the US, are only too happy for everything to be changed ‘so that it all stays the same’.

Nevertheless, there are two changes on the agenda. On the positive side, a political - but not social and therefore weak - democracy will tolerate diverse opinions, have greater respect for human rights and put an end to the police brutality suffered under the former regime. On the other hand, women’s rights are likely to be fragile. In other words, there could be a return to a multi-party ‘Bourguibism’ tinted with Islamism. The plan of the western powers, based on the power of the reactionary consumer block, will put an end to what people hoped would be a ‘short’ transition - the movement accepted this without considering the consequences - not leaving enough time for the social struggles to be sorted out. It will allow its exclusive ‘legitimacy’ to take hold by means of ‘proper’ elections. The Tunisian uprising was generally unconcerned with the economic policy of the ousted regime, concentrating its criticisms on the corruption of the president and his family. Many of the protesters, even the left-wingers, did not question the basic development orientations implemented by Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

This outcome was foreseeable. Many (probably the majority) of the people who rose up were only very slightly aware of what really was at stake. Moreover, like causes sometimes produce the same effects. What will the popular classes think and do when they see their social conditions inexorably deteriorating, with all the accompanying unemployment and insecurity? They are probably not reckoning with the other downward trends in their conditions that have been intensified by the general crisis in capitalist globalisation.

It is too early to say, but we cannot continue to blind ourselves to the fact that only the rapid crystallisation of a radical left wing, going well beyond the demand for proper elections, can allow the resumption of a struggle for a change worthy of its name. It is the duty of this radical left wing to: (i) be able to formulate a strategy for democratising society that will involve much more than merely holding proper elections, (ii) link this democratisation with social progress, which implies abandoning the current development model and (iii) strengthen its initiatives by its international, independent and clearly anti-imperialist stance.

It will not be the imperialist monopolies and their international lackeys (the World Bank, IMF

and WTO) that help Tunisia to make a fresh start; this new beginning will be less difficult if the country turns towards new partners in the South.

None of these fundamental questions seem to occupy the minds of the main political actors. Everything that is happening would make you think that the ultimate aim of their 'revolution' had been to have speedy elections. It is as if the one and only source of legitimate power is the polling booth. There is, however, another, superior, legitimacy – that of the struggles! By uncritically adopting the whole recipe for 'representative electoral democracy', as widely proposed, most Tunisians risk being disappointed by the outcomes. To whose advantage will this disappointment be? To a radical left wing that is still marginal? If not, the worst is yet to come: the capitalisation by political Islam of the inevitable disappointments to come and the loss of the legitimacy of democracy.