

## The crisis of the " Popular Front " and the dilemma of the Tunisian left: Interview with Riad Ben Fadhl

conducted by Mounir Mrad



*A few months before the anticipated presidential elections and parliamentary elections, specifically at the end of May 2019, the conflict between the various components of the "Popular Front for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution" intensified. This led to its division into the "Coalition of the Popular Front" and the "Coalition of the Front". In the parliamentary elections in 2014, the "Popular Front for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution" was able to reach the fourth place (15 seats out of 217) and its candidate for the presidential elections Hama Hammami reached the third place with 8% of the votes.*

*The results of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019 were devastating for the former Popular Front for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution actors: only a single deputy from the two splits made it into parliament. In the presidential election Hama Hammami for the "Coalition of the Front" got 0.69% of the votes and Mongi Rahoui for the "Coalition of the Popular Front" 0.81%.*

*In this context, the following interview was conducted with Riadh Ben Fadhl, Secretary General of the Al-Qotb Party, part of the Popular Front since 2013, in order to understand the causes of the crisis of the Popular Front and of the Tunisian Left in general and to discuss the perspectives and ways out of this crisis. We discussed three topics in this interview: First, the history of the Popular Front and the Tunisian Left in general. Second, the crisis and the division of the Popular Front. And finally, we talked about the Tunisian left in the 2019 elections and the position of the left on Ettayar ad-dimuqrati party and the winner of the presidential elections Kais Saïd.*

### What are the main historical currents of the Tunisian left?

The history of the Tunisian left is embedded in that of the Tunisian national movement. The Tunisian left emerged politically with the formation of the Tunisian branch of the *Communist Party of France* in the 1920s. These different cells later transformed into the *Communist Party of Tunisia* (CPT) at the end of the 1930s at the party-forming congress in Ariana<sup>1</sup> under the leadership of the trade unionist and militant in the struggle for independence Ali Jrad. Before the

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<sup>1</sup> A district of Tunis

CPT was founded, the Tunisian trade union movement, founded by Muhammad Ali al-Hammi in the mid-twenties, emerged. The CPT and the left in general also nourished itself from the Tunisian branch of the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO), predecessor of the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) today. One part of the Tunisian left was thus linked to the *Communist International*, the *Communist Party of France*, which gained its partial autonomy in the Congress of Ariana, and another part was the Tunisian branch of the *Socialist Party*, which did not have much influence. The main influence of the political left in Tunisia came from the trade union movement, which expanded and became known as *Union syndicale tunisienne* (UST). The UST was very close to the *Communist Party of Tunisia* and the historic *Union générale du travail tunisien* (UGTT), founded by a large number of trade unionists led by Farhat Hached (God bless his soul). There was an organic relationship between the Tunisian left and the UGTT. Historically, the bond was very strong. Until, at some time, the *Union syndicale tunisienne* which was close to the *Communist Party of Tunisia*, joined the UGTT. Thus, the leftist movement in Tunisia was for a long time mainly represented by the *Communist Party of Tunisia* and important sectors of the trade union movement.

At the beginning and in the mid-sixties and in accordance with the international situation, youth and student movements began to organize themselves and represented currents left of the Tunisian communist movement. They began by founding the *Groupe d'études d'action socialiste de la Tunisie* (GEAST), which eventually changed its name to *Perspectives - The Tunisian Worker* (al-amel al-tounisi). These movements were mainly Maoist, philosophically and politically, and saw themselves to the left of the *Communist Party of Tunisia*, which they considered as revisionist. These movements played an important role in the cultural movement, especially in the *Fédération tunisienne du cinéma amateur* and the *Fédération tunisienne des ciné-clubs* and mainly at the universities. After the attempted military coup against Bourguiba<sup>2</sup>, the regime took this opportunity to withdraw the CPT's legal recognition. The CPT and its leadership went underground and some of them exiled to Prague, reducing the influence of the CPT. Their influence was mainly at the universities and in the Higher Education Union, which had a large number of party members and supporters. At the same time, the movements, especially *The Tunisian Worker*, began to spread among young people at the universities, whereupon a large number of their cadres were arrested. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, there was a number of convictions in the ranks of *The Tunisian Worker - Perspectives*.

Over time, the movement reached its peak in the late sixties and especially in 1968, which, similarly to Germany, France, the USA and Japan, was characterized by intensified mobilization of the student movement. These leftist movements considered themselves revolutionary in comparison to the "traditional" communist parties. But at some point, these movements reached a dead end and most of their members engaged in associative work, trade unionism or the human rights movement. An exception was a group led by Hamma Hammami, along with some comrades of *The Tunisian Worker*, who founded the *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia* (Parti ouvrier communiste tunisien: POCT) - the "Workers Party" to delineate them from the CPT. Furthermore,

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<sup>2</sup> In 1962 an attempted coup failed against President Habib Bourguiba, who was led by former resistance fighters.

the word 'workers' was added in reference to the mainly Maoist tendency of the party, which was based on the "theory of the three worlds". So, in the political landscape there was the CPT and a communist revolutionary party, the POCT.

In the same context, the movement of Arab nationalists also had influence in Tunisia. The nationalist movements began to engage with Marxism, creating a mixture between Marxist and Arab nationalist thought. This is how movements like *al-cho'la* (the flame) emerged. They saw themselves as left-wing nationalists and openly said that they were Arab Marxists. A similar development took place in the movement of Arab nationalists in the Mashreq, which began nationalist and engaged with Marxism, leading to the founding of the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* and the *Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine*. Each of these movements expressed its belonging to the philosophy of Marxism in different ways. In Tunisia, *al-cho'la* is a left-wing movement whose nationalist character is clear but which became Marxist over time.

All these divergences existed mainly in the student movement. The main influence of left movements and the radical left was in the student milieu and student organizations: whether Trotskyists (revolutionary trade unionists), or nationalist Marxists like the *Democratic Patriots at the University* (Wataj), which later became the *Party of Democratic Patriots* (Watad), or the communist revolutionaries of the *Union of Communist Youth of Tunisia* (UJCT)<sup>3</sup>. The terrain for their proliferation and their ideological and political struggles was the university.

Over time, these currents began to shrink under state repression. On the side of the Marxist left, the two organizations *Watad* and the *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia*, which later renamed itself the *Workers Party*, remained the main actors. And, of course, the *Communist Party of Tunisia* continued to exist, although renewing its thinking and ideology drastically and changing its name into *Ettajdid* (the Renewal). The CPT became "more reasonable" and the space between it, as a reformist left with Marxist roots, and between the radical left, represented mainly by *Watad* and the *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia*, was unoccupied.

### **What are the most important historical differences in the Tunisian left?**

The differences were essentially ideological rather than practical. The *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia* (PCOT) analyzed that its ideological hostility to political Islam and the *Ennahdha-Movement*, formerly the *Movement of the Islamic Tendency*, was secondary and its main contradiction consisted with the Ben Ali regime. In this sense, the PCOT engaged in the *October 18. Movement* (2005) and worked to assemble a broad front in which a large number of left forces, reformists and civil rights movements (*Note of the translator: and Islamists*) participated. *Watad* and the *Communist Party of Tunisia* (*Ettajdid*) rejected participating in this front. The other difference concerns the question of individual freedoms in general. The Tunisian left did not give high priority to individual freedoms, which represented another major problem.

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<sup>3</sup> The Student Organization of the *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia*

This Marxist left, also shared the political landscape with Arab nationalists, namely Nasserists and Baathists. Baathists with their two currents, the Iraqi and the Syrian Baathists. Whereby in Tunisia the Iraqi Baath was mainly represented. In addition, there were Trotskyists, supporters of the *Fourth International*, especially in the student movement and in some trade unions (in the Postal Service). And this mixture of nationalist, Trotskyist, reformist left... understood at some point in history that their contradictions with each other were smaller than their fundamental contradiction with state power.

### **What are the circumstances and reasons for the emergence of the "Popular Front for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution"?**

The attempts to unite the left began under the government of Mohamed Ghannouchi (January-February 2011), which was essentially a government of the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* – Ben Ali's party – and by those forces who advocated the election of a constituent assembly. Meetings were organized, but the result and the efforts for a Tunisian left united front, with all its differences, only consolidated in October 2012. Why in October 2012 and not before?

Between the Revolution of 14 January 2011 and October 2012, an event caused a major upheaval: Ennahda's victory in the elections for a National Constituent Assembly. At that time, the left felt the danger as its party offices were burned and leftist festivals were attacked by the *Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution* and by *Ennahdha* sympathizers. So, there was a need for unity and all these forces, despite all their differences, whether Arab nationalists, Baathists, Nasserists, Marxist Maoists like *Watad* or the *Communist Workers Party* (PCOT), agreed to unite in the *Popular Front* formed in October 2012.

We in the *Al-Qotb* party joined the *Popular Front* in May 2013 after we split from *Al-Massar* – the party we were involved in founding. Our disagreement with our comrades in *Al-Massar* consisted in the need to build an alternative democratic left capable of presenting itself as a serious alternative to power, with the aim of overthrowing the government of Ali Laarayedh<sup>4</sup>, the *Troika-Government*<sup>5</sup>. The difference with the comrades of *Al-Massar*, the inheritors of the *Communist Party of Tunisia* and *Ettajdid* consisted in the question of 'timing'. We said that we had to enlarge *Al-Massar* in order for the party to be a serious alternative and strengthened. But our comrades in *Ettajdid* had a different opinion and they made an alliance with the *Union for Tunisia*<sup>6</sup> and with *Nidaa Tounes*. Ultimately, *Al-Massar* did not win any seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections. We (in *Al-Qotb*) spend from 2012 to May 2013 to take a decision. We entered into discussions with our comrades in the *Popular Front* and then joined them.

When we joined the *Popular Front*, an important incident occurred, a national disaster, which was the martyrdom of Chokri Belaid, the Secretary General of *Watad*. This blow was very painful for

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<sup>4</sup> Ali Laarayedh, a member of the *Ennahdha* Party, that was Prime Minister from February 2013 to January 2014.

<sup>5</sup> A coalition government of *Ennahdha*, the left-nationalist *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) and the self-proclaimed social democratic *Ettakatol* (FDTL), that governed Tunisia from the elections in October 2011 to January 2014.

<sup>6</sup> A broad secular electoral alliance announced by Beji Caid Essebsi, the founder of *Nidaa Tounes*, at the end of 2012. Originally, five parties joined the alliance, but it was dissolved before the 2014 elections.

the Tunisian left, but we were able to deal with it. And then in the summer Mohamed Brahmi, the general secretary of the *Popular Movement* (Nasserist party also part of the *Popular Front*), was murdered. This blow inflicted enormous damage to the *Popular Front*. But it was also proving to the Tunisians that the *Popular Front* was the fiercest force resisting Ennahda and this confrontation costed it the murder of two out of seven of its Secretaries General. Thus, we engaged in the *Errahil* struggle (departure). With the *Popular Front* we were the organizational backbone of this protest-movement. The major demonstrations involved broad sectors of Tunisian society and especially women, who played a central role in overthrowing the government of Ali Laarayedh. The mobilization also involved more reformist and modernist right-wing forces – it was a struggle of modernists against political Islam. But the organizational backbone of the *Errahil* struggle, which led to the overthrow of the Ali Laaraeydh government, was the *Popular Front*.

So we took part in parliamentary elections ( in 2014 ) and because of our role in the *Errahil* struggle and the martyrdom of the General Secretaries, Chokri and Mohammed (God bless them), the *Popular Front* got 15 seats in parliament and our comrade Hama Hammami, official spokesman of the *Popular Front*, reached the third place in the presidential elections with about 8% of the votes. The *Popular Front* received about 3% of the votes in the parliamentary elections and 8% in the presidential elections, suggesting that in the presidential elections, the *Popular Front* was able to surpass the historical base of the radical Left in Tunisia. It therefore had begun to convince sections of the educated youth who were previously unwilling to vote for a radical Left candidate. Unfortunately, there was no will on the part of the *Popular Front* member parties to form a united party and they were considering the *Popular Front* rather as a party cartel. All attempts to transform the *Popular Front* into a united left party have failed. The reason for this, is that the two main parties in the *Popular Front*, *Watad* and the *Communist Workers Party of Tunisia*, did not want the *Popular Front* to merge into a united party.

**Before we talk about the disagreements within the Popular Front. How do you evaluate the performance of the Popular Front in the last five years: in parliament, in politics, but also on the streets and in the protest movements?**

The *Popular Front* entered parliament with a significant faction of 15 MPs and its spokesman Hama Hammami was the third strongest man in the presidential election. We did not manage to benefit from this qualitative leap and from this social and cultural penetration. The role of the *Popular Front* decreased over time, due to rigid patterns of thinking from before its foundation. In retrospect, the *Popular Front* faction proposed only two legislative initiatives: one on the 'denunciation and criminalization of normalization' (with Israel) and the other one on *Law 52*, known as the 'Zatla' law (hashish). Regarding *Law 52*, the *Popular Front* bill was more reactionary than the government's own proposal – it was a conservative bill. We in *Al-Qotb*, have submitted a draft regarding the 'Zatla' law, which was more open and closer to the concerns of young people. In the 2019 elections, we as *Al-Qotb* ultimately called for the decriminalization of the consumption of 'Zatla' – so we have developed considerably in this area.

The performance of the *Popular Front* was poor in view of the many challenges it faced. Objectively speaking, our friends in *Ettayar*, who could not form an own faction, our friends No'man Al-Euch, Samia Abou and Ghazi Chaouachi, played a much more active role in parliament than the *Popular Front*. As I have already said, in five years the role of the Popular Front has been limited to just two legislative initiatives. In 2015, we presented an alternative draft to the *Finance Act*, but this good initiative was limited to one year and we did not do it again after 2015.

In the field of trade unions our performance was scandalous: the nationalist left and the Marxist left, whether *POCT* or *Watad*, fought and argued with each other in the trade union congresses of the UGTT. In many cases, the internal trade union disputes have resulted in political forces hostile to the *Popular Front* to seize positions in the leadership of primary or even central trade unions. In the student movement and mainly in the *Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie* (UGET), the disaster was far more serious and there were many divisions. This allowed the *Union générale tunisienne des étudiants* (UGTE), the student union of *Ennahdha*, to take over the majority of the seats of the faculty councils throughout Tunisia, benefiting from our differences in the student movement and our internal divisions.

To summarize: Poor performance in workers and trade union policy, a catastrophe in university unions, poor performance in parliamentary work and legislative proposals, ending with the suicidal split of the *Popular Front* in January 2019. This led to the former actors of the *Popular Front* to present themselves in the elections under three different banners: The *Popular Front Party* and the *Popular Front Coalition* constituted by *Watad*, the *Ligue de gauche ouvrière* (LGO) and *Ettali'a* (Socialist Avant-garde Party); the *Coalition of the Front*, consisting of the *Workers Party*, the *Popular Current*, the *Baath Movement*, the *Parti Populaire pour la Liberté et le Progrès* (PPLP) and the *Socialist Party of Democratic Patriots* (Al-Watad Al-Ichtiraki); and a third political offer with *Al-Qotb*. Since the beginning of the crisis, *Al-Qotb* had tried to reunite the two quarrelling sides and decided not to join either of the two sides of the conflict. For *Al-Qotb*, the *Popular Front* was a united front, and if that front broke apart, *Al-Qotb* will not choose between this or that side.

The political offer of the united *Popular Front* in 2014 led to the election of 15 deputies to parliament, while only one deputy was elected to parliament after the divide (2019). The *Popular Front* experiment, that opened horizons and inspired for large sections of Tunisian society and youth, has fallen apart and we must carry out a serious investigation of the causes of this failure.

### **In your opinion, what led to the division of the *Popular Front*?**

The different components of the popular front know each other, some of them have known each other for thirty years: the nationalists, *Watad*, formerly *Wataj*, the *Workers Party*. When the front was founded, it was done on a minimal basis, which was to oppose the reactionary forces that came to power democratically in the October 2011 elections. Nobody was discerning or blind and all people knew each other and their ideological and political positions. We as *Al-Qotb* joined the *Popular Front* after our National Congress in May 2013 on a minimal basis. Its name said the most essential things about it, the *Popular Front for the Realization of the Revolutionary Goals*: national

sovereignty, national dignity and democratic education. We had the objective of forming a significant political party body. But after the legislative and presidential elections (2014), all components of the *Popular Front*, without exception, were very cautious about forming a unified organizational structure, not to mention a unified political structure. We have a "Popular Front", but a political party that wants to seize the power must have an organizational structure. All components in the *Popular Front* did not want to strengthen the organizational tissue of the front and basically invested all their energy in their own parties. The front nourished the parties but the parties did not nourish the front. At some point the other comrades in the front, when talking about *Al-Qotb*, said it was a "technical party". Why a technical party? Because we (in *Al-Qotb*) put all our human, material and media resources into the *Popular Front*.

The organizational rupture and the lack of a unified organizational structure in the front led to the fact that important parts of the sympathizers, who are the independents, had no participation opportunities. The members of the front, who are members in the front parties, have structures in which they can speak. The independents, however, being the majority of the sympathizers of the front, do not. The overwhelming majority of the 8% who voted for Hamma (Hammami) do not belong to any of the front's parties. The lack of a united organizational structure in the *Popular Front* led to the marginalization, in the full sense of the word, of non-party independents who saw in the front the dream of unification (of the left) but were not willing to join *Al-Qotb*, *Wataf* or the *Workers Party*. And so, the rupture began. There was no unified organizational structure, no unified study center, no unified union sector, no unified youth structures, no unified women's structures, with each party having its own union sector, and its internal calculations contradicting those of the other parties. We were not able to find a minimal organizational basis to offer the possibility of participation to as many people as possible, and especially to the independent members, and this is where the crisis began and with it the political problems.

If you do not have a united organizational structure, and if the political issues and those of ideology become a priority, but you do not have structures in which you can discuss them, this leads to narcissistic disputes between the parties and between their leaders. And the main mistake in my opinion, why the *Popular Front* broke apart, is because it was not able to create hope among its historical and new sympathizers (which it was able to attract in the presidential elections), because it had no organizational structure and was a *Popular Front* only by name and did not form a real popular front. It was not a real popular front, but a front of cadres, a front of trade unionists, a front of teachers and professors, a front of employees in general, and even the composition of the leadership of the *Popular Front* comprised mainly trade unionists. All this created a break between the front as national political entity and non-existent grassroots. The front was a paper tiger, with people from outside perceiving the front as a giant. In reality, however, it was organizationally in a fragile position, in a way that is hard to imagine. This led to the political conflicts, which had a personal narcissistic and organizational character and led to the destruction of the unity of the *Popular Front*. And we did not have structures that would make it possible to alleviate this crisis. In politics, all fronts are experiencing crises, but if there is a party base and an organization and structures and a space for democratic debates, this would solve the

problems. But when the political discussions and differences are held in small, narrow circles, the party narcissism prevails and thus the front was destroyed and committed its political suicide.

**There is a controversy over the question of power-sharing in the left worldwide. Hamma Hammami believes that what has happened in the Popular Front is based on a political disagreement since 2014, in the context of the Popular Front's position on government and power. How has this disagreement manifested itself in the Popular Front?**

A political party is a regulatory space that seeks power, and that is an honorable position and there is no discussion about it. The founders of the *Popular Front* and its main driving force were the Marxist parties, *Watad*, the *Workers Party*, *Al-Qtob*, and our comrades in the Tunisian nationalist movement, but there are two options for taking power: an armed rupture, a rupture of the masses outside the boundaries of the rule of law, or a democratic parliamentary rupture through participation in elections. The parties of the *Popular Front* officially renounce violence, and advocate for the takeover of institutional power democratically. We participated in the elections based on the institutions of the state and the constitution, the constitution of the Second Republic. In 2014 we had a bloc of 15 deputies and we initiated talks with the prime minister of that time, Habib Essid, to discuss the possibility of the *Popular Front* joining the government. There were significant differences within the leadership of the *Popular Front* because some parties judged that a participation in the government would be catastrophic, while others supported this idea. In autumn 2014 we reached an agreement in the leadership of the *Popular Front*: yes, we participate in a coalition government under two conditions, the first is the non-participation of *Ennahdha* in the government, and the second are programmatic overlaps.

We would present our vision and our program and will discuss them mainly with *Nidaa Tounes*, who had 86 deputies in 2014. We will look together to see if there is a possibility of finding programmatic intersections, especially in the economic, social and cultural spheres – in foreign policy we had no differences, the differences were essentially in the economic and social spheres. We concluded the negotiations with *Nidaa Tounes* and especially with Mahmoud Ben Romdhane and Slim Chaker (God bless his soul) and of course with Mr. Habib Essid, and we said in the first meetings from the very beginning that our presence was conditioned by the non-participation of *Ennahdha* in the government. In the first two sessions we received the assurance that *Ennahdha* would not be in the government. Especially with Mahmoud Ben Romdhane and Slim Chaker (God bless his soul) we spoke positively about debt, economy, social issues and the crisis of social funds. However, these negotiations were stopped after the third meeting, when Habib Essid told us that *Ennahdha* would be part of the formation of the government – even if only with a weak presence of one minister and two secretaries of state. So, we told them that we stop the negotiations: we are ready to participate in the formation of the government on the basis of programmatic overlaps, but a red line represents *Ennahdha*'s participation in a coalition government. Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi had made his choice between a democratic majority, which will not be easy because of daily discussions, and a majority of 169 deputies together with *Ennahdha*. This majority has brought the country into the situation we are in today and which has been consolidated in the 2019 elections. The "consensus system" destroyed the foundations of democracy in Tunisia and

strengthened new forces, which we have not been able to confront because we were not rooted in the population.

There was then a debate about power-sharing or not, but it was predominantly about individuals. In Youssef Chahed's first government, he offered Mongi Rahoui a ministerial post. If not the critical objection of the leadership of *Wataf*, my friend and brother Mongi Rahoui would have become minister and thank God he was not a part of this government because we have seen its effects.

Today the question is not so much, about the participation or not in any coalition government, but: Do the balances of power enable a participation in a government that is in line with the goals of the revolution? The balances of power that would have allowed us to impose our positions in a government were not in our favor. Our participation in the successive governments from 2014 until now, would rather have been symbolic. The problem is not of the participation in the government, but on the contrary we participate in the government, but we participate when the balance of power is in favor of the revolutionary forces.

Since our success in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014, we are no longer a strong political force, in the sense of being connected with the masses that would allow us to resort to the power of the street in case of a trouble in government. This was our main problem, which was also reflected in the results of the presidential elections (2019): Hama Hammami, who received 8% of the votes (2014), received 0.69% in the presidential election (2019). Mongi Rahoui, who had announced in a large number of radio stations and national television stations that he would reach the second round, received 0.8%. It was a devastating defeat for the Tunisian Left that must renew itself politically, intellectually and organizationally.

To conclude your question about power sharing: these discussions were not constructive, because the conditions for participation in power, a popular and structural anchoring that allows you at any time to resort to the street to decide the differences between you and your associates, did not exist.

**The signs of a weakening of the Popular Front have already been evident since the bad results of the 2018 local elections. How did the Popular Front deal with this?**

The 2018 election was a warning shot for the *Popular Front*. The *Popular Front* was organizationally unstructured in the local elections and, after hard work, was able to run in 120 out of 317 municipalities. If it hadn't been for the extraordinary commitment of our comrade Hama Hammami, who put in all his strength and effort, the front would only have been in 60-65 municipalities. We have set up more local councils than *Ettayar*. Still, *Ettayar*, that submitted lists in only 70 communities, was able to achieve better results than the *Popular Front* in all the communities in which they were both running for the elections.

We emphasized this dangerous situation and called for an investigation of the causes and an evaluation of the election results, because they showed the structural and organizational weakness of the *Popular Front*. The *Popular Front* was present throughout the country and yet it

was unable to submit lists in all the country's municipalities. Independent members of the *Popular Front* had joined on numerous independent lists. This was because we did not have the structural and organizational capacity to go to these cities or rural areas to submit lists. Despite this strong signal about the weakness of the *Popular Front* in the local elections, the front did not worry and continued as if nothing had happened. With the exception of a single meeting, no common meeting was organized with the elected municipal councils, not to mention the conditions of that meeting. In contrast to other forces, such as *Ettayar* for example, that trained their local councils.

This was in spring 2018, in May. Then came the summer and nothing happened, and in autumn neither. And when there is no more political machine, no organizational structure and no proximity to the people, the mill no longer grinds for the party, it begins to grind the party itself, and this led to the suicidal crisis of the *Popular Front* in January 2019. The results of the legislative and presidential elections are a natural continuation of the crisis in the local elections, which everyone tried to hide. But the truth can be hidden for one, two, three days, but at some point, it will come out. In the case of the *Popular Front*, this happened with the scandal in the parliamentary and presidential elections.

**Part of the left-wing youth supported Mohammed Abbou in the presidential elections and his party *Ettayar ad-dimuqrati* in the parliamentary elections. Why did they take this decision? And what perspectives does *Ettayar ad-dimuqrati* have as the strongest opposition faction in parliament?**

Three deputies of *Ettayar* achieved a better output in parliament compared to the entire faction of the *Popular Front*. The *Popular Front's* parliamentary speeches were positive and attacked the ruling system and its injustices. However, these speeches were not translated into legislative initiatives. There was a break between the discourse of the *Popular Front* in Parliament and its concrete organization and field work. The performance of our friends in *Ettayar* in parliament is not comparable to that of our comrades in the *Popular Front*.

Our internal differences today and the absence of women and young people in leadership positions have led large sections of sympathizers of the *Popular Front* to turn to *Ettayar*. As an example, with four or five comrades, I distributed leaflets for *Al-Qotb* when we met a group of *Ettayar* who had pitched a tent to distribute leaflets as we did; they were eleven comrades, seven of whom had previously been in the *Popular Front*, and I knew them and we greeted each other. This picture summarizes the problem of the *Popular Front*: The *Popular Front* could not provide an organizational and structural framework for large sections of the Tunisian youth who wanted to debate about a front, but were forced to join one of the parties of the *Popular Front* or to remain outside of the stream. Their solution was to approach *Ettayar* and join that party. If the Tunisian left continues as before and the disruption with its sympathizers lasts, it will open a large space for *Ettayar*, which will become the strongest opposition force in the country.

**Do you think that there is a possibility of joint cooperation between leftist and more conservative forces who equally believe in the need to continue the revolutionary process? And**

**did you perceive such a cooperation in the volunteer movement engaged in the election campaign of Kais Said, the winner of the 2019 presidential election?**

Today, and this is our assessment in *Al-Qotb*, we are not in a phase of thinking about alliances. We are in the phase of identifying the structural, organizational and political factors that led to this disaster. We have launched an initiative called 'Let's Core the Pomegranate' to understand why and how we arrived at this deplorable situation. Once we have understood how and why this catastrophic situation unfolded, we will consider building political alternatives.

Our current concern is working on ourselves to enable the left to play a future role in building a serious alternative in Tunisia. The situation in which the Left finds itself today does not enable it to present itself as an alternative to power. We are not thinking about alliances today, but we are in a process and must think about intersections with non-left forces: on issues of (state) debt, national sovereignty, the rule of law, the fight against corruption. We will meet with all the forces with whom we agree on these points, regardless of their political orientation. We are in a deep and substantial self-critical process, working at intersections rather than alliances on certain issues related to our thinking and our political and strategic direction. These intersections are there, and we need to build on them together. Kais Said was able to awaken hopes and open up perspectives for large parts of the youth – on this occasion we congratulate him. There are many tangible elements in Kais Said's victory. Kais Said was able to win back large parts of the youth who had no interest in elections and in the public cause for the democratic process and for the elections; in the first round of the presidential elections the turnout was 49%, fell to less than 40% in the parliamentary elections, and reached 57% in the second round of the presidential elections. Also noteworthy was the large turnout at the October 13<sup>th</sup> demonstration (after the proclamation of Said's election victory) on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, which was attended mainly by young people.

The demands made today mainly concern the future of young people, which is positive. There is a certain ambiguity, but we can go along with conservative forces in some areas. These forces are socially conservative. Conservative on individual freedoms and issues relating to minority rights. Conservative on their view of the position of women in society and their support for an undemocratic law of succession. But on other issues we can agree, such as the question of national dignity, national sovereignty, the fight against ALECA, the fight against corruption and local governance in accordance with the Constitution and its institutions. In addition, there is the possibility of withdrawing each candidate after half of his legislative term, in case a number of his voters decide that he has not fulfilled his duty and his election promises<sup>7</sup>. We can find points of intersection that ensure the continuation of the democratic process and, on the other hand, enable the construction of an alternative democratic left that presents itself as an alternative to power. We reject any overlap with conservative forces that would draw the left into an abyss. We can only overlap in clear, concrete and programmatic cases.

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<sup>7</sup> A proposal made by Kais Said.

## **What are the future strategies and perspectives of the Tunisian Left? And how can it overcome its current crisis?**

The left is in a serious crisis. The worst crisis the left has ever experienced in its modern history. Objectively, the 2019 elections were in favor of the left. Why in favor of the left? A serious economic crisis. Nobody could have imagined that the socio-economic situation would deteriorate so much; a political crisis: the religious right-wing conservative forces and those of political Islam, as well as the modernist right-wing forces, are divided, struggle for power and are unable to unite their candidates; a moral crisis, a security crisis and a cultural crisis. All the objective factors that should have driven large sections of the Tunisians to vote for the left were present – mainly the rejection of the system and a vote against the system (anti-système). Despite all these objective factors and the anti-systemic vote, only one left-wing candidate became MP. The two candidates of the *Popular Front* in the presidential election did not exceed 1.5%. The crisis is therefore structural and not temporary.

It is time to think about, comprehend and connect with the people who were relatively behind the rise of Kais Saïd. Among them are left-wing forces, social-transformative forces - which may not see themselves as left-wing, but are left-wing programmatically. We must overcome the attitude that we are the ones who are always right, and all those who disagree are mistaken. We must discuss with all these forces. We need to reposition ourselves to build a new radical democratic left alternative that seeks to present itself as a serious alternative to power. This step will not be easy, because it will affect parties that have been in the political landscape for 30, 35, 40 years – which are the left parties. But these left forces have been overtaken by history and no longer play a role for the youth. Still, these forces must play a role in the coming struggles, on condition that they renew their positions and accept their defeat. Because in every defeat, for us for whom dialectics are the basis of our work and contradictions the basis of our political work, there is also something positive. For this new construction, first of all the break between the leadership of left parties and the youth must be overcome as soon as possible. In the new left-wing parties, women must be given a greater role because they are not present in the leading positions of our parties. Minorities must also be represented in the leadership positions of our parties and be present in the media. We must structure ourselves in a democratic way, because you cannot demand democracy, but not being democratic in your own party. I personally and a large number of my comrades regard the ideas of Marxism as essential to our political configuration and ideology. We also have other important references, but the ideas of Marxism are structuring for the organization of the party. But today we are convinced that democratic centralism as a tool for the internal organization in the party has failed and is bankrupt. These revisions must be tackled with courage, because what is at stake is the reconstruction of the left, or the survival of a left that will never come to power. Today we have a task and a message: that of taking power for a democratic, social and national project, a project of social transformation for the benefit of the working people. Such a project in break with liberalism and capitalism, cannot be built if we do not draw the lessons from the fiasco of the presidential and parliamentary elections.