

# The Left in the Arab Region and the Question of Deficiencies

## Case Studies



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## **What is the left in the region today?**

Is a leftist whoever “claims” that s/he is, or one who adopts certain ideological concepts? This question is valid all over the world as “liberal socialism” grows in the European countries and hybrid experiences emerge - such as the “Syriza” movement and its leader, Tsipras in Greece... But the question seems particularly urgent in the Arab region which experiences constant violent conflicts, wars, occupations, in addition to the successive uprisings, last but not least of which were those of 2011.

Since it is impossible to revisit the entire history and course of the leftist organizations in our countries and map their formations, we will focus on their relationship to the 2011 event, as a revealing moment in history and to what has followed. It is an opportunity to examine whether the left – or the “lefts” - has understood what happened in 2011, and to scrutinize how it has reasoned and interacted with the event, as a telling example of its effectiveness and the nature of its connection to reality .

A part of the left - in its old and new forms and as organizations or individuals - has leaned towards the theses of “social democracy” - which are reformist at best- and became dominated by the neoliberal approach. Another part has sided with the existing regimes, fearing the influence of the powerful and popular Islamic political movements. Egypt and Tunisia are stark examples of this.

So, what does it mean to be a leftist today in our region? Whom and what does the left represent, and what future does it seek or hope for? Does the question of the future trouble it at all? Of course, the dull argument that the “crisis of the left” is a global one presents no answers. On the other hand, resorting to over-the-counter Marxist theories and parroting them is neither convincing nor leftist! This has been acknowledged since the late 1960s, with the emergence of the so-called “new left”, which is very diverse and might be the child born out of the defeat of 1967. There are dozens of organizations throughout the region that have sought to draw inspiration from the Marxist thought as an analytical tool and not as a dogma. Some of those strongly believed in grassrootsing and devising theories from the living reality.

What is the criterion or criteria that can be used to define the left? An urgent need arises to review the foundations, and to start from the objective “need” to formulate a vision that strongly believes that a miserable reality can be changed at all levels. What is needed is a vision that calls for change, carries this dream,

proposes methods and tools and adheres to the conditions and requirements of this long path. It has been said that “the left has stopped thinking a long time ago” and that the crisis it suffers is, above all, a defeat at the level of thought and vision, as well as values.

What is the emancipation program, on the individual and social levels today? What is the yet unaccomplished national liberation program, given issues such as that of Palestine, for example, but also concerning the highly dependent position our countries occupy within the global exploitative system.

The texts of this folder cover the experiences of the left in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. They seek to examine:

1- The stances of the various leftist organizations regarding the uprisings of their countries in their varying outreaches, addressing the produced perceptions (analyzes, programs, texts, etc.), as well as their field action.

2- The relationships of these leftist formations with other currents, especially Islamic ones, where in many cases, a dominant “identity conflict” has taken over the decisions, positions, and polarizations.

3- The relations of these formations with the regimes of each country.

4- Their vision for the period following 2011, where various challenges have emerged ranging from the counter-revolution (Egypt), and the modified foundations of power sharing (Tunisia).

5- The left’s interests that require most of its efforts, and the extent of the left’s engagement in the existing struggles for popular demands, in addition to the extent of its pioneering roles on the ground.

6- Its “social spheres”: What is the status of the left in universities, for example, and the extent of its presence in the popular neighborhoods and in the “slums” that exist around major cities, in the “peripheral” regions, and what is its relationship with trade unions and professional frameworks, and with non-governmental or civil organizations?

7- The left’s approach to the “human rights” issues. How much has this issue turned into a cover that compensates for the lack of a vision or agenda, on the social and political fronts alike, in the light of the practical experiences after 2011... in the sense that engaging in the struggle for rights and freedoms in the face of repression is necessary, but it does not excuse the left from engaging in its integral mission, which is pushing forward a comprehensive change.



**EGYPT**



## Has the Left Died While its Essence Still Mobilizes the People?

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We are facing the following dilemma: there is a regime that is imploding in one sense or the other; it is at least cracked, both on the level of the system of governance - as in the case of the Egyptian revolution, or as a capitalism in global crisis, whose most recent manifestation was the financial crisis of 2008. There are millions of people now calling for what is - by definition, at least partly - the “leftist” demand of social justice.

The state of the left in Egypt cannot be viewed in isolation from the state of the left in the whole world. It is – so to speak - a state of a protracted crisis whose first indications could be detected in the students' movement of 1968, and continued after more than two decades since the revisions of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The manifestations of this crisis in Egypt, as well as in the Arab region as a whole, demonstrated the rise and domination of political Islam as the most popular party in the opposition and as an alternative to the regimes that have been in place for several decades before the 2011 revolutions came to completely expose them and reveal the depth of the crisis. While an overwhelming number of people took to the streets with demands and slogans that expressed the very core of the left's project, such as "bread, freedom, and social justice!", the Egyptian left was not only unable to fight for power, but it was also ineffectual in scoring points in favor of its intellectual predominance or the expansion of its organizational base.

Once again, this was not the case of the Egyptian left alone, but also of the Arab and international left. In all the Arab countries that witnessed the wave of revolutions, the conflict eventually turned out to be between the two poles of the political Islam on the one hand, and the existing regimes on the other. Otherwise, globally, the alternative was the rise of right-wing populist currents.

These phenomena cannot be viewed as separate cases, and one cannot be satisfied with the easy and comfortable answers, such as the rhetoric that says that the political Islam does not threaten global capitalism nor the core of the existing regimes, which is why it was allowed to build a grassroots base, while the left was suppressed. One must also question the idea that the message of political Islam in the Arab and Egyptian cases, just like the rightist currents in Europe, plays on the primitive feelings of the masses, and that for this reason, it has a larger popular base or the financial capabilities that allow it to buy the political loyalty of wide segments of society... All these reasons, while true, are not enough to understand the depth of a decades-old crisis.

There are more generic answers that attribute the crisis of the left in Egypt and in the world to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the association made between the "left" with the totalitarian regimes, considering the American propaganda in this direction, and finally the inability of the left to link between class struggle and other identity-based conflicts. By extending this line of reasoning, the logical conclusion would be "the

death of the left”, while other considerations turn into mere attempts to revive what must be buried.

The truth is also that – regardless of the nametags-, what represents the heart of the left and the reason for its existence in a dynamic way, is demanding justice in its radical form on the one hand, and on the other hand, the crisis of global capitalism, which represents the basis of the left’s theoretical understanding. Those two issues were the main driving forces of the wave of popular movements, whether it was the “Occupy Wall Street” movement or the Arab revolutions. Hence, we are facing the following dilemma: there is a regime that is imploding in one sense or the other; it is at least cracked, both on the level of the system of governance - as in the case of the Egyptian revolution, or as a capitalism in global crisis, whose most recent manifestation was the financial crisis of 2008. There are millions of people now demanding that which is - by definition, at least partly – the “leftist” demand of social justice. On the other side, the right, in its most severe forms of degradation, is on the rise. I do not claim to have answers to this dilemma, but perhaps we should consider a set of trends simultaneously and in a more complex way, away from the easy and comfortable answers.

The fight for power in Egypt since the first months of 2011 had crystallized and materialized in the form of a battle between the two most powerful poles in the Egyptian political system: the state wings on one hand and groups of political Islam on the other. This conflict has cast a shadow over the Egyptian left as a whole, until it became the main point through which its formations define themselves and their differences.

### **The relationship to power: The national liberation complex**

In Egypt, as in many countries of the global south, the left’s relationship to power was formed - or rather was distorted - through the question of national liberation. The army in Egypt was - and still is - the real pillar of the post-occupation state that the 1952 regime represented. This identification not only represents a focal point for the old left embodied by the National Progressive Unionist Party (El Tagammu’ Party) and its extensions, but it still casts its shadow over the entire leftist movement after more than sixty years. The military nationalist character, with its rhetoric and choices, remains an integral part of a wide sector that calls itself a progressive left. Here, we find the discourse of “preserving the state” strongly present, not

only during the first months after the revolution, but also in supporting the military regime when the counter-revolution rose in 2013. The 1960s saw a similar precedent case when the left had expressed its support of Abdel Nasser's regime from within the prisons. This position in some way extended till 2013, as a large portion of the left continued to support the military regime aiming to preserve the state that represents the symbol of national liberation in their perspective.

This does not deny the existence of another segment of the new left represented by the Revolutionary Socialist Movement and the Bread and Freedom Party, in addition to other youth movements. This segment has rejected the identification with the regime, and its discourses clearly distinguished between the bias for national independence and the support for the military regime. However, this position was difficult to express because the fight for power in Egypt since the first months of 2011 had crystallized and materialized in the form of a battle between the two most powerful poles in the Egyptian political system: the state wings on one hand and groups of political Islam on the other.

The conflict over women's headscarves and the Copts' assumption of positions of authority took the left at a moment of the revolutionary tide to a space of discussion far from being engaged with the concerns and questions of the wider audience about women's security in transportation, for instance, or the double discrimination that the poor Copts suffer from.

### **The relationship with political Islam**

This conflict has cast a shadow over the Egyptian left as a whole, in all its different formations, until it became the main point through which the formations could define themselves and their differences. However, this wasn't the starting point of the argument, because at least since the 1990s, the position on political Islam and what it represents in the political conflict has constituted a seminal distinction between the various formations of the left: Are the groups of political Islam fascist forces or just reformist forces with reactionary tendencies? But, after 2011, the dominance of this debate over the choices and tactics of the various leftist groups rendered different repercussions. In the nineties and until the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, the outcomes of this choice were either to support the state in its war against groups of political Islam and to provide a kind of legitimization for the dictatorial practices (electoral fraud and

human rights violations), or to criticize and expose these practices even if the leftist group stands against these Islamic groups in question.

However, with the emergence of the movements of change during the 2005 presidential elections, the disagreement over what political Islam is and its position in the maps of political conflict has become a determining factor for political alliances and their practical interpretations on the ground. Then came the revolutionary wave in 2011 to reinforce these differences and take them to a new direction. Defining who the “true leftist” is became essentially related to the stance on political Islam, and the debate over personal rights became less related to their place within the framework of the class struggle and their linkage with economic and social rights. Rather, personal rights were debated and formulated separately from these contexts, from a liberal standpoint, as though it was a battlefield with the groups of political Islam. The question of women’s freedoms or the status of religious minorities, for example, were reduced to a theoretical / rhetorical battle over the headscarf and the Copts’ assumption of positions of authority.

Though important, these questions and debates took the left at a moment of the revolutionary tide - which could have been a chance to possibly expand its popular base, at least - to a space of discussion far from being engaged with the concerns and questions of the wider audience about women’s security in transportation, for instance, or the double discrimination that the poor Copt people suffer.

**A rupture still exists between the consensus over the shortcomings of the left and the failure to take action in the direction of addressing these shortcomings. The programs of the various parties and configurations of the Egyptian left are still either based on identifying the deficiency of neoliberal policies or advocating something similar to central state economies that used to be prevalent in the sixties of the twentieth century.**

The problem lied not in engaging in the debate with the ideas of political Islam nor with the attempt to expose its reactionary ideology. Rather, the problem was limiting this discussion in the range that is far from the concerns and problems of the general masses who benefited from the revolution,

and in placing this political faction in a defensive position through posing questions that are difficult to answer: What happens after all the women are veiled and after the building of new churches is prohibited? How do we tackle the problems of education, health and wealth distribution? Perhaps the left's tendency to score points at the expense of formulating a broader political discourse, stems from the fact that the left itself does not own detailed or pragmatic answers to these questions that go beyond generalizations and towards a better understanding of the nature of the moment.

The Egyptian left, however, is not unique in all this, but rather shares with its counterparts all over the world the same predicament, perhaps since the late 1970s. Although there is much criticism from within Marxism for the experience of the Eastern Bloc, and despite attempts to jump over "economicism" - that is economic and historical determinism - and the theories explaining the neoliberal stage in the global capitalist system, these theoretical frameworks still lack the answer to the question of "what next?", or in Lenin's words, "What is to be done?" Perhaps that is why the easiest thing to do was to define the "real left" by its stance on political Islam rather than through its suggested political alternatives and projects, and not just the slogans it raises.

### **Building on the points of intersections**

Before the revolutionary wave of 2011, the Egyptian left was already attempting to build new dynamics, and those attempts were no less serious after 2011. It went in the direction of building unifying fronts between different organizations like the "Alliance of the Left", and even creating a new broad leftist party ("The Socialist Popular Alliance Party") on the background of the revolution. The various leftist formations and the individuals who belonged to this ideology in an unorganized way did not, at any time, deny the importance of linking the economically driven demands and movements to the political demands, nor did they deny the importance of creating a practical political program that answers current questions, or the centrality of translating the revolutionary slogans into public policies and finding new organizational forms. Still, a dissociative rupture exists between the consensus on the shortcomings of the left and the failure to take action in the direction of addressing these shortcomings. For instance, on the morning of the revolution, there was a unanimous

agreement regarding the importance of building a left-wing party that is broader than the small organizations and underground ones; a party very far from “El Tagammu’ Party” (The National Progressive Unionist Party) with its relations with the authorities and its absence from every popular demand movement prior to the revolution. However, the strange thing was that this consensus about building an alternative party soon turned into a reproduction of the same old dynamics that governed previous experiences. Drowning in the details of how to integrate the existing left-wing entities within the framework of a new party, looking at the presidential elections as a mere ideological rivalry with Islamists rather than a battle to win the support of the masses or building the party or even competing in the presidential battle itself... all these were reasons why the two leftist candidates ended up last in the polls.

Perhaps the left’s tendency to score points at the expense of formulating a broader political discourse, stems from the fact that the left itself does not own detailed or pragmatic answers to these questions that go beyond generalizations and towards better understanding of the nature of the moment. It was easier to define the “true left” by the stance on political Islam rather than by the alternative political projects it suggests.

On the theoretical level and as far the agenda is concerned, despite the serious attempts to formulate policies beyond the slogans, the absence of the left from power and its inability to even compete for power have rendered the left’s incapability to place its agendas on track. The programs of the various parties and configurations of the Egyptian left are still either based on identifying the deficiency of neoliberal policies or advocating something similar to central state economies that used to be prevalent in the sixties of the twentieth century.

### **What is to be done?**

Considering these various dilemmas, it appears that the new left, in Egypt as well as in the world, must engage in two seemingly contradictory tasks: the first is to revive a part of its heritage, without any shame or equivocation, and the second is admitting that its answers are inadequate, and that what it has now is nothing but the tools it needs to use in order to find answers. At the organizational level, for instance, the most successful

example in Egypt in the past fifty years is still the Muslim Brotherhood, which adopted an essentially Leninist organizational form. Despite this, just mentioning the Leninist model of organization in the leftist circles - even in the most radical of these circles - has become cause for either ridicule or indignation. Though, what is required is not reconstructing the Leninist organizational structures of the 1920s, but summoning whatever can be useful from their core and essence, in a way that suits the current stage and its tools, whether by replacing the party's newspaper with a Facebook group, or by finding ways to ensure that centralism does not overwhelm democracy as a mode of decision-making.

**The left must define itself not by its opposing position against the Islamists (though this is an important part of the ideological war), but as a stand-alone political project in a moment that much resembles the vicissitudes of the first half of the twentieth century, with its wars, the rise of the fascist right, and waves of displacement across continents.**

On the other hand, for a distorted economic system such as the Egyptian one - that has neither undergone the developments of industrial capitalism (or what came after), nor became part of a system of digital capitalism -, attempts to understand the economy through the oversimplified theorizing of post-industrial capitalism will not be able to produce sufficient answers for a political project. The concept of uneven and interdependent development and the concept of surplus value and class exploitation can all be important points of entry, but they have become mere tools for understanding the nature of an economy and a class stratification in which even the nature of the work itself has been modified. Therefore, these concepts cannot be relied upon to provide answers or immediate alternatives.

Finally, perhaps the left should have taken a few steps back to reconsider all the space occupied by the efforts and debates over political Islam, and then tilt the balance in favor of the side that focuses on defining what the left currently is. It should define itself not by its opposition against the Islamists (though this is an important part of the ideological war), but as a stand-alone political project in a moment that much resembles the vicissitudes of the first half of the twentieth century, with its wars, the rise of the fascist right, and waves of displacement across continents.



## The Left in Egypt: Its Limits and Prospects in the World of 2011

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The article is a quick reading of the history of the Egyptian left movement in its various stages, and of the changes that it has undergone. In an attempt to understand the outcomes, a feature stands out that has accompanied all changes, permeating the surrounding conditions: the absence of the question of power in its deepest sense, and the absence of the concept of social conflict. The left thus seemed to be a force capable of making normative corrections but unable to induce any real social shifts.

The position of the left and its role in the Egyptian revolution and in the “post-January 2011” posed a big interrogation in the intellectual, political and social arenas in Egypt. The question stems from the mechanical search for “a left” in light of “a revolution”. What is meant by “the left” is the presence – or emergence - of political and social forces that fight to attain gains which are - in their core - related to enabling the sectors subjected to injustice and exploitation (by the existing power system) to have their political and social rights. The main bases of this empowerment are: the fair redistribution of wealth and enabling these sectors to manage resources and represent themselves. Hence, the left is a struggle process based on a vision and a reading of the nature of the social conflict.

### **The History of the Left in Egypt: The First and Second Constitutions**

Egypt has a long history of leftist and Marxist organizations, intellectually and politically present since the beginning of the twentieth century, but also socially present throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties of that century. However, to understand the left today, it’s essential to begin with understanding its defeats in different historical stages and its reconfiguration with the renewal of its struggles.

The left has been defeated in one of the most important stages of social and political conflict in Egypt in the early fifties and sixties by the government of free officers of 1952. The state had finished off the left with a security grip, and it absorbed the leftists’ discourse through some implemented changes and measures that had a “socialist” character. Most of the left-wing parties at the time were loyal and subordinate to the Soviet Union, which had then decided to support the bourgeois nationalist regimes of a military nature. However, the conflict was soon renewed after the horrific defeat to Israel in 1967. The left reemerged through the students’ uprising of 1968 in response to the defeat and democracy started to become an urgent question, considering that the dictatorship was one of the biggest factors leading up to the defeat.

The left’s presence flourished in the Egyptian universities and some workers’ collectives since the “bread uprising” in 1977. The 1970s saw the marriage of organized left-wing forces and their intellectuals with the labor and student movements. The left had succeeded in taking root within the sectors it targets ideologically and in the context of the struggle.

Since the movements of 1975, the ruling regime and its security services have recognized the seriousness of this situation when the workers of “el-Mahalla el-Kobra” marched in a massive demonstration. The movement was met with great violence as the police forces killed seven workers and wounded thousands.

The “Egyptian Communist Labor Party” had a central role in the 1970s, but it also took some painful security blows in the aftermath of the 1977 Bread Uprising, which led to the eradication of the party. That generation of leftists was defeated and the uprising ended with no positive outcomes. It also took severe blows in light of the alliance between Sadat’s authority with the Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular). The Islamists in all their various formations had succeeded in defeating the left yet again in the universities, while the security forces pursued and repressed them in their different labor positioning.

The decline of the left in Egypt was abrupt in the eighties and the nineties of the past century- despite several labor strikes and sit-ins that took place at the time, most notably the sit-in of the iron and steel plants in Helwan. Many factors had contributed to this decline, including the growth of the Islamic ideology , the intensification of the “war on terrorism”, along with the fall of the Soviet Union. The latter was the least significant cause, as the defeat of the left in Egypt was already largely enacted because of internal organizational issues – particularly because the National Progressive Unionist Party (El Tagammu’ Party) had dominated all representation of the left and chose to stand with the authority rather than engage in any sort of struggles against it in fear of the “Islamic extremism”. El Taggamu’ Party had abandoned some big central battles, such as the uprising of Idku city in El Beheira governorate in 1992, despite a strong presence of the party and its cadres in that governorate and in the city itself. This abandonment confused some of the party’s members in the city in which they had previously played different roles. Even after the uprising was subsided by police oppression and social negotiation, El Tagammu’ Party still did not make any attempt to lead and crown the popular struggle with any political gains.

Contrary to the “calcification” of El Tagammu’ Party, some other leftist groups fought a long legal battle against the authority, and the courts were main arenas for their struggle. The names of Ahmed Seif El-Din and

Nabil El-Hilali became prominent as both of them succeeded in gathering a group of young left-wing lawyers who became inspirational models for later generations.

Mubarak and hereditary politics were understood as being the biggest political problems in Egypt, while corruption was just viewed as a symptom of the lack of transparency, lack of accountability, lack of competence, and lack of the rule of law. The violations of the police of the Ministry of the Interior and its political repression were believed to be solvable by changing the leaders, while it was believed that most problems of governance in Egypt could be resolved by building a representative democracy and ensuring the integrity of the elections.

However, there was a shift at the dawn of the new millennium that gave the left room to reconfigure itself once again. Left-wing groups started to form numerous human rights and development organizations (working on local development, preparing youth leaders for civil work, developing resources and local projects... They also coordinated and worked with the United Nations and “Development Support Programs”). It was these left-wing formations that were to be found on the ground at the moment of the first spark of the revolution in 2011.

The beginning of the third millennium was not just the climax of the neoliberal transformation in Egypt, but also the inauguration of a decade of open conflict with the power system and Mubarak’s political system.

The decade witnessed several important transformations at the beginning, which provided the left with new opportunities to engage in political and social conflict:

1- The role of human rights organizations in opposing the brutality of the Ministry of the Interior in particular has expanded. After the victory of the Ministry in its war on terrorism, the police rule continued to reinforce itself and the establishment completely dominated the daily life in Egypt with the patterns of its exercise of power becoming increasingly harsh. This was one of the most important starting points of a major human rights battle fought by institutions whose backbone was the left-wing, such as

“El Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture” and “Hisham Mubarak Law Center”. These institutions had succeeded in mobilizing their human and financial resources, and the legal struggle through left-wing lawyers hence became fundamental. These organizations also included a number of researchers with left-leaning tendencies.

2- The labor struggle against the neoliberal transformation had also moved to the courts, especially to what is known in Egypt as the administrative judiciary. In this space, other human rights institutions, such as the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, played an important role.

3- This neoliberal transformation provided a wide space for the emergence of newspapers relatively independent from the state’s authority, which meant that left-wing journalists found an opportunity to interact in the Egyptian press scene.

4- Finally, the political struggle against Mubarak erupted in 2005 with the emergence of the “Kifaya Movement”, which was formed by leftists , liberals (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word) and Nasserites.

On the other hand, the “Revolutionary Socialists” organization received a major security blow at the turn of the millennium, which turned into a case in the Egyptian courts. However, this blow constituted the true birth of this organization that was formed in the nineties of the last century by a group of students and professors of the American University in Cairo. The organization had made serious attempts – in very complicated security conditions - to engage in the various social struggles that culminated in 2006, 2007, and 2008. It also tried to embrace political demands with social protests and produced subsidiary tools, such as “The Socialist Magazine”, which tirelessly accompanied all forms of protest in Egypt. It also established a website, while some of its cadres were actively involved in labor issues as journalists, political activists and lawyers.

Inside the leftist sphere, there was also a struggle that revolved around the attempts to build a new left against the rusty old leadership, specifically against El Tagammu’ Party and its Stalinist character. This conflict highlighted the features of the new leftist currents and prompted them to become more vital in interacting with the explosion of the sociopolitical conflict in Egypt again.

With the founding of the “Kifaya Movement” in 2005, many youthful movements began to emerge, such as “The Youth for Change”, the “Solidarity Movement” in 2006 and many other youth coordination such as “The Coordination Office for Political Forces” in Alexandria in 2009, “The Youth Movements” in 2010 after a young man was brutally murdered by the police in front of his house in a middle-class neighborhood, whose case became widely known by his name; “Khaled Saeed”. Most of the young leftist members have been vigorously involved in small, effective, but short-lived movements, of a nature that transcends the ideological dimension in favor of working on specific issues. Many of the left’s youth is concerned with limited but important conflicts, such as the displacement of residents in favor of capitalist projects (one example is the “Toson” case in Alexandria in 2008) or environmental issues (such as the pollution caused by cement factories in 2006).

The “Kifaya Movement” and the “National Assembly for Change” diagnosed the problem in Egypt as being summed up in the issues of corruption and tyranny, without examining the structure of the ruling social class, its affiliations, interests, and the mechanisms through which it asserts dominance, or examining the social forces tasked with working for change. This reflected in the confusion of these forces’ stances on the ruling apparatuses and institutions, such as the army, public intelligence directorate, or the judiciary.

Since they were fighting these battles without strong organizations and with the lack of a broader political vision, their political and ideological presence has diminished, and they became overwhelmed by their frontal nature, basing their work on the centrality of a certain issue without elaborating on its political and social treatment. However, these movements sometimes succeeded in networking human rights and development institutions, and networking the various political formations among themselves. They challenged power and maneuvered their way skillfully, broadening the struggle to spaces away from the large democratic battles waged by the “Kifaya Movement” and the purely legal battles that limited a substantial part of the effectiveness of their activities to the legal profession. They pulled a large part of the struggle to a ground far from the wholesome Islamic perceptions and in favor of a serious clash with the material reality of life in Egypt. The leftist cadres were distinguished by their movement across the various organizations and the multiplicity of their roles.

The new left was characterized by the interruption of the historical accumulation of the previous generations because of its huge battle with the Stalinist left. Other characteristics of this left include the predominance of the legal and humanitarian sides over the material and historic reading of the social realities in Egypt, the efforts it exerted to receive funds for its legal propositions, liquidity, and the lack of strong organizational skills.

### **2005-2011: Leftists without a Left**

The political situation since 2005, with the initial movement against Mubarak and his son and against the brutality of the Ministry of the Interior, was marked by several contradictions; most notably the absence of a general intellectual and analytical nature in favor for the focus on general national issues. This was manifested in the “Kifaya Movement” and then in the “National Assembly for Change”. These entities diagnosed the problem in Egypt as being summed up in the issues of corruption and tyranny, without examining the structure of the ruling social group, its affiliations, interests, and the mechanisms through which it asserts dominance, or examining the social forces tasked with working for change. The moral and the legal natures characterized the change movement and the Mubarak opposition. This was reflected in the confusion in these forces’ stances on the ruling apparatuses and institutions, such as their stances on the army, public intelligence directorate, or the judiciary. This last point was especially dangerous because it produced a political strategy that implies a method of managing the social and political struggle from within the existing system.

**What was happening around the spinning factory of the industrial city of “Mahalla” in 2008 seems far more important than what was happening inside of the factory itself. It turned out that the workers were not the main actors in what quickly escalated into an urban warfare.**

This perspective dominated the political struggle until 2013 and created a common ground for what was known as “The National Forces”. It specified the limitations and the conditions of the political and revolutionary action later on. It had three main characteristics: the first was the moral nature which overshadowed the struggle; the second was the normative and legal nature; and the third and most important one was the absence of the

issue of the power in the deep sense of the word, along with the absence of the notion of social struggle from the arenas of the battle for change.

Indeed, the hope that everyone had long lost was suddenly manifesting: the revolution broke out! There was as much hope as there was a painful confusion. The left was unable to lead the enormous masses, nor did it succeed in organizing and rooting its movement to finally reach its desired goals.

This predominant stance did not require major theorizing efforts in order to understand the Egyptian social reality and the nature of the state. According to this vision, the Egyptian state was authoritarian because of the hegemony of Mubarak's regime, so the socio-economic relations only needed to be emancipated politically from Mubarak's domination, and the judiciary system was a just one that only needed to activate its independence and improve some laws. Likewise, the judges – according to this same perspective - were honorable protectors of the constitution, its values, laws, and sovereignty in society, whereas the army was a long-standing national institution that protected the people and was to be protected from political conflicts. As for the people of Egypt, they were authentic and honest people that needed nothing but liberation from the nightmare of the dictatorship weighing heavily upon their chest.

The army, meanwhile, was also sending messages through various channels inside the camp calling for change, suggesting that it was not satisfied with the situation and the hereditary politics.

This political vision was consistent with the liberal and moderate Islamic trends, yet the contradiction lied in the left's position from the process of change. This vision does not seriously consider the mode of production and the need to modify it while changing the conditions for producing in Egypt. It sees repression only at the political level or merely as a violation of the law, but it does not see the social dimension of repression and oppression exercised by the authority. More importantly, it misses any viable vision on wealth, its management and redistribution, which is supposed to be the question of the left par excellence - while there is only constant talk of corruption.

The dilemma of the left manifests here: What differentiates the left from

the liberal and national forces? Large sectors of the left have come together under the banner of this vision to work in coordination, trying to build bridges with other power forces to improve the conditions and the feasibility of political action in light of security oppression and restrictions. This led to the incorporation of fresh blood into the political movement and conflict in Egypt, meaning that it succeeded to expand the circle but cast a heavy shadow of doubt on the left's ability to crystallize a political and social project away from leading protesting and defending rights.

The left was incapable of building a vision for a project that leads to wholesome change. Its "human-rights-defense" tendencies camouflaged its escape from discussing the issue of power and the imperativeness of crystallizing an assessment of power away from the normative level and the international criteria; a discussion that would define the nature of power and define its practices; i.e. how it manages and governs the society.

Hence, the left is positioned as a compass of moral and legal corrections that protests and revolts against violations of rights, but it is not a force driving change towards a perception of governance and administration. Furthermore, it remains incapable of gaining positions of power within the society like the Islamists do (especially the social presence through service work and its institutions, in addition to the augmentation of Islamists as a religious social authority and their involvement in various social networks that manage wealth and resources), nor is the left able to provide a vision of a different and possible pattern of life and social relationships. Hence, the forces of the left are capable of making normative corrections but remain powerless in making any social change.

**The Revolutionary Socialists saw that there was a huge class disparity inside the Muslim Brotherhood. It realized that the Brotherhood represented wide popular sectors that could be prompted to partake in the revolution because of the contradiction of interests between the leadership and the broad sectors of partisans. It is a stance that had completely dominated their view, blocking the Brotherhood's reactionary, sectarian and neoliberal dimensions.**

This powerlessness portrayed the left as a liberal force dealing with the

police state through an approach based on amending legislation and laws rather than catalyzing change in political conditions, production patterns, and their relationships that create the objective conditions for the continuity of the police state brutality and clientelism in Egypt. There was no attempt in the first place to put forward an assessment or a new vision of a different production pattern which was not copied from theoretical ideas or from other experiences, but rather relevant to plausible possibilities in the Egyptian / regional reality. On the contrary, the left was proposing a horizon that was impossible to attain (considering the conditions), nurturing delusions about its leadership of the popular masses and believing that once liberated from the oppressive grip, those masses will come to the left because it is sincere in representing the spirit of the masses... Or, it was sticking to the legal battle for rights that some of its members had suggested and were confining themselves in. The abandonment of the agenda, the mission and the envisioning of change explains the left's slide into the situation described above. It also explains the inability of the left to fight for the uprooting of the state and its social networks when the revolution erupted.

However, this interpretation assigns the left a lot more than its potentials, as there are historical and material conditions that led it into a state that did not allow this task to be accomplished. The presence of substantive elements of a social and political conflict does not necessarily mean that the left is going to be the political force most likely to lead the conflict and define its course. The left crystallizes in the context of a long struggle process in which social forces are able to represent their interests with a different vision for power (and alternative interests), and to seek change in the relations of production and the nature of the distribution of wealth and resources, all while waging this war with the right tools that allow the left to achieve meaningful gains.

### **The Left and the Revolution: Dream and Confusion**

The networks formed were able to clash with the authority and destroy some of its components, but its main goal was only to make a shift in the pattern of power, it did not really consider seizing the whole apparatus of the state. The rest of the organized left, meanwhile, was just beginning to create its new partisan organizations, such as the "Popular Alliance" and the "Social Democratic Party"- in which the left was not the only

component, and later the “Bread and Freedom Party” which still struggles to establish itself as an official party while suffering from several security blows.

### **Three Currents**

The left had three different positions before and after the landmark event of the revolution, and during it as well.

- The first direction considered it imperative to gain seats in power, whether on the social or political levels, through competing with the ruling forces and the Islamists, especially in the elections. This current was comprised of some forces of the democratic left that joined the “Social Democratic Party” (and those are the biggest supporters of this trend and the most effective in the several elections that Egypt had post-revolution). The social composition of this party clearly reveals that most of its members belong to the upper middle class, and that it incorporated some kinship networks from Upper Egypt, intellectual groups, and a significant number of Christians. The leftists who were part of the party believed in the essentiality of creating a broad political current that contained within it alliances among various liberal and civil forces in a factional form.

- Another current saw that the historic moment was overall not in favor of the left, and that therefore, any serious strategy to deconstruct the power or to overthrow the socially hegemonic forces and disrupt their relations would inevitably lead to the Islamists seizing power. This current preferred to make compromise with the existing authority and tried to assume the role of the adviser. This trend was mainly comprised of El Tagammu’ Party, particularly the so-called enlightenment intellectual leftists.

- The third current, closest to the revolutionary status, rejected power, the fight over it, and even engaging in any way in it. This trend (which is hostile to the authority but not willing to fight over it at any level) represented some sectors of the leftist youth distinguished by a high sense of puritanism and the Revolutionary Socialists Organization. The latter took pride in supporting other candidates in the elections, such as Mohammad Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood in the run-off against General Ahmad Shafiq in the 2012 elections. Several sporadic speeches from known leftist groups condemned any involvement in the electoral political

process after the revolution, and voices emerged to emphasize the trend, such as “Muqati’oun” (Boycotting) and the “Martyr’s Fund instead of the ballot box”.

The revolution is a leftist dream par excellence. The promise of a revolution that topples the ruling regime and changes the status quo is a feature of the movement of the left in any society. Indeed, the hope that everyone had long lost was suddenly manifesting: the revolution broke out! There was as much hope as there was a painful confusion. The left was unable to lead the enormous masses, nor did it succeed in infiltrating the ranks to organize and root its movement to finally reach its desired goals. The mapping of left with all its factions remained as it was before the revolution: El Tagammu’ worried about any popular movement, the revolutionary socialists were eager to engage in the process of change, the democratic left was trying to contemplate its position and comprehend what was going on to figure out its next move, and the “Socialist Renewal Current” sought to create a new umbrella under which the left can gather. Different cadres, most of which were emanated from the democratic left or rebellious against the El Tagammu’ Party, took two different directions: the first was trying to create a broader political party (the “Social Democratic Party”), and the second was trying to build a left-wing party with a clear ideological orientation (which is the “Popular Alliance Party”).

### **The Popular Alliance**

There were several attempts to build a clear-cut left-wing party. The first attempt began with the creation of a “Popular Alliance” in 2011 which played a prominent role in founding both the Democratic Left and the Socialist Renewal Current (born in 2009 after the Revolutionary Socialists split over the priority of democratic transformation and the support for El Baradie, while the others - who remained within the Revolutionary Socialists - saw that the priority should be supporting the labor strikes). During its first days, this Popular Alliance succeeded in attracting young and older left-wing cadres.

This alliance, however, was confronted to two issues: its inability to create a democratic organizational and its inability to resolve its internal struggles in a way that allowed its continued coherence and effectiveness. It appears that it was, on an intellectual level, adhering to the ideology in the literal

sense, when it comes to its political content and agenda, while Egypt did not have a full-fledged working class of a vanguard nature because the conditions of modernization were not met in such a way that would allow that the Alliance's proposal to work in the conditions of the Egyptian reality.

On the level of political coordination and with regards to its openness toward other currents, the Popular Alliance had made the important experience of building what was known as the list of "The Revolution Continues" in the 2011 elections, forming an alliance with both the "Egyptian stream" which had "post-Islamism" tendencies (that is, it called for reconciliation with the Islamic identity without necessarily and fully adhering to the Sharia (religious law), giving the social and political action a civilizational dimension that stems from the Islamic history), and the "Free Egyptians Party" with liberal tendencies, which was founded in 2012. The alliance clearly rejected the dominance of the military establishment over political life. By the end of 2013, the Popular Alliance witnessed mass resignations which violently shook it.

The stated reason for this wave of resignation was the party's discourse of appeasement after June 30, 2013 (the demonstrations calling for Morsi's dismissal followed by the then Minister of Defense Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi announcement of the end of Muhammad Morsi's rule on July 3, declaring the handover of power to the President of the Supreme Constitutional Court), thus overthrowing the Muslim Brotherhood. But the party was suffering from internal schisms long before June 30, and it was only a matter of time until the conflict imploded between young members and older cadres. In addition, issues related to women and harassment emerged within the party itself. The alliance exploded and some of its dissident elements founded together the Bread and Freedom Party (still in the process of being officially founded).

### **The Revolutionary Socialists**

The Revolutionary Socialists were vastly engaged in the revolution, utilizing the tools they had created and mastered before the revolution along their history of struggle for various social and political issues since the year 2000. Nevertheless, they found themselves bewildered by the revolution on several levels:

1- The question of how they could emerge from their clandestine activity to overt action.

2- Building a clear political vision that defines the level of revolutionary radicalism that they were ready to engage in. At the moment of the revolution's victory, when Mubarak was overthrown, the organization clearly stated that the regime had not fallen yet. It went on to resume its battles against the military council and the very first chants calling for "the overthrowing the military" were credited to the Revolutionary Socialists.

3- The organization adopted a clear expansion and polarization strategy, but its expansion has caused clear ideological confusion. The structure of the organization was unable to handle the momentum of the newcomers, and it was not able to train new members in a manner coherent with the identity of the organization. As a result, many new actors can be said to be active participants in the organization but they could not actually be considered as leftists when it comes to the intellectual understanding or the progressive perceptions on women for example, their roles within social life, gender equality, and respecting different sexual identities and orientations. In fact, some members even held explicitly reactionary ideas and practices, but the organization was attractive to them because they viewed it as the most radical in the face of the Military Council and the Ministry of the Interior. The organization also lost its ability to devise a political plan and solutions for the existing social conflicts. It fumbled through its attempts to read the Egyptian reality and its transformations, which rendered a tendency within it to use pretentious rhetorical vocabulary. However, despite these deficiencies, the organization spread in the universities and in the media.

4- The revolution stripped the organization of its main characteristic as a left-wing organization whose members were involved in labor and sectoral struggles for a long time, having built a reasonable accumulation of activity, especially after 2005 with the Mahalla strikes and the strike of the real estate taxation authority. It also failed to link the social issues to the political one and, like the rest of the currents, drifted since 2011 into the political struggle at the expense of the social conflict.

Despite the organization's coherence in most of its political discourse and slogans, the intensification of the political and social struggle in Egypt,

especially with the phase of the “war on terror” and the power struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood after June 30, 2013, rendered the organization incapable of formulating any political content, or any interpretation of the reality. It was therefore impossible for it to find its own position in the conflict within these events and away from the moral stances. However, on its website, the organization maintained its important tradition of issuing political statements on various issues such as its refusal of police brutality or the suppression of labor protests.

**The revolution started without a leftist understanding of the dynamics driving it. Until this moment, the Egyptian left has not presented a serious reading of the nature of the social formations that partook in the revolution.**

To this day, one of the most persistent problem of the Revolutionary Socialists remains its inability to read and interpret the Egyptian reality in a complex manner. The organization has a highly ideological, highly-principled perception, which is in a way non-political as it excludes the understanding of politics as a prolonged process of conflict. Perhaps the most prominent example is its reading of the Muslim Brotherhood based on locating the disparities within it at the level of class structure, and the fact that the Brotherhood represents broad popular segments that are liable to partake in revolutionary efforts and change due to the contradiction of the interests of those in leadership and the broad segments of the organization. It is a stance that had completely dominated the Revolutionary Socialists’ view of the Brotherhood, blocking their reactionary, sectarian and neoliberal dimensions from their field of vision. This reading of some aspects of the Brotherhood’s structure (related to class contradiction, or even the intellectual contradiction to some extent - as the Azhari mingles with the Sufi with the Salafi) might prove true. It still excludes attention to the Brotherhood’s ability to create patterns and impose hegemony within it, thus forming a largely homogeneous ideology. Therefore, the Revolutionary Socialists have forgotten the important Marxist lesson that states that inconsistency alone is not sufficient to understand the various social structures.

A least widely circulated critique of the Revolutionary Socialists is that of their reading of the events of the industrial city of “Mahalla” in 2008 (the strike of spinning workers, which was one of the largest labor strikes

in the country). The Revolutionary Socialists insisted that the Mahalla workers were the essential fuel for events and the uprising. However, surveying the field with anthropological scrutiny during the events, with their transformation into a city-wide urban warfare between the protestors and the authority, indicates that the workers were not the main actors in this war. They were actually the least involved with the expansion of the uprising in the city. Had this been realized in a realistic manner, without any prior “ideological projection”, it could have provided a new understanding of the identity of the actors within society. The groups who are willing to escalate the clash with the authority, those who are less willing to withdraw from this clash, and those who are most likely groups that do not engage in this act based on their temperament or even for intellectual reasons, but rather because their act reflects what their lives have come to in the context of the peripheral, subordinate and parasitic production patterns that exist in the country. When attempting to understand the social relations and how they interact with power, what was happening around the factory seemed more important than what was happening inside of it. A major transformation had taken place within the Egyptian society and in its relationship to the state, but the insistence on reading the reality through a purely ideological lens has obscured this understanding.

### **The Social Democratic Party**

Another part of the map of the left after the revolution is the significant wing of the democratic left that had partaken in founding the “Social Democratic Party”. Among all the leftist factions, this group was the most interested in the political struggle and the conflict over power, even when it sought to score some intermediate small gains. These Social Democrats absolutely prioritize elections, managing blocs, collecting votes, and making alliances. They believe in the following three points:

- 1- Egypt’s main problem is the absence of politics from the public activity, and the absence of organization that resulted from a long heritage of neglecting public action and refuting the idea of political and social organization. It is a heritage that was founded with the “State of July”, the constant security persecutions, the eliminating of political cadres, the reinforcement of ignorance, and the investment in this ignorance to create an uneducated social structure that remains subordinate to the authority. The party believes that the highest priority after the revolution in Egypt

must be the consolidation of organization and the unrelenting call for the right to organize at all levels, especially in political work, as there can be no serious political work without a serious presence of political parties taking part in the elections.

2- In the absence of a new free solid political arena that can pressure the state and compete head-to-head with Islamists over the positions of power, there is no way to defeat the Islamists, lead to a change in the elites of the state, or diminish the role of the army. The gradual buildup in a serious political action would, however, be able to disrupt and cause change in the existing social status.

3- Breaking the sectarian condition in Egypt would not be possible unless the Christian blocs are welcomed into the political process. The Social Democrats have worked on infiltrating the Christian blocs, taking advantage of their concerns about political Islam. They saw an opportunity to push these blocs into a broader social and political struggle beyond the walls of the church.

4- Perhaps one of the most significant and unique Leftist engagements in political action post-revolution was the attempt to enter into the depths of the social networks that dominated the rural areas and the Nile's Delta, and break through these social structures to engage in the conflict with the Islamists and/or the state. Political work, for the Social Democrats, requires compromises and social alignments in order to make a serious step towards creating social shifts and transforming the forms and contents of the struggle. Those leftist elites therefore paid attention to creating alliances and working on new polarizations for the purpose of competing in the elections.

There are generally two kinds of "Orientalism". One sees the Egyptian society as ignorant and tied up because of the dominance of religious forces, the second sees that the Islamists are the sincere expression of Egyptian society and the only forces capable of engendering change and challenging the Western hegemony...

This leftist bloc viewed that it was necessary not to engage in the establishment of a purely left-wing party. They considered that the priority,

relevant to the historic moment, should be the establishment of a broad party that includes both the left and the liberals. Their primary concern was the inception of a political field that holds the deep-rooted democratic traditions, along with a leftist core, re-introducing progressive ideas through discourse, legislation, and the modernizing of the state, while taking into account the social dimension of the working class within this historic transformation. This bloc regards Egypt as a backward country that suffers from a deficit in the production of wealth, its plundering, and the unjust distribution of wealth.

The party was trying to target what is known as the popular bases of the state and power in Egypt. But, a critical question imposes itself here: Is this a matter of working in politics from within the system and through its tools? Is this attempt eventually nothing but a reproduction of the ruling and power-constituting rural bourgeoisie of the Egyptian society? Was this strategy in line with the existing revolutionary situation that was seeking to overthrow the regime?

Some researchers and partisan cadres see that the party's approach does not reproduce the system nor the social structure, but rather works on developing this social structure and enhancing the conditions of political action. They also view it as a serious attempt to change the nature of the social relations by making long-term displacements and upgrading the political process itself to base it on the conflict between agendas, modernizing the way resources are managed instead of reinforcing the clientele networks based on tribal loyalties and sectarian dimensions. The vision of this left emerges from an emphasis on the importance of reading and analyzing the Egyptian reality, since there is much difficulty in formulating a pure leftist way of action in the presence of a backward social structure – at the level of the production patterns and their relations.

The party also believes that class fluidity and the lack of a clear form of class struggle are substantial problems in Egypt that must be understood and that strategies must be conjured in order to deal with these issues. Eventually, in the light of this miserable reality, the role of the left remains limited due to the complex structural conditions. Its only possible contribution is confined to its attempts to push forward towards building a new political field through involving various political and social forces and to try and materialize success in the political and social conflicts,

knowing that this, by itself, is not necessarily a big achievement.

### **The State, the Islamists, and the People: Where Does the Left Look?**

The position regarding the existence of Islamic movements; i.e. movements that use religion as a basis for their operation in the political sphere, seems to be the fulcrum of the dispute between the various leftist currents. It is their main point of disagreement about the movement and the revolution. El Tagammu' Party has made up its mind since the 1980s: it would always stand with the state against the Islamists. As for the Revolutionary Socialists, their slogan was: "sometimes with the Islamists, but always against the state". El Tagammu' was completely subservient to the state, and its agenda – so to speak – revolved around its fear of the state's fall and the uprising of the Islamists. This stance was not limited to El Tagammu' Party alone, but it affected all the left.

The rumor that the left has been very weak on the social level all along is not true. El Tagammu' newspaper ("Al-Ahali") had a wide audience and prints more than 150,000 copies. Remnants of El-Tagammu' cadres (the youngest of those is probably in their fifties) could be found in the different villages and governorates where you would least expect a leftist presence, from Aswan to cities in the governorates of El Beheira...

However, the party's presence under the umbrella of power stripped it of the most important component leftist character, which is the struggle for the issues that concern the marginalized ones, the poor and all the victims of exploitation under a capitalist system and a repressive state. Hence, the central question is: why might people choose to join El Tagammu' Party and not the party of the regime, represented by the National Party? El Tagammu' and its members were playing the part of the state's faithful adviser, and they also tried to play the role of the enlightened intellectuals or technocrats within the state apparatus. The party also accepted "state offerings", such as the presidential appointment of the party's president Refaat El Saeed in the Shura (consultative) Council, and the renewal of his position for three sessions in 2001, 2004 and 2007.

All of this reflected on the moment of the January revolution and on its aftermath in many ways: First, the absence of the largest historical organized leftist party from the scene of the struggle in general. Second,

its loss of credibility among large portion of the youth. Third, the inability of El Tagammu' Party to build powerful groups that could impact the events due to the party's withdrawal from its militant role over decades, especially since the beginning of the serious opposition against Mubarak in 2005.

One of the forces of the left, the Revolutionary Socialists, solved this dilemma by adopting the famous approach of "always against the state, and sometimes with the Islamists". This approach paved the way for political coordination and networking with ideologically heterogeneous social forces, and opened up horizons for political cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood to work against the Mubarak regime. However, in the phase that followed the 2011 revolution, another dilemma was the feasibility of building a left-wing movement that was capable of distinguishing itself socially, ideologically and politically from the Islamic current. Therefore, the biggest criticism addressed to them was that they were considered as "subservient to the Islamists".

There are two kinds of "Orientalism". One sees the Egyptian society as ignorant and tied up because of the dominance of religious forces, the second (which expresses a reverse Orientalism per se) sees that the Islamists are the sincere expression of Egyptian society and the only force capable of engendering change and challenging the Western hegemony... This was demonstrated after the revolution in the attempts of rapprochement with the movement of Abdel Moneim Abou El Fotouh, which had left the Muslim Brotherhood to build a moderate Islamist movement with a leftist tint, or the rapprochement with the Brotherhood itself to build clear conditions for an alliance, before Mohammad Morsi came to power. The biggest confusion of the left would rise with the intensification of the struggle against the Brotherhood in 2013, before and after the military coup.

Some main characteristics of the leftist forces organized within parties or small groups are the general absence of an analysis of the situation, the fear of being accused of atheism and the fear of losing the approval of many social sectors because of the clarity of the progressive content.

The absence of a systematic materialistic reading of the Egyptian reality and its recent transformations, away from banalities and generalities, was

one of the central factors leading to the lack of a clear and pronounced leftist contribution in the January revolution, and to a confusion in many political, social and intellectual stances in the various stages of the struggle. This was reflected in the insistence of what was known as “the youth of the revolution” and their various coalitions to reject any leftist directions or to impart any intellectual or ideological dimensions to the event, with the emergence of a “post-ideology” discourse. Thus, the forces of the left missed a clear political discourse in the early stages of the revolution, and lacked a serious reading of the Egyptian reality, whether in understanding the nature of socio-economic relations and their transformations, or understanding the major shifts in the Egyptian state and its role. That is, with the exception of some individual jurisprudence, some old works by Samir Amin and Mahmoud Amin Al-Aalem, some cultural studies on the Egyptian society that were produced in the eighties of the last century, the emergence of some new writings in history such as the contributions of Khaled Fahmy and Sharif Younis, and some studies on social movements.

The revolution commenced without a leftist understanding of the dynamics driving it. Up to this moment, the Egyptian left has not presented a serious sociological reading of the nature of the social formation that has partaken in the revolution and all its differences. This last point was reflected in defining the historic agent with which the left must engage to change the course of events, deep-rooting the revolutionary act, and investing in the political and social mobility that the revolution has provided. Even more importantly, the left has been unable to develop political and social prospects for the conflict. Therefore, slogans such as “The Voice of the Martyr”, or “No to Politics”, or “Down with every traitor! Military, remnants, or Brotherhood members!” were effective ones. Although doubtlessly sincere slogans, they had no real content nor did they carry any militant horizons for the social struggle whose doors were wide open with the revolution.

What comes after “political Islam”? The real problem lies in the way the people and the state are viewed and understood. El Tagammu’ sees the state as an imperative that has three main tasks: modernization, independence/ confronting imperialism, and providing protection from - or the repression of - reactionary components within society, particularly political Islam and fascist movements. But this left cannot perceive the wider public, as it sees the population not based on the imperialist “Middle

Eastern exception”, that is, a perception according to a model that tries to see the public as a creative possibility for political and social action. Moreover, standing behind this state has proven day after day what it really means: standing behind failure and fascism.

The left lacked the ability to understand existing social structures, their language, and their material basis. Hence, it lacked the ability to make any social displacements. It grappled with big headlines, waiting for some metaphysical force to assist it in achieving a historical victory. Before the revolution, and even after it, many were wishfully spreading the promise of a worldwide laborers’ red revolution. And as such, the historical agent became a mysterious thing whose desires and actions must be heeded, and for whom we must immerse ourselves in the obsessive urban sphere. This vague agent was called “the poor of the cities”. In fact, whatever they could not specifically define, they would call “the poor of the cities”!

## **Conclusions**

The left is concentrated in Cairo, with the exception of some presence in different governorates, especially the Revolutionary Socialists’ presence in Alexandria, and, in the 2011 elections, attempts by the “Social Democratic Party” to penetrate the popular bases of the National Party. Until this day, the left has not engaged in social and political struggles, nor has it provided an interpretation of the social and urban structures or of the power relations in new industrial cities, whether it has to do with what was happening inside factories and companies, for instance, or inside the city itself. This means everything from the commercial relations, hooliganism, police’s repressive practices, negotiations, social bargaining between the power and the various sectors, the daily life management, the way informal employment is approached, and the city’s lifestyles and its interaction with the formal and organized labor market. The efforts of the left were limited to areas like El Mahalla, while the industries, along with the workforce in Egypt, were concentrated in the new cities, such as Burg El Arab, EL Dekheila, Asher Men Ramadan (10th of Ramadan), Setta October (6th of October), and Aswan.

Hatem Nassif, the former head of the Independent Syndicate of Workers of the National Stevedoring Company at the Dekheila Port in Alexandria (which went on strike for 18 days in March 2013) said: “I was shocked

at the lack of a leftist presence or support even though I had contacted them". He said that apart from the strike of this company, there were several strikes inside the port, at the time, the authority had not fully regained its ability to suppress them; however, the left was totally absent in a very important and highly sensitive location like the port of El Dekheila.

Indeed, there is rarely any organized effort to understand these cities, while they have witnessed great transformations and complications. For example, El Dekheila of Alexandria, contains a substantial number of factories, workers and companies inside and outside the port, in addition to the presence of tribal relations and organized gangs... The only prominent effort made was the engagement of the Revolutionary Socialists in supporting the residents of one of the districts of the region, El Mafrouza, when they were forcefully displaced in 2006 in favor of the expansions in the port of El Dekheila.

There is an absence of a systematic effort to understand the social workers in industry in Egypt and all that relates to the lives of workers in general. Therefore, there is a deficiency in weaving and formulating a clear, detailed, and effective leftist discourse capable of mobilizing within organized entities that represent the interests of these sectors. The culturalist nature of the left does not come, as some claim, from its exclusively middle-class composition, but is due to its failure in providing a broader interpretation and involvement within society. It is a reciprocal process, whereby engaging enables an understanding and knowledge of the language and relationships of the various social sectors. Away from the anthropological obsession with the oddities of the Egyptian society, it gives a serious understanding of the nature of the power and the state and crystallizes the ability to produce a political discourse and prospects.





## What Has Remained of the Left in Algeria?

Omar Benderra

An economic expert from Algeria, member of “Algeria Watch”

The political arena is frozen in Algeria as the political forces have neither the right to exist as organizations nor as discourses. In the face of a liberal “Mafia” imposed by the dictatorship, the people hold on to the deep-rooted traditions of egalitarianism and justice, far removed from dogmas and ideologies. So what has remained of the “left”, while the inevitable restructuring of the political field is pending, other than what the people have kept deep within: a rejection of injustice and oppression, resisting the impositions of imperialism in Palestine and refusing to align themselves with the West?

The moral and political collapse of the “socialist” camp – which is, in fact, a collection of intransigent regimes, led by the former Soviet Union - largely explains the decline of a vast ideological current based on the ideals of justice and egalitarian demands. In the West, the communist parties are not the only political parties that have retreated, among those who supposedly reject, with varying degrees of sincerity, the market’s tyranny - just like the social-democratic parties whose practices of power often end up being aligned with the market and the liberal system. The same can be concluded for the former “Third World” countries. In all cases, it is more of an internal collapse than an ideological victory of liberal conservatism. This is the case in Algeria today.

### **From “Specific” Socialism to Bureaucratic Liberalism**

The summer crisis which erupted immediately after Algeria’s independence on 5 July 1962, in which the border army led by Boumédiène faced “The Interim Government of the Republic of Algeria” (1) and resistance groups, led to a permanent ban on politics from a society riddled by wounds and traumas caused by a horrible colonial history. Political parties were banned, and only the National Liberation Front (FLN), emptied of its essence and reduced to a purely bureaucratic apparatus, remained responsible for relaying the options of the power. By imposing the single party, the military-police regime monopolized political expression. As soon as sovereignty was restored, the progressive and social orientations of the liberation war (2) were gradually abandoned by an increasingly corrupt police state.

According to the official discourse, the social dimensions of the 1970s development policy were the result of a “specific” formula of socialism that adopted part of the socio-economic postulates of the various currents of “scientific” socialism, while rejecting areligious dialectical materialism. The pace of the economic transformation towards an “open” arbitrary liberalism, catalyzed by the death of President Boumédiène in 1978, was accelerated by the military coup of January 11th, 1992, which put a violent and bloody end to the free elections - an unprecedented event in the history of independent Algeria.

The first round of these elections, which were in the process of establishing a multi-partisan political reality, revealed that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was ahead in the results. It was a party with a vague identity, which

was licensed only two years before the elections, and it presented a fragile combination of different, and sometimes contrasting, sensibilities affiliated with different trends of “political Islam”. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was run by a “Shura” Council (advisory board), and some of its most emblematic figures were Ali Belhadj, a very popular preacher, and Abbas Madani, one of the notable men who had participated in the National Liberation Movement. The other two parties that achieved significant results (yet weak in comparison to the Islamists’ results) in the elections were the historic “National Liberation Front” (FLN) - the former single party headed by pro-reform Abdulhamid Mehri, and the “Socialist Forces Front” (FFS), headed by Hussein Ait Ahmed, a prominent figure of the Algerian Revolution and a fierce opponent to the authoritarian regime installed by the army after the independence in July 1962. Both parties claimed they were socialists, yet it was a historical “specific” socialism, slightly or fundamentally modified to fit the National Liberation Front, and, on the other hand, it was a democratic socialism with a “humane” face (one that Ait Ahmed holds so dearly), according to the Socialist Forces Front.

The 1962 summer crisis that erupted immediately after Algeria’s independence, in which the border army led by Boumédiène faced “The Interim Government of the Republic of Algeria” and the resistance groups, led to a permanent ban on politics from a society riddled by wounds and traumas caused by a horrible colonial history.

### **1989 – 1991: A Democratic Leeway**

Algerian Socialism was largely founded on the nationalization of large sectors of the economy. The bureaucratic mechanisms used to manage foreign trade and the de facto control of political police and military leaders over it - even before the death of Houari Boumédiène in 1978 – proved to be an obstacle to any development. This issue aggravated the country’s dependence on hydrocarbon exports and imports of consumer goods, such as food products. This bureaucratic organization is largely responsible for the debt crisis and the deterioration of the general economic conditions of the country.

Senior executives at the Presidency tried to deal with this development

by formulating a reforms program based on a dual openness: towards a market economy on the one hand - while preserving an advanced public sector in the 1970s - and towards the rule of law, order and public freedoms on the other hand. This openness, which mobilized a large number of professionals and experts from all sectors is, above all, the work of a group of executives – usually dubbed “reformers” - who were the entourage of the Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche. These executives, (influenced by the Minister of Economy Ghazi Haidousi (3) and supported by some leaders of the National Liberation Front, mainly by Abdelhamid Mehri) were convinced that there was a need to exit the authoritarian regime and abandon the inefficient administrative mode of managing the economy based on oil and gas rent. After being appointed as a Prime Minister by President Chadli Bendjedid in September 1989, Mouloud Hamrouche and his government implemented a program of political reforms, for a short period of no more than 18 months (until June 1991). The program was based on the establishment of the rule of law, especially in terms of public and economic freedoms, by ending monopolies and the institutionalization of common market rules.

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Foreign debt, which drained the bulk of the country’s external revenues with its high interests, was the main obstacle during that period. The strategic priority was to preserve national sovereignty by avoiding subordination to the ultraliberal programs of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the creditors who controlled the bulk of an external debt which significantly reduced the room for maneuvering. For the reformists, the main dilemma was the ability to preserve, as much as possible, the social character (free medicine and public education) of the state as a descendent of the war of liberation, and to defend the public sector, while at the same time accelerating its democratic transformation and opening up to the private sector in an attempt to effectively rehabilitate the economy.

Hussein Ait Ahmed described that movement and that period as a “democratic openness by force” (4). It was during this period of unprecedented freedoms – particularly, freedoms of expression, assembly and demonstration – that “independent” newspapers were born and new parties emerged from the shade; the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), in particular. There was also the Vanguard Socialist Party (5), though much less important than the former two. It is considered the heir of the Algerian Communist Party, close to the Soviet Union, and oscillating throughout the long period of its unauthorized activity, between a “critical support” and an outright alignment with the regime. The dramatic events of the 1990s proved that the party was, in fact, widely infiltrated by the political police. Other small Marxist formations had also gone public, attributing themselves to the Fourth Internationalism or to Trotskyism in general.

The work of the “reformist” government quickly provoked opposition from within the system, from those whose power had diminished and whose monopolization of rent management was in question. These individuals in high positions in the military and political police were the protectors and the primary beneficiaries of a system of interest groups, particularly groups actively involved in importing food commodities and making foreign transactions. The January 1992 coup, amidst unprecedented violence, closed the doors to a political openness that began in the wake of the events of October 1988, when the internal crisis of the regime coincided with an escalating public anger.

### **Superficial Modernity and Dictatorship**

In the early 1990s, the Socialist Vanguard Party (PAGS), which consisted mainly of urban francophone middle-class militants, emerged exhausted from clandestine work. The party’s approach of “critical support” to the regime had cost it much of its credibility in the eyes of the cadres and the population, in a context of a deeply rooted tradition of apprehension of communism. In fact, the 1939 rupture with the French Communist Party (PCF), which was considered a neo-colonial party, had greatly influenced the shape of the political discourse of Algerian independence seekers. (6)

Externally, the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Red Army caused popular outrage in the Algerian public opinion, which had also witnessed

with astonished admiration the Islamic revolution's overthrowing of the Shah's regime in Iran that same year. Then came the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, annihilating any chances of intelligibility through the old discourse. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of Algerians who had endured the "police socialism" established by Boumédiène were not willing to lend any credibility to expired theses. In the late 1980s, the rapidly and radically transforming international political contexts revealed the difficulties of the daily life of Algerians, characterized by the lack of various essential needs, constant arbitrariness and shameless display of wealth by the most corrupt of the power elites. Popular outrage was constantly irrigating the terrain of "political Islam" that was consistently growing and strengthened throughout that decade.

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In light of its unrealistic approaches and its devastating internal disagreements, the Socialist Vanguard Party, despite its long history, failed in the 1991 elections, just like the "laboratory" parties (such as the modernist secularist "Rally for Culture and Democracy" (RCD)), founded by internal intelligence agencies, but backed by very generous external support, especially by circles close to the French Socialist Party. This examination has lost none of its relevance: the Algerian society is not yet ready to engage in the pseudo-modernist propaganda promoted by a contrived bourgeoisie.

### **The Military, the Eradicators and the Oligarchs**

The dissolution of the Socialist Vanguard Party in 1993, the main party claiming Marxism in Algeria (7), coincided with the beginning of the army's war against the rebellion. This radically anti-religious "communist" trend (8) soon joined the more extremist minority in its support of the generals: the notorious "eradicators" who supported the idea of a full-

fledged war against the Islamists and their suppression by all means possible (generalized torture, forced disappearances, massacres...). The war “against civilians” (9) found, among these circles, its most committed actors and its most enthusiastic propagandists - especially in Europe.

The suspicious yet extremely bloody war against citizens who “failed to elect well” in 1991 mobilized a number of activists who seemed unbothered with the gradual loss of social gains and the accelerated deepening of inequalities between citizens. In fact, the liberal trends whose “Mafia” character was obvious - especially since the signing of the Stand-By Agreement with the IMF in 1994 - have provoked almost no reactions from “progressive” parties and figures (10), even though the agreement was a major blow to the public sector, which ended up dismantled with a large part of it sold amid total blackout.

That period witnessed an abrupt mutation of a number of ex-Marxist public figures, who became opportunistic businessmen with greedy appetites. The implementation of the Stand-By Agreement was accompanied by a brutal subjugation of the overseers who rejected the liquidation of the public sector and the orders of the political police. For example, during 1994 and 1995, more than 4,000 figures and executives were imprisoned on various pretexts, and some died in prison as a result of torture. The war against civilians and the wide violations of human rights presented an effective cover-up for a brutal reorientation of the economy. This ultraviolent period, culminating in the mass killings carried out by “death squads” linked to the secret military police, ended with the appointment of Abdelaziz Bouteflika as president in 1999.

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The first years of the current century brought much “luck” to the regime. The attacks of 11 September 2001 completely diverted Western policies towards the “clash of civilizations”. The coup generals received a grand prize they had not even expected, as the interest of human rights organizations in Algeria gradually faded, making the regime more accepted. More “good news” were in sight. Oil prices rose exponentially over a

period of 10 years, enabling the country of 40 million inhabitants to collect more than 800 billion dollars in hydrocarbon export revenues during the period between 2003 and 2013. The unprecedented levels of corruption in the military-security apparatus were higher than ever, modifying the power structure in Algeria. A new class of intermediaries associated with influential decision-making groups in the presidency and the head of the army was formed, and took advantage of these circles' unlimited ability to plunder and monopolize national wealth. These businessmen now have a major role in decision-making positions (11). Based on all this, Algeria is today objectively governed by the oligarchy, consistent with the military and political police (12). The decisions made concerning the economic policy are the most prominent proof of this.

### **Popular Resistances Against a “Mafiosi” Liberalism**

In the face of these socio-political developments that occurred very publicly but without attracting any valuable political reactions, can we confirm that the movements carrying ideas of justice and progress no longer exist in Algeria? Is it true that every expression which does not align itself with the directions at work since 1994 is almost impossible, and that the entire society is living under a repressive regime that has abandoned its citizens? The spread of a Cholera epidemic in central Algeria in late August 2018 has exposed the extent of the neglect of an impotent regime whose only policy is to silence opponents' voices. A debate is therefore forbidden, and any kind of expression has been confined to the clientele margins of a regime that had created a political vacuum equal in its magnitude to its moral collapse and its economic and social bankruptcy.

The political arena has become suspended in time. Political forces that represent society have no right to exist as structures, organizations or even as discourses. The vocal advocates of eradicating Islamists simply vanished from the media scene, as the naivety of their theses became increasingly evident with the regime's regression. The relationship between the francophone petty bourgeoisie that produced most of the leftist activists, and the rest of the society was gradually severed. The sporadic demonstrations that organizations from this medium continually tried to organize no longer mobilize the masses. However, it is clear that the ideas of progress and justice have not left the social field, even if those who have long stood for these ideas have lost all ability to influence and persuade.

As with the illegal mass immigration movement towards Europe, young people's anti-regime slogans in the football stadiums speak volumes about the despair of the new "wretched of the earth" under the rule of the Algerian dictatorship. While Algerian young men and women risk their lives as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean, an uncultivated and lawless comprador bourgeoisie is in formation in symbiosis with the power centers. The recent shocking case of cocaine trafficking (13) involving police, army commanders and personnel is an example of this situation.

Anger culminates within wide social classes as the people are left to face their fates. The terrible deepening of the disparities between classes and the suffocation of political expression nurtures the people's resentment. The mediocre and futile military bourgeoisie, with its civil facades, offered nothing but violence, in addition to subsidizing goods to numb popular outrage. But this policy is coming to an end, since the decrease in rent revenues could no longer allow for a lenient redistribution of wealth for the clientele, as in the past decade.

In the face of a liberal "Mafia" imposed by the dictatorship, the people hold on to the deep-rooted traditions of egalitarianism and justice, far removed from dogmas and ideologies. So what has remained of the "left", while the inevitable restructuring of the political field is pending, other than what the people have kept deep within: a rejection of injustice and oppression, resisting the impositions of imperialism in Palestine and refusing to align themselves with the West?

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1) *The Interim Government of the Republic of Algeria.*

<http://www.montraykreyol.org/article/contribution-for-the-fifth-anniversary-of-gpra-creation>

2) *As expressed in the fundamental texts of the Algerian Revolution, the Appeal of November 1, 1954 and the Soummam Conference (August 20, 1956).*

3) *Cf. Ghazi HIDOUCI, Algeria, The Unfinished Liberation, La Découverte, Paris, 1995, 302 pages.*

- 4) For more about the political activity of Hussein Ait Ahmed after the coup of January 1992, read the contribution of Samir Ghazlawi  
<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/samir-ghezlaoui/blog/221013/hocine-ait-ahmed-fin-du-coup-detat-aux-elections-truquees>
- 5) The Socialist Revolutionary Party - founded by Mohamed Boudiaf - almost completely ceased in the late 1980s.
- 6) See Jean-Pierre Vernan, "The French Communist Party and the Algerian Question", an article published in French in the magazine *Voies nouvelles*, 1959.  
[www.vacarme.org/article143.html](http://www.vacarme.org/article143.html)
- 7) See the article of Abdul Aziz Saudi.  
[www.algerieinfos-saoudi.com/article-document-comment-on-a-liquide-le-pags-98147881.html](http://www.algerieinfos-saoudi.com/article-document-comment-on-a-liquide-le-pags-98147881.html)
- 8) A position that represents a large part of the Vanguard Socialist Party activists.
- 9) See article by Salima Mallah and François Jazz, "Dirty War in Algeria: The Responsible and The Guilty", published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* on May 16, 2005.
- 10) With some exceptions that are worth mentioning, such as Sadek Hagra, the former Secretary General of the Vanguard Socialist Party.
- 11) See Omar Ben Derra's article, "Algeria of the Oligarchs: The Coalition of the Bayonets and the Money Treasuries", published in French on *Algeria-Watch* in December 2014.  
[www.algeria-watch.de/fr/article/analyse/algerie\\_des\\_oligarques.htm](http://www.algeria-watch.de/fr/article/analyse/algerie_des_oligarques.htm)
- 12) The strength of the decision-making power of this new military-comprador bourgeoisie, for example, can be illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the dismissal of a prime minister during the summer of 2017.
- 13) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/en-alg-rie-l-t-des-intrigues-commenc-1157796851>



**Tunisia**



## The Student Left in the Midst of the Revolutionary Movement in Tunisia

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The involvement of left-wing students, individually and in organizations, in all the forms of the political struggle, even in periods of severe oppression, is a starkly given fact in the history of Tunisia. However, what is reaped does not match what has been sown, so why is that? This is a reading of the student movement, on the subjective and public levels, that attempts to find elements of failure and their causes, and to seek solutions.

Tunisia has known the existence of the “student left” since the emergence of the non-religious university, in the early 1940s. The path of this left has been through many detours, zigzags, and unexpected bombastic events. How can we monitor some aspects of the approach of this student left regarding the revolutionary movement that the country has known starting from the winter of 2010 and the new political reality after it? The features of this group are difficult to define accurately, as they are mainly youth organizations linked or not linked to political parties, as well as large numbers of militants not affiliated with any party or youth organization; a part of those may have been previously active in these organizations. This group generally belongs to the “leftist family” with its various branches, and to the “Arabist family” in its two main branched: Nasirism and Ba’athism. There is the “General Tunisian Union of Students”, a historical student union, which is an organized condensation of the student left. These designations may lack accuracy and are certainly a bit arbitrary for the sake of clarity and summarization.

In what ways and forms has the student left influenced the Tunisian political reality during the revolutionary movement? What are the political and social mechanisms that enabled it to do so, and what are the subjective and objective constraints that limited the student left’s ability to carry out its task? What prospects exist for the Tunisian student left in the context of the Tunisian political and social reality after 2011?

### **A Mobilizing Unit During the Revolutionary Movement**

This role is the product of a long history of the Tunisian student movement, contributing to building the structures of the “General Tunisian Union of Students”, formulating its organizational and political identity, and defining its relations with its various components and to outsider components as well. The conditions of defining its capabilities were gradually formed over the major stages that the university went through. Remarkably, an examination of the stages that the “General Tunisian Union of Students” has gone through since its foundation provides a unique perspective on the history of the major political conflicts in the country, whether during its founding phase in the midst of the struggle for independence, or during the emergence of the radical left (1) as a child of the despotism of the ruling party, at a time when the conflicts inside the organization and around it presented a reflection of the reality of the country. The situation

continued in this way throughout the years of Bourguiba, where the university – in which the left was an effective character during the 1970s - was the starting point for social protests that swept the country during the second half of that decade. The brutal repression of these protests did not succeed to eradicate them. Since the eighties, the university turned into a conflict arena between the left and the Islamists, who had succeeded in dominating the political activity within it. That, however, did not negate the presence and influence of the left in the university sphere.

After the coup d'état of November 7, 1987, Tunisia, led by General Ben Ali, went through a period of relative political détente for three years, during which political activity had recovered and the student struggle was searing again within the university walls. This period represented an open space for public and popular activity for the left and the Islamists, after the regime officially recognized their organizations in 1988: the “General Union of Tunisian Students”, the historical union that was banned from public activity for nearly 17 years, and which had become completely dominated by the left, and the “Tunisian General Union for Students”, which was founded by students of The Islamic Way in 1985 as a trade union organization.

During this period, the authority and the Islamists started to sense that the “Ennahda Movement” (formerly called “The Islamic Way”) was a political force capable of playing a major role and perhaps of getting to power if it had the opportunity. This feeling was further enhanced by the results of the 1989 legislative elections. Afterwards, since the beginning of 1991, the two parties have engaged in an open confrontation which was triggered by the regime to eradicate the Islamists and eliminate their threat to the authority, in which the state wanted no partners. The Islamists, on the other hand, wanted to defend themselves against this attack, but they were also part of the confrontation because they had a deep conviction that they were strong enough to topple Ben Ali's regime. This confrontation raged in all social spaces, and the university was its most aggressive field.

The confrontation was violently suppressed and ended with the organizational elimination of the Islamists. Their structures were dismantled, thousands were imprisoned, and the rest fled from Tunisia to settle in diaspora. In addition, on July 8, 1991, it was decided that the

Tunisian General Union of Students be dissolved. The General Union of Tunisian Students, too, was not safe in the face of the repression, and the possibility of its dissolution became a serious proposition. It had survived two decades under a tight security and administrative blockade, which turned it into a semi-banned organization despite its apparently legal status. Its members from various leftist and nationalist organizations have also been subjected to multiple forms of repression. They were arrested, physically and morally harassed, subjected to torture and imprisonment, administratively restricted, expelled from the university, deprived of work, and subjected to other forms of repression...

Hence, the General Union of Tunisian Students during these two decades has been through a major organizational breakdown. For instance, this was manifested in its abstinence from holding a national conference for ten years, in the period between the 24th conference held in the summer of 2003 and the 25th conference held in 2013. Perhaps these conferences themselves were one of the reasons leading to this disruption, as the leftist organizations were fighting each other over control of the organization and ensuring a legal position that could provide them with a minimum level of protection against repression, in addition to the political and organizational privileges it provides (no matter how limited those are). Constant conflicts inside the organization over its leadership and operating structures have existed ever since it had regained its legal status in 1988. The years of political desertification and open repression have only become more aggravated as the fight over controlling its structures intensified to the point that the leadership split into two parts after the 21st Conference of 1995. Each side claimed to be the legitimate one (in the legal and / or militant sense). In all subsequent conferences, this division was present, until the whole issue reached an unprecedented level of rivalry in the year 2004 when there was a structural duplication for the first time since the organization regained a legal status. Some student political groups emerged to challenge the legitimacy of the decisions of the 24th Conference by holding the Corrective Conference. As a result, local offices affiliated with the two conferences appeared within university factions, which greatly affected the union.

Despite this, it was not possible to completely eradicate the university space as one of the most important spaces for social critique in the country. The persistence of the protest movements within the university

institutions proved this, even when they had to be very limited and modest during the decade of severe repression before their relatively vigorous comeback.

The left was an effective character during the 1970s – the starting point for social protests that swept the country. The brutal repression of these protests did not succeed in eradicating them. Since the eighties, the university turned into a conflict arena between the left and the Islamists, who had succeeded in dominating the political activity within it.

During this period, the university was the only space in Tunisia in which a person could openly address crowds of citizens with a speech criticizing the government in general, the ruling party, or one of the apparatuses of the executive branch of the authority, especially the Ministry of Higher Education. The general strike of March 10, 2005 was one of the significant milestones in the recent history of the Tunisian University. More than 200 thousand students went on strike to condemn the brutal suppression of the preceding student protests which lasted for more than ten days in a number of cities, opposing the invitation of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the World Summit on the Information Society organized by Tunisia later in November of that year. The student left was leading the political movements under the banner of the General Union of Tunisian Students. However, the dominant features of this period's protest movements are the geographical limitations and deficiency in the number of protests.

The ability of the student left to ensure a minimum presence throughout this period, starting from the outbreak of the first revolutionary waves in December 2010, was extremely important. The General Union of Tunisian Students was a space in which thousands of young people were trained in various forms of protest movements, where they gained political knowledge and field skills in incitement, mobilizing, facing the police forces, and protecting protest movements for the longest time possible and, especially, in accumulating and linking together field movements. The most important contribution of these militant experiences is their weaving of complex networks of spontaneous (informal) nuclear units (2) that bring together activists who had participated in some on-the-field experiments. They are interlinked core units that are sometimes connected by personal relationships or through forms of regional, professional, or political solidarity.

These nuclear units that were barely visible before December 17, 2010, even by their own constituent members, turned into an active network for exchanging information, organizing movements, propaganda and incitement. Something similar to the concept of “mobilization cells” by Verta Taylor (3) in her argument about the hibernation of American feminist struggles during the recessions and oppressions in America during the 1980s. This does not mean that the student left has assumed a leadership role in the protest movements, as it is clear that the revolutionary movement in Tunisia between December 17, 2010 and January 14, 2011 was happening without a centralized leadership. Rather, this idea refutes the claim of “spontaneity” about the revolutionary movement in Tunisia. The absence of a central leadership does not mean the absence of multiple forms of political awareness within the various protesting groups. The “mobilization cells” of the student left were some of the several groups fueling the protest. Those consisted of activists from the Student Union who had completed or had not yet completed their university studies, and others who had left the university and the Union years ago without breaking their ties with them due to unemployment and their involvement in the various dynamics established to defend the unemployed university graduates. Those are dynamics that have revolved, until the year 2011, in the orbit of the General Union of Tunisian Students. These militants have kept their ties through small groups that were close on a personal level. As for the networking among these groups, it was done by individuals of multiple positionings (militant, regional, sectorial, etc.).

**The General Union of Tunisian Students has seen consistent conflicts over its leadership ever since it restored its legitimacy in 1988. The years of political desertification and open repression thereafter have only become more aggravated as the fight over controlling its structures intensified to the point that the leadership split after the 21st Conference of 1995. Each side claimed to be the legitimate one.**

One of the most prominent roles played by this left-wing network is successfully linking between the youth of the popular urban neighborhoods on the one hand, and the traditional spaces of politicization on the other hand; such as the headquarter spaces of the Tunisian General Labor Union or the newer virtual spaces of the social networks. The network succeeded in playing this role by virtue of its initiative, with the help of

the leftist union activists, to organize the first protest movements in most of the country's cities, despite their limited mobilization during the first three weeks, providing a suitable ground for the propagation of protest movements in the popular neighborhoods.

### **Present, Despite the Ongoing Inner Crises of the Left**

After the escape of Ben Ali and the disintegration of a substantial part of the regime's executive leadership, Tunisia witnessed a great political vacuum which was soon filled by the hundreds of new political and civil organizations. This process had its serious implications for the general political framework in the country, as a large number of hegemonic social institutions staggered in their positions. This period was open to many possibilities, and all the actors played their cards to affect change in the public scene and the political and social realities. This prompted a number of actors to reevaluate and drove political groups into taking some unexpected decisions that would have not been taken in any other context. It also pushed some previously marginal actors into the political scene, providing them, through a "structural obscurity", an entry portal into becoming influential players in the public sphere.

The political authority at the time maintained part of the preceding executive apparatus, as an extension of its self-proclaimed "legitimacy". This apparatus appointed itself the role of "preserving the state's sustainability and unity", consecrated by Mohamed Ghannoushi's continued presence in his post as Prime Minister – being as he is, Ben Ali's first representative in government- and with Fouad Mebazaa, the head of Ben Ali's Parliament since 1997, becoming the interim President of the country on the night that Ben Ali fled (between January and December of 2011). This was despite the limited authority of this apparatus on the ground during the first few weeks after the revolution. The executive branch's unity itself has been questioned, and its legitimacy doubted by multiple powers. However, what had enabled this legitimacy - despite its frailty - to continue is the fragmentation and confusion that characterized the forces that contributed to the overthrowing of Ben Ali, the limited field experience they had accumulated, their lack of political maturity, and the need for organizational ties that could ward off the violent reactions of the various forces who strongly denounce the rooting of the revolutionary movement.

Although multiple parties took part in overthrowing Ben Ali, the hastiness of the process rendered what had been accumulated, both on the ground and politically, insufficient to establish the “post-Ben Ali” stage. The common denominator between these forces, or the center of the “revolutionary legitimacy”, was not clear and powerful enough to create a dynamic that brings together those various groups. Although important attempts have emerged to organize the masses in many neighborhoods and cities throughout the country since the night of January 14, 2011, the resulting groups could not do more than provide local security groups for neighborhoods. Rarely did these groups succeed in creating spaces for mass politicization within local spheres that could discuss local and national political issues (save for some very few exceptions, such as the experience of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution in Djemna), which kept these groups generally marginal.

After that, the most mature and organized political groups, the youth and civil groups that formed in the cities which had known the fiercest confrontations with the police forces for weeks and where there was the largest number of martyrs (Menzel Bouziane, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Thala...), decided on escalation to recover the political initiative and mobilize again the popular movement, which had relatively diminished for nearly a week. This escalation manifested in the organization of the first Kasbah sit-in, starting from January 23, which called for the dismantling of what remained of the executive branch’s leadership that was still under the control of the former regime’s men. More than two thousand protestors gathered in the sit-in which lasted four days and ended with the police suppressing the gathering and dispersing the people by force. Despite the relative failure of the sit-in, its repression and the participants’ insistence on their demands contributed to the mobilization of other groups that had not participate in the sit-in initially, refocusing the protest movement in the face of a common enemy. Furthermore, a number of civil and political forces that were confused at the time between two options: to head directly into the legislative and presidential elections organized by the existing executive body, or to overthrow the leadership of this body and establish a new political framework, were pushed – in the aftermath of the sit-in - to resolve their position for the latter option.

Naturally, many political organizations were not isolated from the first sit-in of the Kasbah, but some - especially the smaller, local, and more militant

left-wing groups - were totally immersed in organizing it, accompanied by a majority of the protestors that were not affiliated with any organization. However, the joining of these groups happened individually and passed through previous local militant networks, which had been greatly reinforced by new members that had joined since the beginning of the revolutionary movement. Hence, what encouraged the new members to join these groups, at least during the period between 17 December 2010 and the middle of February 2011, was the local equilibriums, personal relations between the participants and their trust in each other, based on field solidarity and, to a lesser extent, based on the shared slogans and the more general political perceptions that often lacked compatibility.

The local leaders of the Labor Union supported the sit-in, especially those located in the areas where the revolutionary movement was highly-mobilized and vigorous. They provided bus transportation for the protesters and other logistical needs, in addition to their contribution to pushing the bureaucratic leadership of the Tunisian General Labor Union (the largest mobilization force in the country's history) to play a role in breaking the official and media blockade of the sit-in, by providing it with a political cover. The trade union bureaucracy did this to protect itself from a confrontation with its most influential and dynamic bases, while relatively maintaining its role in the process to curb the more radical tendencies within the revolutionary movement whenever needed.

**The general strike of March 10, 2005 was one of the significant milestones in the recent history of the Tunisian University. More than 200 thousand students went on strike to condemn the brutal suppression of the preceding student protests which lasted for more than ten days in a number of cities, opposing the invitation of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the World Summit on the Information Society organized by Tunisia later in November of that year.**

During this period, the student left organizations found themselves in a situation which they had partly created. It is imperative, before delving into the choices of the student left, to emphasize its diversity, which sometimes borders on being contradictory. The groups forming this left were not only conflicting over the leadership positions in the student organizations before the 2011 moment, but were also conflicting over a large number

of major political and social issues, such as the prospects of a socialist revolution, the stance on the existing economic model and the ways of changing it, the issues of individual liberties and the independence of civil organizations. These disputes multiplied at the time. These general statements only aim to help deduce the major political dynamics that have fractured this student left.

In this context, two basic dynamics were at play. The first and dominant one was represented by the organizations that were at the forefront of the forces calling for a break with the previous regime (the communist Tunisian Workers' Party, the Democratic Patriots...), and those were brought together by the second stage of the revolutionary movement, known as the Kasbah I and Kasbah II sit-ins in the Government Square in the capital. The members of these organizations participated, along with the unorganized leftist members, in setting the ground for the two sit-ins. They played important roles and undertook various tasks in which they used their previous militant experiences and acquired field skills, such as logistical preparation, incitement and rhetoric, and techniques of confrontation with the police forces in the public spaces. In addition to the participation of a significant part of the General Union of Tunisian Students in the Kasbah sit-in, it also supported the sit-in politically as a student union, despite all the fragmentation it was suffering.

As for the remainder minority of the student left (of the Socialist Leftist Party, Movement for Renewal (Ettajdid Movement), The Progressive Democratic Party...), its options hung between going to the elections and halting the revolutionary movement. This political confusion made it all the more vulnerable on the ground, and as a result, its ability to impact the course of the events shrunk. Those forces have occupied marginal positions within the political arena since 2011.

Since February 2011, there has been a consistent mobilization of the various dynamics opposing Mohamed Ghannoushi's government for different purposes and in different forms. The popular coordination committees that flourished after the first Kasbah sit-in tried to encourage another sit-in in order to overthrow the government as the embodiment of the continuation of what was called the "former regime". These coordination units, which are different in their organizational forms and methods, were becoming increasingly organized and their demands increasingly radical

as their field involvement grew in preparation for organizing a sit-in that would outstrip the previous one in the number of participants and in its impact.

During this period, the civil, political, and unionist organizations were working on restructuring themselves, after having been in a state of “clinical death” in the final years of the rule of Ben Ali. The left-wing and national parties found themselves in the same situation. Perhaps Ennahda Movement experienced the situation in a more severe way, which was manifested in its political and field absence from the events until that point. It was an appropriate opportunity for these organizations to reassemble and restructure (albeit in an often hasty and undemocratic manner), to address the challenges facing the country and to benefit as much as possible from the great political vacuum left by the self-dissolution of the “Democratic Constitutional Rally” (4). This period represented an opportunity for these parties and civil organizations (5) to return to the political forefront. The establishment of the “National Council for the Protection of the Revolution” stood for an official declaration that the institutional legal organizations had returned to the foreground, and indicated a shift from the role of supporting the first Kasbah sit-in to making decisions and managing the second Kasbah sit-in.

Despite all the differences that divided these organizations, they were able to accomplish a very important main task through their unity in politically leading the second sit-in of the Kasbah, raising the bar of the political demands, which shifted from demanding the government’s resignation to demanding the suspension of the constitution and the election of a new National Constituent Assembly. However, the people’s demands were confined to this limit, and any possibility for the movement to bypass the legal institutional ceiling was overruled. It can be said that, at this level, what had been done was more advanced than what the protesters demanded in the first sit-in, however, it was far less radical than the original direction of the protests in the midst of the struggle and the field conflict waged by the second sit-in committees in Kasbah from 20 February, and until the sit-in was resolved on 3 March, 2011.

The National Council for the Protection of the Revolution wanted to impose itself as a partner in power and a political representative of the mobile revolutionary forces during that period all over the country. Its

approach, hence, recognized the partnership with the transitional political leadership, as a source of an inherent legitimacy that it did not possess itself. Secondly, it also represented a reproduction of the hierarchical relationship between the political elites and “the masses”, in which the former plays the roles of leadership, planning and negotiation, while the latter has the “honor” of playing the role of fueling the battle. This division was questioned at the time by the popular groups that formed in all cities and which pushed forward the first and second Kasbah sit-ins.

During that period, these groups were in the process of formulating new mechanisms that were growing in parallel to the existing partisan system (but without confronting it), among them there were voices questioning the hierarchical partisan organizational form and defending the democratic field leadership. The assertion of the Revolutionary Protection Council that the election of a new National Constituent Assembly was the primary way out of the second Kasbah sit-in was an extraction of all these citizenship networks from the sphere of direct action to the positions of either being supporters to one of the parties or rejecting the elections in its entirety. These are secondary roles in all cases, very different from the ideas of decentralized patterns of government and popular democracy that were brewing among the most radical groups of protesters.

**These nuclear units that were barely visible before 2010, connected by personal relationships and regional, political or professional ties, turned into active networks for exchanging information, organizing movements, disseminating propaganda and incitement.**

The field leaders of the second Kasbah sit-in did not succeed in resisting this hegemony despite the serious organization of the protesters, who were organized in the form of representatives of the different bodies participating in the sit-in and of what was termed as the “youth of the revolution”, the martyrs’ families, and the wounded of the Tunisian revolution. However, the institutional trend of the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution tried to politically devour the sit-in.

Most of the student left forces fully supported the second sit-in of the Kasbah, with their members actively contributing to it, but at the same time these same members were the field arm to defending the option

of institutionalizing the political ceiling of the sit-in, standing behind the leaders of political parties. The youth of the left-wing organizations played an important field role in defending the sit-in and ensuring its continuity, but they were politically closer to the discipline imposed by the agendas of their parties than to the horizontal fieldwork, as was the case in the first sit-in.

### **The Return of the Conflict Between the Two Unions and the Bardo Sit-in**

This period saw the relative departure of left-wing students from university commitment due to the intensity of political activity outside the college campus. The facility of establishing associations, parties, and engaging in field activity resulted in removing activists from the unionist and political work within the General Union of Tunisian Students. The political organizations that were previously fighting over leading the student organization did not give much importance to its restructuring or to holding its national conference. The Union stayed without any real leadership for almost two years past the revolutionary movement, long after all the members of its executive office and its central structures had left the university.

The leftist and nationalist organizations that benefited from the revolutionary movement and whose ranks were filled with militants were no longer in the leadership, while the organizations that previously dominated most leadership positions in the organization had lost a large portion of their proliferation among students. It was a situation that further complicated the possibility of holding the National Congress of the Union and resulted in prolonging the state of organizational inertia.

However, two facts arose during this period that contributed to a gradual restoration of the role of the union among the youth of the student left. The first is the return to action of the Tunisian General Union for Students and the historical organization of Islamic students, in the university with the beginning of the 2011/2012 academic year, after having obtained a legal permit in June 2011. Fear grew within the left of losing the university which they considered as their vital space, after they had lost their hopes of playing an important national political role in the October 2011 elections. The overwhelming victory of Ennahda Movement in the elections for the National Constituent Assembly paved the way for its control over a

significant part of the executive and judiciary branches, in addition to its dominance of the legislative authority. The return of Ennahda Movement to the university represented a moral and symbolic revenge in the eyes of the leftist youth that had suffered a double political marginalization since the end of the second Kasbah sit-in, as it ended up occupying an ineffective position on the national political scene. It also found itself in the back seats inside its mother organizations after the hierarchal party mechanisms were reinstated. Hence, the left-wing youth organizations found themselves – at least in their own imagination - defending the “very last of the sites” that Ennahdha had not yet gained control over. The celebration of the historic victory of the lists supported by the General Union of Tunisian Students in the college council elections in March 2013 is a clear proof of this. The event represented an opportunity for all the anti-Ennahda forces to celebrate, including those that had always been very hostile towards the Students’ Union.

The shrinking space for open political activity outside the walls of the university also contributed to the return of the General Union of Tunisian Students to the forefront of the leftist forces’ interests. The academic year 2012/2013 witnessed endless discussions, negotiations, and conflicts between the components of the student left, in all its various ideological and political colorations, in preparation for the organization’s national conference. The conference aimed at renewing its organization’s structures and revitalizing its roles, which the different forces and components defined differently, but they agreed, however, that holding the conference was vital. The leftist and nationalist student components did not succeed in holding a unified conference. Once again, they held two divided conferences, in May 2013.

The major struggles that fractured the student left during that year contributed to the marginalization of the position of the union struggle within the priority scheme of the youth political organizations. On the other hand, the Tunisian General Union of Students played a clearer unionizing role, despite its known proximity to the ruling Ennahda Movement.

The Ennahda movement was forced to form alliances with the remnants of the old regime, or what was termed the “deep administration”, which had preserved the legacy of the authoritarian regime in its working mechanisms and internal organization for 55 years and was able,

despite the changing leaders and successive administrative divisions, to reproduce itself with astonishing perseverance. These alliances had two major repercussions at the political level. The first is that they restored the legitimacy of “preserving the state’s prestige” ideology, with the state being a common denominator, agreed upon by both political opponents, and even consolidated by both, with each seeking to bring it to their side. The second is that it helped the “deep administration” out of its political confusion by providing it with field leaders who negotiate on its behalf. In the same period, in April 2012, the “Nidaa Tounes” party was founded as a political expression uniting the forces of the old regime, even though it did not purely reflect the aspirations of those forces... Beji Caid Essebsi, the former Minister of Bourguiba, and the head of the transitional government that arranged the elections for the National Constituent Assembly (agreed upon after the second Kasbah sit-in was broken) was the focal point of this hazy party. He managed to form an alliance around this party of groups that represented the remnants of the “Constitutional Democratic Rally” party, former leftist, businessmen, jurists and senior management figures.

**Despite all the differences that divided these organizations, they were able to accomplish a very important main task through their unity in politically leading the second sit-in of the Kasbah, raising the bar of the political demands, which shifted from demanding the government’s resignation to demanding the suspension of the constitution and the election of a new National Constituent Assembly. However, the people’s demands were confined to this limit, and any possibility of the movement to bypass the legal institutional ceiling was overruled.**

This coincided with the exceptionally sensitive political situation following the assassination of two political leaders (Chokri Belaid and Muhamed Brahmi) of the Popular Front, the main leftist force in Tunisia. That period was characterized by an extreme political tension that can be summarized in the unprecedented bilateral polarization, exacerbated by the developments in Egypt. The Ennahda movement and its allies inside and outside the government represented the first pole of this polarization, while the National Salvation Front represented the second pole. Though the long list of founding parties and organizations of the front might make it seem that this front was heavily diversified, however, it cannot obscure

the hegemony of “Nidaa Tounes” and the representatives of the old regime init, after they had gradually reconstituted themselves as the main political force in the country.

The two conflicting poles, hence, defined the axes of the struggle over the question of identity, which they both knew how to handle. Consequently, most of the left forces became involved in the conflict based on this chosen axis. On the other hand, the left did not succeed in becoming a pole which is independent of the two aforementioned ones, despite the intensifying social crisis in the country and the ongoing social demands that had mobilized broad groups of protestors in the uprising of 2010, not to mention the fact that its two martyrs, Belaid and Brahmi, gave the left a “legitimacy paid by blood”.

The field battle began on 25 July, 2013, on the day Mohamed Brahmi was assassinated. Its main arena was the area around the Constituent Assembly in the capital’s suburb, Bardo. The various leftist forces, especially the youth factions (students mainly), played a vital part on the first couple of days of the sit-in. On the 26th and 27th of July, the members of the leftist organizations and some independent youth made several attempts to concentrate the sit-in in Bardo square, but they were suppressed and attacked by the police forces. Eventually, the protestors succeeded in imposing their presence and stationing their sit-in starting from the third day, after they were joined by the opposition lawmakers who had frozen their memberships or threatened to resign from the parliament (and most of those were leftists). During these early days, a significant part of the members of the General Union of Tunisian Students participated in the sit-in, in addition to most leftist student organizations. The Bardo sit-in, which will play a major role in rearranging the political papers in Tunisia, would not have been possible without this participation. The leftist youth present at the sit-in – including the youth factions of the left-wing parties- tried to push towards a more radical political horizon, by seeking to establish revolutionary units for regional sit-ins that could polarize citizens around them and gain control over the local authorities.

However, this participation, as those before, did not meet the necessary conditions for success. The general subordinate position of the left to “Nidaa Tounes” kept it in a marginalized position both politically and media-wise, and stripped its youth initiatives of any revolutionary credibility.

They appeared as mere field maneuvers to improve the conditions for negotiation whose strings were in the hands of “Nidaa Tounes”. The streaming of political money from entities close to “Nidaa Tounes” to mobilize its supporters in the sit-in was the death sentence of the student left’s presence in the sit-in, as most of its members gradually withdrew from Bardo in disappointment.

The Bardo sit-in succeeded in achieving the goals formally-announced by the Salvation Front, bringing an end to the foundational phase of Ennahda Movement, voting for a constitution guaranteeing the minimum public and personal rights and freedoms, setting a date for the upcoming legislative and presidential elections and appointing a technocrat government... However, despite this, the left is the one who emerged from Bardo with the greatest losses, after handing over its years of struggles and sacrifices to “Nidaa Tounes” to exploit, although the latter was in a more secondary political position compared to the left in 2012. In the political scene, the left had turned into a mere complement to the liberal right against the conservative right, rather than becoming an independent standalone political pole.

The ramifications of the Bardo sit-in were deep within the student left, too. The disappointments led to an escalation of conflicts, disagreements and frustrations. Organizational conflicts over the legal structures of General Union of Tunisian Students deepened, and the disagreement over the dual (or even the plural) organizational bodies within the structures of the organization took violent forms in several faculties among militants belonging to the different leftist factions. This situation has placed the union and the student left in general in a futile situation in which its energy was exhausted in sabotage actions instead of invested in the struggle for democracy. This reality increased the isolation of the student left and its impact receded, making it unready to fight the major battles much needed by the student masses. The student left neither filled this void in the university, nor did it withdraw from the scene to open a gateway for the student movement to produce other expressions that could be closer to its reality and more capable of addressing the students’ needs.

The student left missed the most important national, sectoral and local battles because of these absurd conflicts, but also because of the rigidity of the mechanisms and common organizational principles that impeded

the radicalizing of the democratic struggle within the General Union of Tunisian Students.

### **Political Marginalization Continues after 2014**

Perhaps the biggest obstacle in the face of understanding how the General Union of Tunisian Students should operate is the issue of the relationship between the student union and the political parties (the leftist parties and, implicitly, the national ones). To address this issue, one must first go back to the need to define the role of the union in the university and outside of it; a task that has occupied generations of militants and was the subject of hundreds of theoretical-political publications formulated by the various political organizations of the student union.

### **In Summary**

Perhaps the most important conclusion derived from studying the spectrum of political sides and their practical approaches in the union for decades is their conviction that the union is first and foremost an incubator for political organizations, rather than for the students as individuals. It is an organization that includes within it other clandestine and overt organizations. It polarizes the students for unionist action and, afterwards, each of these organizations seeks to re-polarize them to its own ranks.

Among the syndromes created by this situation is that the legacy of the student struggle carried a unique meaning for its militants and for the students who sought to engage in it. Not any student who wishes to participate can do so, because only the student who is delegated by one of the political organizations in the university institution can belong to it. And since political organizations have often sought to exaggerate their volume in the context of their struggles by introducing individuals who did not necessarily have an organizational position or even a political affiliation to them, they have been compelled, in order to perpetuate their control, to create a second level of discrimination between members, by creating what they called “the militants”, and those who belong to the political organization. The person who wishes to become a member without having to belong to one of these organizations is required to make great efforts to prove themselves as a “militant” in the union. Some have even

come to the extent of creating coordination units for the “independent” (non-affiliated) members to defend their membership in the union without having to belong to one of the organizations. But, because of their limited influence, they ended up as subordinates to one or another of the university parties. The situation gets far more complicated in the field (which is often the case) when organizational differences or difficulties emerge, disrupting the membership distribution within the union, turning the process of joining the union into a process of endorsement by political organizations. This complicates the independent members’ engagement with the Union.

The second syndrome related to this legacy is that democracy inside the union, in its most perfect manifestation, means ensuring the participation of the different political groups in the decision making process. This means that, in this context, the exclusion of the independent ones from being militants is not a sign of the absence of democracy in the union. More than this, when conflicts and repression intensified, the union sometimes came to the point of sufficing with the agreement of the organizations’ leaderships on the practical steps to be taken, as a way of blessing their decisions with a “consensual democracy”, in the absence of any collective decision-making mechanisms which are open to the militants, let alone the rest of the members. Ironically, these limited agreements made (among the leaders) were never taken seriously on the ground, during most of the historical stages that the union went through. The failure to give legitimacy to political agreements at the level of the grassroots makes their denunciation and manipulation by the most politically and logistically powerful organizations an easy task.

**Leftists (with caution in using this generalization) are advised first to stop “alienating people”. They are also called upon to raise awareness of their social position individually and collectively. This may seem surprising at first impression, but in reality it is one of the basic criteria that may explain the distance between this left and its assumed popular social incubator.**

Denying the role that the repression and the lack of political freedoms played in formulating these organizational mechanisms would be unjust for the union and for these political organizations. However, the denial of

the continuation of these forms even in the periods of political détente (the beginning of the eighties, the late eighties, and after January 14, 2011...) confirms that factors other than habituation contribute to perpetuating these practices.

These organizations also agree on a functional understanding of the union's role. It is the framework that should bring together "the student movement as an arm of the popular movement in its struggle for a revolutionary alternative to the existing regime". Although there are different understandings of how to unionize and what the alternative should be, the organizations share that view that the General Union of Tunisian Students is their incubator. According to those interpretations, the union is a public space in which the "student masses" can unionize, especially since they are reluctant to get involved in a direct manner in costly political action, in light of the repression they had experienced under the previous authoritarian regime. Students are brought to this space based on their desire to defend their direct material interests. Afterwards, they become politicized through a careful framing process by the political parties inside the union. This understanding has contributed to the conviction that the union's activity is inferior, as it is merely an excuse to lure the students into "the real mission", which is political change. During the rule of authoritarian regimes before 2011, this reading overburdened the union with conflicts that transcended its role; ones which the political parties were unable to settle outside of it. This led the union into a state of permanent contradiction between its rhetoric, which mainly promotes its role as a union, and the reality of its action, which was often political and partisan.

These statements have neither been reviewed nor criticized after 2011, and no efforts were made to adjust to the major changes in the country in general and the university in particular. The union's occlusion of the general student body was no longer justifiable as it previously had been by the risks of a security breach (which is a questionable matter in the first place). The union was also no longer the only legitimate entity in the university, as associations and parties now operated with relative freedom. With the lack of accountability, the union has fallen into a temporal paradox, much like the other leftist organizations outside the university. In recent years, most of these organizations have lost a large number of their activists, and their outreach has shrunk in a way that threatened their very existence.

If we go back to the university, we find that the intensity of the struggle experience and the high cost of joining the union previously represented a barrier to the members that lacked a militant upbringing, keeping them from approaching the General Union of Tunisian Students and the rest of the leftist and national political organizations. The reason lies in the exclusive collective frameworks the militants use in their everyday lives: the use of a special lexicon, coded inside jokes, a distinct taste in clothes, art, and literature, and specific interests. This informal framework becomes a repulsive factor for the new students, or at least a source of a feeling of alienation for them among this group. Although the cost of joining the union has decreased significantly since 2011, these obstacles for newcomers have not changed, rather, these particularities have become vaguer and more abstract, especially since the conditions that caused their emergence have changed. Contrary to the popular discourse among leftists (concerning the necessity of simplifying the leftist discourse because it is incomprehensible for the “ordinary student”), what is actually happening is that leftists generally resort to adopting a sophisticated discourse (one that most of its own members find complicated), as a desperate way of proving they belong to a so-called “elite”, socially distinct from the “student masses”. Therefore, the process is related to the very common strategies for acquiring social positioning.

Leftists (with caution in using this generalization) are advised first to stop “alienating people”. They are also called upon to raise awareness of their social position individually and collectively. This may seem surprising at first but, in reality, it is one of the basic criteria that may explain the distance between this left and its assumed popular social incubator. The Tunisian left includes elements that generally come from families of the lower classes to the educated urban middle classes. Questioning the repercussions of this social positioning is supposed to explain some of the causes of the conflicts that divide the left’s ranks, away from the dominant personal pathological analyzes, or the so-called “personal conflicts”. It also reveals some aspects of the political margins and limits of a part of the left, away from the accusations of treason or of being rightists...

Acknowledging that the left is ignorant of its environment is also a necessity. A part of this ignorance is understandable and reasonable in a country that has lived under an authoritarian regime for 55 years, where the possibility of accumulating knowledge or producing critical knowledge about the

social realities is hindered. This relative ignorance is not limited to the left, naturally. It is a common denominator of all the political and civil forces and an objective reality in Tunisia. The Tunisians do not know much about how their collective lives proceed, neither in the past nor today, and definitely not in the future. Perhaps this is a normal matter for the forces that seek to safeguard the status quo, which generally means ensuring that the same social mechanisms continue to operate. But, the issue becomes truly disruptive when it comes to a force that claims to seek a change in the power relations, production relations, and social relations as a whole. How can it accomplish this without an in-depth understanding of the realities of these relationships? Of course, this knowledge is not produced by alleged experts who isolate themselves in offices, but rather through a collective effort in which revolutionary knowledge is produced from revolutionary field practice (i.e., from “Praxis”, as Gramsci has argued). This requires questioning and scrutinizing the dominant social relations within left-wing organizations themselves, as well as their relationships to their surroundings, which is not an easy task, nor a possible one without a collective will to address it.

In recent years, waves of resignations have struck all the left’s youth organizations, bringing them into a major crisis. It is no secret that the feebleness of their internal democracy, their detachment, and the failure to overcome their political sterility over recent years are the most important reasons for these waves. Tracking these resignations is important to understand their causes. Contrary to the hypothesis that political aversion is spreading among young people, an inspection of the reality leads us to detect a continued interest in civil and political commitment among a large number of those who had resigned. This is proven by their engagement in major movements, such as those against the so-called “reconciliation act”, or the movement in support of the unique agricultural cooperative experience by the people of the Djemna oasis in southern Tunisia, and in other major struggles.

One of the most vital spaces the militants who grew up in the student movement have engaged in after 2011 is the social movements that became widespread after the political openness in the country. Those movements have been carried out regardless of any of the political actors’ opinions, but rather by the autonomous will of the people who participated in them, as a response to the continuous deterioration of

the living situation in the country. Local groups were formed whenever the need was present to confront urgent problems related to issues of employment, pollution, supplying safe drinking water, etc. The members who have accumulated a militant experience within the General Union of Tunisian Students have been part of these movements in most of the regions all over the country. They have worked with others for years to overcome the occasional nature of these movements through networking and providing frameworks of solidarity to protect and enable them to accumulate experiences.

In addition to these semi-spontaneous movements (at least in their beginnings), a second type of movements had also risen, in which the union activists played a pivotal role. Those are the social movements that carry political demands and concern personal and public freedoms. This is where the left's youth has proven several times its field knowledge ability, practicality, and political flexibility during the movements of the unemployed ones of the union's veterans, or in its handling of the various political contradictions that surrounded the mobilization against the reconciliation act, the campaigns against police brutality, and the campaigns supporting the legalization of the consumption of cannabis, for instance.

However, this situation must not obscure the major difficulties faced by the left's youths in formulating general political visions and plans. While the relative withdrawal from field work represented an ordeal for the leftist organizations in a way that deepened their isolation from their environment and kept them hostages to the outdated theoretical analyzes (addressing a changing reality they cannot grasp with the analytical tools of the past), the immersion of unorganized leftist members in movements and their dispersion – on the other hand - have not allowed them to take the necessary critical distance from their experiences to formulate general perceptions about the daily reality. And despite the richness of political experiences accumulated over the past seven years and before, the general synthesis process remains weak, and the defensive social movements and partial battles remain the dominant characteristic of the leftist youth. The risk of this situation lies in the immersion in the daily tasks, getting used to the inability to change anything of substance, and sufficing with the partial battles. There lies the broadest door to the disintegration of the radical tendencies and to paving the way for being easily devoured by the market

mechanisms through international funders and the existing ruling system.

In addition to the foregoing, the critical discourse of party organizations has not yet reached a level of maturity that allows it to leave the impressionism and the timeliness of the subjective experiences of those who had resigned. With the exception of some delusional perceptions that appear on the scene from time to time, the absence of in-depth readings of the reality remains evident. Perhaps the main element absent from this critique is attempting an open collective thinking process that could provide opportunities for intellectual accumulation and a critical approach to the formulation of contents and programs, and could then extract the leftist conflicts from the tradition of personalization that has distorted the struggle and obscured the real causes of the existing conflicts.

**Contrary to the hypothesis that political aversion is spreading among young people, an inspection of the reality leads us to detect a continued interest in civil and political commitment among a large number of those who had resigned. This is proven by their engagement in major movements that have motivated their participation.**

The absence of this systematic and collective criticism facilitates the spread of the culture of intellectual consumption, through attempts to reproduce the experiences of other regions in the world, without taking into consideration the constraints and specificities of each experience, which impedes critical interaction with new experiences and the ability to produce organizational forms and contents drawn from the reality of the class and social conflict in Tunisia. Hence, the shallowness of the discourse on the conflict between horizontal and hierarchical forms of organization is exposed as a mere echo of generalized proverbs, along with a lack of any significant intellectual production on the subject from both sides. In fact, the struggle in Tunisia is extremely enriched by the dialectical conflict between the two sides, and the experience is capable of providing more eloquent and valid arguments for the current reality.

## **Finally**

Perhaps what we can draw from all of the above is that the Tunisian left has not succeeded, until today, in becoming an independent and well-

defined political party. In its arguments, the left, reiterating Marx, has always considered that the most important step in eliminating capitalist oppression is the transformation of the proletariat from a class “in itself”, that is, by force and spontaneous consciousness, into a class “for itself”; that is, by revolutionary practice and consciousness. However, the Tunisian political reality confirms that our left, until this moment, lacks the awareness in itself and of itself, as it has been imprisoned by the grand political schemes for years, supporting one at the expense of the other at times “for tactical reasons”.

The left has not yet abandoned the narrative that the modern classist Tunisian state was founded on, which is the reformist narrative (6). What is essential in this regard is the relational aspect of this narrative which has shaped the relations of the self-proclaimed “elites” who tasked themselves with the mission of freeing the “people” of their backward reality. This perspective is characterized by the conviction of these elites that the “commoners” are incapacitated to undertake the historical tasks themselves. More than this, they are instinctively unable to do this task and thus, it is the duty of the elite to become the shepherd who lead these “sheep” to paradise, even if they have to chain them along the way. In general, the major intellectual groups in Tunisia agree on this evaluation, although they use terms which are less acute. Rather, they disagree on the ways that should be used to advance this historical mission by the “elites”.

The left’s belief in the “vanguard” role of the university as a part of the historical mission of the “elite” to extract the “people” from their backward reality has remained unshaken. The role that the Tunisian University has played, since its establishment, in the ideological structuring of the authoritarian Tunisian state has never been questioned. The university might not be an exception within this authoritarian and discriminatory regime that Tunisia has known since its independence. On the contrary, it might be one of the conditions for this regime.

Perhaps the first step in questioning this crisis situation perception is to doubt the social role and benefit of the “elite” and to question its relation to the intelligentsia. Do the elite identify with the intelligentsia, is it a part of them or is it a completely different group apart from them? What are the social conditions necessary for a person to become an “elite”? The

second step is to hold the university, in its position, accountable as a presumed space of production of this elite. In this context, one of the crises of the left in general and the student left in particular perhaps lies in its dealings with the university as a starting point and an end point for its political work. Perhaps believing in the university's "vanguard" role explains, for example, how left-wing organizations are mainly found in the university. Their discourses are also about the university, and thus the discourse of the General Union of Tunisian students itself, in its most profound analysis, has not yet gone beyond the nostalgic reminiscence of comparing the university's poor conditions today with its exceptional situation in the beginning of the sixties of the last century, when the student was a socially respected person who had many privileges. The role that the Tunisian University has played, since its establishment, in the ideological structuring of the authoritarian Tunisian state has never been questioned. The university might not be an exception within the authoritarian and discriminatory regime that Tunisia has known since its independence. On the contrary, it might be one of the conditions for this regime.

There are very few answers to the many questions and many doubts remaining at the moment...

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1) For more information about this relationship during the fifties and sixties, one can refer to the article "March 1968 and the Radicalization of the Student Activism".

2) The usage of this familiar term is similar to the meaning given by Deleuze and Guattari in their book "Capitalism and Schizophrenia" for the term "rhizome".

3) V. Taylor (1989), "Social movement continuity: the women's movement in abeyance", *American Sociology Review*, pp. 761-775.

4) The process of the fast "self-dissolution" of this party (which has brought two million Tunisians into its ranks in a few days' time) needs to be carefully studied in order to understand what happened and reveal its implications, as that would be greatly beneficial in understanding the basic political mechanisms in the last years of Ben Ali's rule, and the conditions and possibility of reshaping again that which is called the "old regime" in several parties and organizations.

5) *The situation of most of these professional organizations (lawyers, judges, writers' organizations...) and associations (Tunisian Human Rights League...) is no less disastrous than that of the parties.*

6) *B. Hibou (2006), La force de l'obéissance. Économie politique de la répression en Tunisie. La Découverte, Paris.*



Ahl Al-Kahf - Tunisia

## The Tunisian Left After the Revolution: The Challenge of the Social Movements

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A closer look at the Tunisian Left today, considering four social movements that have occurred in the recent years: The self-governance in the Djemna oasis, the “Petrofac” sit-in in the island of Kerkennah, El-Kamour sit-in and the protests against the national budget law in 2018. The following is an attempt to present some preliminary conclusions.

Generations of Tunisian leftists have suffered all sorts of security prosecution, imprisonment, torture and ban from performing any public political activity. Despite the repression, leftists have continued to participate strongly in various social and political movements since the 1960s, becoming one with the rising masses during the most critical moments of the country's history, such as "Black Thursday" in 1978, the "Bread Uprising" in 1984, the uprising in the mining basins in 2008 and, of course, the Tunisian Revolution in 2011. All these uprisings "incidentally" happened in the beginnings of their corresponding years, in the month of January.

The fall of the dictatorship was expected to allow for the Left's emergence from the shadows into the light, but years of oppression, covert action and "left-versus-left" ideological conflicts rendered it exhausted and divided, with no clear vision for the future in a "post-revolution" Tunisia. The emergence of Islamic movements, the successive disappointments and deviations of the various Arab uprisings and the fear of the dictatorship's return all produced a state of uncertainty and distraction for the "radical" left, which found itself fighting on more than one front.

The Tunisian Constituent Assembly elections in 2011 were a humiliating shock for the "radical" left that ended up winning only two or three seats in the assembly out of 217, which is less than 1 percent, while the Islamists won nearly half of the seats. The elections' results and the increasing presence of Islamists in Tunisia and elsewhere prompted a large part of the Tunisian left to acknowledge the need to unite all efforts and engage in a larger political structure. This was reflected in the formation of the Popular Front in October 2012, whose main backbones were the two longtime-opponent currents that most represented the Tunisian Left: "The Tunisian Communist Party" and "The Democratic Patriots' Unified Party", in addition to other leftist and Arabist parties, such as the Baathists and Nasserists. This new organization will be strongly present in most social and political protests during the Troika rule (the tripartite coalition led by the Islamic "El Nahda" Movement). However, the left became less and less interested in social struggles in the country after a series of terrorist attacks and political assassinations took place.

The following is an overview and analysis of the ways in which the Tunisian left has approached some of the social issues in the country. I consider

four main instances that are worth studying for their exceptional nature, longevity, importance, large number of protesters participating in them, or for all of these reasons combined. Given the difficulty of addressing the stances of all leftist parties, organizations and groups (some of which are “microscopically” small), I focus on the stances of the Popular Front in Tunisia, since it is the largest coalition of leftists in the country (partisan and independent leftists), including representatives of most of the historical leftist currents. All other leftist parties are either too “moderate” to engage in the social movements or too “radical” in their statements, yet without any realistic presence on the ground. I also choose to study a specific period; the years after the 2014 presidential and legislative elections, which is the period that saw the end of the “revolutionary flow” and the restoration of stability and strength to the state institutions, under the rule of the right-wing, with its two pillars(both the historic rivals of the left) in power: the old regime’s “recycled” men and the Islamists.

The fall of the dictatorship was expected to allow for the Left’s emergence from the shadows into the light, but years of oppression, covert action and “left-versus-left” ideological conflicts rendered it exhausted and divided, with no clear vision for the future in a “post-revolution” Tunisia.

### **The Self-Management Experiment in the Djemna Oasis**

“Hensheer Al-Muammar” or “Hensheer Stil” are the palm oases located in the town of Djemna in the far south of Tunisia (in the governorate of Kebili). They were tribe-owned lands which had been confiscated by the French colonial authorities and granted to French settlers. After the independence of Tunisia, the new government chose not to return the oases to their original owners, but to claim them as “state land” (known as “Miri”), initially placing the land under its state-owned company “STIL”, but later leasing it to private investors in return for a small fee, vastly disproportionate to the profits generated by these lands. In January 2011, and with the state’s confusion upon the unfolding events of the revolution, the people of Djemna finally had the opportunity to retrieve their rightful ownership of the land. They evicted the investors and their associates from the oases and reclaimed control over the land.

After “liberating” the land, an obvious question arose: what to do with

it now? Some suggested that the land be divided among the people, while others called for safeguarding its unity and collectively investing in it. The majority of the people of Djemna approved of the second opinion. Then came the second question: how can the oasis be managed and farmed? The retired teacher and leftist activist from Djemna, Taher Taheri, then came into the picture. He headed an association that worked on collectively self-managing the oasis, improving the conditions for the workers/partners (increasing wages and reducing work hours), selling the harvested dates, distributing revenues among production inputs (wages, fertilizers, equipment, etc.) and improving public services and facilities in the region. However, after the 2014 elections, the state institutions started to re-stabilize and the authorities attempted to regain control over the Djemna oases. The minister responsible for the Miri territories (state-owned land) regarded this as a “personal issue”, turning it into a war in which the ruling party, liberal economists and loyalist media outlets supported him. In October 2016, the authorities even prevented the oases from selling their dates, froze their bank accounts and the accounts of the merchant who won the public bid. The public authority’s attempt to stifle the Djemna experience had been counterproductive, and resulted in its exposure as a matter of public concern.

During the first few years of the experience, it failed to receive much attention from the leftist circles, and many of them had never even heard about it, despite the fact that the president of the association managing the oases is a leftist who had tried to make the experience visible. It was actually the authorities fighting against the Djemna experience (backed by the majority of the media) that drew attention to the experience of self-management and provoked many leftist parties, including the Popular Front, to pay closer attention to the importance and uniqueness of what was happening there.

In October 2016, a delegation from the Popular Front, headed by their most prominent leader Hamma El Hammami, arrived to Djemna to attend the sale of the date crop that the government had tried to prevent. In an attempt to provide overdue support to the people of the oasis, one member of the parliament with the delegation signed the deed, even though the sale was considered illegal according to the laws of the state. The Popular Front also gave media and political support, defending Djemna on television, radio and in the parliament. Its leaders tried to discourage

the government from pursuing its efforts to end the experiment, while its activists participated in political demonstrations in support of Djemna in the capital. Even though the Popular Front approved of the form and purposes of the self-management experiment, it did not go further than expressing its support and solidarity, and did not attempt to reproduce such an experience in other Tunisian regions.

### **“Petrofac’s” Sit-in on Kerkennah Island**

In March 2011, the youth of Kerkennah mobilized to demand employment and called for the government to pressure Petrofac British-Tunisian company to contribute to the development of the island. After great pressure, the company yielded to the demands and allocated a budget to the construction and maintenance of some public facilities and the funding of sports and cultural activities. It also agreed to pay the wages of 270 young people assigned by the state to work in the company’s institutions on the island.

But in January 2015, the company’s management decided to discontinue these young people’s salaries on the grounds that they do not really work in their jobs, to which these employees responded by picketing and preventing entry and exit to and from the company’s premises. As a result, a new agreement was reached in April 2015, but for many months later, the company failed to implement its terms. The young employees hence decided to hold a new sit-in on January 19th, 2016 in front of the company’s headquarters to disrupt its work. The sit-in continued until April 3rd, 2016 when the protesters were warned that the government had decided to send huge security reinforcements to disperse their sit-in. The protesters decided to relocate the sit-in to Mellita, using barricades to block the security forces from reaching them. Violent clashes erupted on the night of April 4th, and the issue was turned overnight from the cause of young protesters who demanded their salaries to the battle of an entire island and a case of public interest. The government, faced by the developing events and fearful of the reaction of the people of Kerkennah, who had a significant presence in work unions and in the political life, decided to withdraw all security forces and instructed the army to secure the island.

When the protests returned again, the company threatened to shut

down and exist Tunisia altogether to pressure the government and turn public opinion against the protesters. In September 2016, after months of protests, an agreement was finally reached between the protesters on the one hand and the government and the company on the other. The company was to settle the status of the protesters, under the supervision of the Tunisian General Labor Union, and create a fund for developing the region and supporting young sailors.

The left – and mainly the Popular Front - was strongly present this time. The spokesperson for the sit-in, Ahmed El Souissi, was a member of the Popular Front and an activist in the leftist students' syndicate. He was also one of the leaders of the “Union for Unemployed Graduates” (UDC), founded in 2006 by university graduates, most of whom are leftists. Likewise, many protesters were leftists or leftist sympathizers. The Popular Front supported the sit-in from the very beginning, both through its explicit political endorsement of the demands and indirectly through its influential presence in the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). The front mobilized on the ground among the protesters and the people of the island, and it took to the media to defend the protesters and condemn the police violence and government intransigence. With the unfolding violence, the front made one statement after the other, calling for supportive rallies and marches in front of the Sfax governorate headquarters and in Tunis, and backing the general strike on the island on 12 April.

### **El Kamour Sit-in**

El Kamour region is located in the heart of the Tunisian desert, in the marginalized province of Tataouine. Considered a gateway to the desert oil fields, it is mainly exploited by foreign companies. Since March 15th, 2017, a movement began to spread in several areas of the province (1), as people raised similar demands: development and employment. In addition to the demonstrations and protests, the protesters began disrupting the movement of trucks and cars to and from the headquarters of the oil companies, leading to a general strike on April 11th, 2017. The protests became a constant recurring event, until a sit-in was decided in the El Kamour region (150 km from the center of the city), aiming to block the only access to the desert oil fields (El Borma and Borj El Khadra'). On the 23rd of April 2017, protesters pitched their tents in a remote desert area amid high temperatures, relying on their own capacities and the solidarity

of the tribes to provide for their basic needs. Their demands can be summarized in the following three points: 1- allocating 20 percent of the petroleum proceeds for the development of the province, 2- transferring the official headquarters of petroleum companies that exploit the fields in the province from the capital Tunis to the city of Tataouine, and 3- providing immediate employment to thousands of people in the province in public institutions and oil companies.

The authorities tried to end the sit-in with promises and threats. On April 27th, the prime minister arrived in Tataouine, with a stack of 64 proposals, most of which were actually ways to circumvent the three main demands of the people. The protesters responded to this with a second general strike and held on to their slogan: “no retreat”. At that point, the Tunisian President instructed the army to protect the oil plants and open the way for the trucks and cars that work for these companies.

Protesters took over the pump station on May 20th and closed its valve, halting the transportation of petrol. The government was quick to respond to this action, by sending massive security reinforcements to dissolve the sit-in by force and “free” the pump. Violent confrontations led to the killing of one person, who was run over by a security vehicle. After the withdrawal of the security forces, the protesters regained control over the pump once again, until the Tunisian General Labor Union finally intervened as a mediator between the two sides. The issue was resolved by signing an agreement on June 16th, 2017.

But, where is the Left amidst all this? The Left wing, supposedly the most concerned with social struggles, was -in fact- absent from the sit-in, including all leftist parties and groups, not just the Popular Front. There was no presence of the left on the ground, and some of its statements were more of a reaction to the violent security intervention than a real endorsement of the movement’s demands. There are several reasons for this failure to act. On the one hand, the protesters themselves refused any interference from political parties fearing that these parties may “invest” in their struggles and exploit their movement for personal goals. On the other hand, Tataouine and the areas adjacent to it are considered “Islamist strongholds”, and the leftist presence (and even that of labor syndicates) is very weak, if not completely nonexistent.

The Popular Front's statement, published on May 23rd, after the security intervention to break up the sit-in, clearly reflected its indifferent position: "It (i.e. the Popular Front) affirms its support to all peaceful social protests and movements based on legitimate demands, whether in Tataouine or elsewhere in the country. It calls on all democratic, progressive and popular forces to stand against all attempts to undermine freedoms and allow the return of tyranny. It observes positively El Kamour protestors' condemning of the acts of arson and looting that targeted several public institutions, as they accuse outsider parties of inciting such actions. The Popular Front calls on all the Tunisian people to preserve the peaceful and civilian nature of their protests and movements, and to remain vigilant against all reactionary and populist actors that are plotting to redirect the movement so that it serves agendas which are hostile to the interests of our nation and people." It does not appear that the Popular Front had fully grasped the uniqueness and quality of the movement in El Kamour, or perhaps its fears and political calculations pushed it to partially reiterate the rhetoric of the public authorities and their media mouthpieces.

The social movements in Tunisia are more advanced than the left. Several marginalized peripheral areas have fought significant and creative social battles without any ideological reference or support. In many cases, the leftist parties join in late and try to keep up with the movement without radicalizing it, in such a way that it seems the left is riding the wave of events or trying to use them to its own benefit.

### **Protests Against the Finance Law (Budget) in January 2018**

In late 2017, the government of Youssef El Chahed presented the parliament with a draft finance law that drew up the 2018 government budget. Several chapters in the law imposed various substantial increases in taxes and royalties, which would automatically raise the prices of goods and services. The law, simultaneously, granted privileges to wealthy investors. Although the government acknowledged that the law was "harsh", it fully defended it and considered it a "painful but necessary" measure to reduce the budget deficit and repay national debts. On December 9th, 2017, the Tunisian parliament passed the law by a majority in a session boycotted by the opposition.

Then came January, a month unlike any other in Tunisia, and the protests

commenced in the early days of 2018, starting from some inland regions and spreading to the capital and other big cities. In parallel, on January 3rd, a youth movement called “Fash Nestanaw” (meaning “What Are We Waiting for?”) was formed, bringing together young partisan and independent activists, with a strong leftist presence, especially from the Tunisian Popular Front. The movement called for protest and action throughout the country to overthrow the new finance law.

The Popular Front also called on citizens to take to the streets and mobilize against the finance law and against the rising costs of living, which had become unbearable for most Tunisians. The leaders of the Front, including parliament members, participated in the demonstrations and tried to push the government to back from passing the law through media and political pressure. The protests were concentrated in major cities, especially in the capital, whose popular neighborhoods witnessed violent night clashes with the police forces. Hundreds of protesters (including leftists from the Popular Front and others) were arrested and a demonstrator was killed in the city of Tabarba, close to the capital.

From the third week of January, the clashes began to diminish and the number of protesters on the street decreased until the movement completely dissolved without the abolishment or the amendment of the Finance Law. The government had counted on the time factor and the exhaustion of the protesters, as the left had been unable to fortify the movement or raise more radical demands.

## **Conclusions**

Even though it is certainly not sufficient to assess the role of the Tunisian Left in the “post-revolution” social movements through four events only, or based solely on the Popular Front’s stances, but there are some preliminary conclusions that can be drawn.

1. The social movements in Tunisia are more advanced than the left. Several marginalized peripheral areas have fought significant and creative social battles without any ideological reference or support. In many cases, the leftist parties join in late and try to keep up with the movement without radicalizing it, in such a way that it seems the left is riding the wave of events or trying to use them to its own benefit.
2. In the best-case scenarios, the left acts as an influential force. However,

it often acts as a supportive force and sometimes it is nothing more than a sympathizer in solidarity. It rarely takes an initiative or assumes leadership. Whenever it takes part in a social movement, it fails to propose a wider horizon and merely demands reforms. It celebrates these distinctive successful experiences without even considering to reproduce them in other regions so they may become a reality that changes the pattern of economic production and modes of development.

3. The Tunisian left is present mainly in the cities, and is often unable to position itself in popular neighborhoods, rural areas and inland areas. For instance, the presence of a leftist person heading the self-management experience in Djemna does not reflect a leftist presence there, but is rather an individual effort of an activist who understood his micro-society, and accordingly built a creative experience that drew inspiration from the local cultural characteristics.

4. Upon studying how the Popular Front interacted with the four experiences mentioned, it becomes obvious that the left cannot mobilize or bring change except in the areas where there are politically active leftists or in the syndicates, i.e. in places that are within the left's "comfort zones".

5. Between 2011 and 2014, the left's enthusiasm withered and its participation in social movements diminished to a great extent. There are several reasons that may explain this deterioration. The left gave priority to combatting the Islamist presence, engaged in the "democratic transition" and abandoned the revolutionary ways, while the Popular Front marketed itself as a moderate and realistic party with an agenda that seeks to gain access to power through the electoral ballots.

To this day, the left has not been able to use well the ongoing social upheaval in Tunisia. It has failed to catalyze or –at least- coordinate a national social movement that extends all over the country. However, it is not too late for it to take action, since the next stages will certainly be critical. But before it takes another step, the left must first resolve an "identity crisis" it has been going through for years and determine its position. Does it want to be a reformist left that operates under the existing political-economic system, or does it prefer to be a force of real pressure and change?

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1) For a chronological overview about the sit-in, refer to the detailed investigation by Inkyfada.



Graffiti from Tunisia

## The Tunisian Left and the Geographies of Rage: On the Paradoxes of Presence and Absence

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The welfare state was not the only one guilty of ignoring the “margins”, whether in the cities or in the remote rural areas. The modernist and secular elites, including the Tunisian left, were also completely absent from these spaces and showed an ignorance about their real conditions.

Right after Mohamad Bouazizi burned himself in front of the Sidi Bouzid Governorate, and at the start of the December 2010 protests, the Tunisian Islamists were still in prison, while some of their leaders were keeping a close eye on the events from the European capitals where they had been exiled. At the time, the Islamists hoped that Ben Ali would undertake reforms that would grant more political freedoms so that they could be released from the prisons or return from their diaspora. They were not aiming for the fall of Ben Ali, but were only seeking recognition. Like the opposition parties, some of which are leftists, the Islamists had reformist and conservative tendencies. Concomitantly, in the streets, the demonstrators were chanting for the fall of the regime with the slogan “Bread and water and no to Ben Ali!”

Almost everyone agreed (and still agrees) that the revolution lacked a leadership and a clear ideology. This may be true in some ways, but whoever has lived in proximity with the events cannot deny that the leftist organizations such as the “General Union of Tunisian Students”, activists from the radical left and professional unions affiliated with the “Tunisian General Labor Union” were at the forefront of the protests and marches, even though this does not mean that the left had planned the uprising or overthrew the regime.

The “January 14” moment had the features of a “leftist moment” in terms of its demands and slogans related to employment, social justice and national dignity. Slogans with an Islamic reference were nonexistent at the time and all that the protesters were calling for was the departure of Ben Ali. In addition, the demonstrations did not start from mosques but from universities and unions’ headquarters.

Nevertheless, the Islamists eventually came to power while the “left” (in all its different currents) remained outside of the electoral calculations. A closer inspection of the issue reveals that the left-wing organizations, movements and groups have failed to find a place within society, and to root themselves in the sectors that were supposed to be their social incubators, such as the popular neighborhoods located within the cities and urban outskirts, while the “Ennahda Movement” had established its presence in these spaces since the eighties of the last century. That was until Salafist jihadism succeeded in attracting the youth of those neighborhoods after the revolution.

## Urban margins turn their backs on the left

During the elections for the Constituent Assembly in October 2011, the parties of the left only won a small percentage of the seats, not exceeding ten percent of the Council. The majority of the seats were won by Ennahda Movement. The scenario repeated in the 2014 elections, which brought back the old regime's remnants embodied by "Nidaa Tunis" to the forefront of power, before it disassociated with the Ennahda Movement and self-fragmented. Ennahda had a slight retreat in the 2014 elections and ranked second behind Nidaa Tunis. However, Ennahda managed to remedy this setback in the municipal elections where it won by a majority. The left, represented by the Popular Front, remained in the same position, winning not more than ten percent of the overall seats.

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The strength of the Islamists stems from the fact that they are strongly rooted in popular neighborhoods, city margins and in some regions of southern Tunisia, characterized by conservatism and a historical tension with the central authority. Islamists do a rather good job positioning themselves in the gaps abandoned by the welfare state. These gaps had widened after the "Democratic Constitutional Rally Party", that had previously played the role of the watchtower and mediator between the state and the margins, dissolved itself. In exchange for providing some social services and aid, a relationship of clientele was formed that assumes loyalty to the ruling party, that is, to the existing system. Ennahda Movement took advantage of these same mechanisms and reproduced them, relying on the policy of proximity and its control over a large number of mosques. Only Salafist jihadism rivaled Ennahda in these policies. There are differences between Ennahda Movement and Salafist jihadism at the level of the political practice and the sociological structure but they meet in their interest in social issues (poverty, unemployment, work precariousness, etc.) to establish roots in the urban margins that are left to manage and survive by themselves.

Since the 1980s, the state has worked to “integrate” those neighborhoods, particularly the slums, through a policy of urban development and polishing, connecting them to sewerage networks and public lighting. But that policy had its limits as it was unable to diminish the feelings of stigmatization, injustice and anger that were growing within those geographies. Evidence of this is that protests that erupted since the revolution (and even before it) usually had an urban character and were mainly concentrated in the areas listed in the “bottom of the hierarchal system of places” (the phrase is for the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant). These are places where the presence of the state’s social welfare is minimal while its security presence is overwhelming. This pushes the inhabitants of those places to sustain the sense that their image in the official representation lies mainly in their categorization as “dangerous classes” that must be controlled primarily on a security level.

At the same time, Islamists worked silently. They went “underground” in the times of repression, relying on traditional solidarities, family networks and community solidarity (belonging to the same neighborhood or alley). Their leader, Rashid Al-Ghanouchi, considered that the revival of Ennahda was “a return from the underground”. The welfare state was not the only one guilty of ignoring the “margins”, whether in the cities or in the remote rural areas. The modernist and secular elites, including the Tunisian left, were also completely absent from these spaces and showed an ignorance about their real conditions.

**Islamists do a rather good job positioning themselves in the gaps abandoned by the welfare state. These gaps had widened after the “Democratic Constitutional Rally Party” dissolved itself, even though it had previously played the role of the watchtower and mediator between the state and the margins through the clientele mechanisms. Ennahda Movement reinforced its presence by using those same mechanisms and through its permeation in the fabric of charitable associations.**

After the revolution, the presence of Ennahda was reinforced by its permeation in the fabric of charitable associations working to provide aid to the poor population of the popular neighborhoods and to the impoverished internal regions. Thus, the clientelism that the ruling party had built was replaced by a new one. Salafist jihadism has worked firmly

and effectively with that same logic, succeeding in attracting marginalized stranded young people lacking purpose, providing them with financial aid and creating small jobs for them, often in the informal economy sectors. This made the youth feel that they belonged, and that there is a bond linking them to a group. In this regard, Islamists, in all their various groups, realize that social ties are the gateway to political action. They realize that they are moving in a society that still “claims” - at least - its adherence to its traditional values (which have become the last social lifeline) that pay great attention to community solidarity and familial cooperation. They also realize, perhaps more importantly, that the dislocated and loose side of these traditional values is offset by the complete absence of any alternative system (in belonging to a workspace, for example, which creates a social medium, or even in the state’s recognition of the citizen’s individuality and rights). The provision of relational frameworks, whatever they may be, becomes a decisive existential matter that is of a great importance and weight, which is not the case in the stable established societies in all their different forms.

The Islamists are also working to establish a conflict between “the people” and “the elites”. The latter are those groups that are educated and fully integrated into the urban world, and which oppose the Islamic project as an identity project. It is precisely because of this that Hammadi Al-Jabali, one of the leaders of Ennahda and the former Tunisian prime minister, considered that “our elite is our affliction”, because according to his perspective, the elites oppose the identity aspirations of the people.

### **Where is the left?**

The left - whether that of the “Popular Front” and some other neighboring parties, or that other “civil” one represented by some left-wing and human-rights associations, is in a spacial schism with the urban margins and the “geographies of anger”. It has no presence on the ground, on the political and ideological levels, due to several factors. Perhaps the most important of which is that the left-wing theses are still approaching reality from theoretical and intellectual perspectives which do not take into account what is actually happening. The people’s “voice” is not being heard and is not being understood and adapted into political plans and programs.

On the other hand, the left seems to be closer to the middle classes, which is the official doing of the independence state, and a close look at the sociological composition of left-wing organizations reveals this. It does not mean, however, that the Ennahda Movement members and leaderships do not also emerge from these same middle classes. However, the movement is characterized by the dominance of craftsmen and workers, within its popular bases, who work in the parallel and informal sectors of the economy. On the other hand, most of the components of the leadership and the bases of the left are secondary school teachers and government employees, and a few are doctors or small businessmen. Perhaps the paradox is that although the middle class within which the left is moving is in a constant decline, it remains essentially concerned with the values of economic welfare and freedoms. At the same time, it is urgently concerned with improving the conditions of its existence in the context of its ability to negotiate with the regime. Therefore, when the battle intensifies on social issues, most of the leftist parties and components in Tunisia line up behind the “Tunisian General Labor Union”. This indicates, on the one hand, the strength of the unions and their ability to mobilize but, on the other hand, it expresses weakness in the parties of the left their elites that seem to ignore the logic of political strategizing and are still drawn to the opposition’s narratives, as if they were refusing to come to power.

**The left - whether that of the “Popular Front” and some other neighboring parties, or that other “civil” one represented by some left-wing and human-rights societies, is in a spacial schism with the urban margins and the “geographies of anger”. It has no presence on the ground, on the political and ideological levels, due to several factors; most important of which is that the left approaches every problem with ideological preconceptions.**

The forces of the left do not operate in the geographies of the margins (the popular neighborhoods and the rural areas). The left has not succeeded in formulating a discourse which the marginalized groups can identify with, including those who are excluded from the worlds of work and consumption, or those that are part of the informal work sector or at its margins. The hackneyed speeches from the left’s leaderships about the “Zawali” (the destitute) and the “sons of the barefoot” (the sons of the

rural women) do not contribute to any change, but rather, this discourse belongs to the ongoing state of objections that characterizes the left's parties and its popular bases. The ironic thing is that the more the left excels in producing a discourse about social justice, poverty and marginalized areas, the more its influence in the course of events is revealed as limited. This is why the marginalized people in Tunisia do not see the "left" as the political alternative that would accommodate their hopes, not only for cultural reasons, but because the visions and insights of the left's elite do not "reach" them. There are several reasons why the two remain disjoint, one of which is the obsolescence of the discourses of the left which still perceives social conflict through the lens of social classes and structures that no longer exist. The left's discourse has been bypassed by a neo-capitalism based on globalized cash flows and financial markets. The leftist rhetoric grants no real importance to the dimensions that the groups most affected by the dominant neoliberal economic policies have come to relate to and speak about: the desire for respect and recognition and the avoidance of contempt. Those in the middle class who are quickly spiraling downward and the "marginalized people of the cities" do not aspire for the overthrowing of the regime. What they essentially want is participation in the system, i.e. to be like the others, on the basis of equality. Consequently, the new forms of social conflict are no longer determined by the logic of a clash between the classes, but rather by the logic of the distance that separates those people from the others who are fully integrated into the consumerist society. The prevailing fear is, in fact, a fear of exclusion. During the protest movements in which left-wing leaderships are involved, the slogan "Down with the regime" is raised, but only as a tactical slogan. The marginalized do not really want to topple the regime. Rather, what they are seeking for is a place in the regime that would allow them to have their share of benefits.

But is this possible? Is it not one of the tasks of the left, to question the very foundations of the dominant political economy and the policies of control and injustice in Tunisia, rather than developing a subservience to the overriding reformist trends in the country?

### **The new left: Retrieving the margins?**

Most of those who are part of the so-called "New Left" are young people who had had some kind of partisan leftist experiences in the past, but had

soon withdrawn when they sensed that their individualism was obliterated by the tyrannical tendencies of the leadership. The younger generation holds an extreme apprehension to the patriarchal and commandership dispositions that characterize the partisan left in Tunisia. It is an organizationally undemocratic left, as the determinant factor according to this left is not always democracy, but the militant and historical legitimacy. Hamma Al-Hamami has led the Labor Party for thirty years (the same goes for Rashid Al-Ghanoushi and Ennahda Movement). It makes no sense to negotiate new names or to give way to any new faces, and this process has rendered the left senile and unable to regenerate across generations.

**Although the middle class within which the left is moving is in a constant decline, it remains essentially concerned with the values of economic welfare and freedoms. Therefore, when the battle intensifies on social issues, most of the leftist parties and components in Tunisia line up behind the “Tunisian General Labor Union”.**

The case is not that the new generation is “reluctant to join politics”. It is a generation that has a strong individualistic tendency and favors new forms of militant commitment. This is precisely what distinguishes youth movements such as “Fesh Nestenau” (“What are we waiting for?”), “Manish Msemeh” (“We shall not forgive”) and “T'allam 'Oum” (“Learn how to swim”). Most of the members of these movements are university students, school students and amateur artists, most of whom have lived through the events of the revolution. They were born in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, and are well-acquainted to social media which they use on a continual basis. They do not present themselves as leftist militants but as “activists”, yet they consider themselves “comrades”. These young people are usually not religious and they are part of the urban consumer world, somehow liberated from the traditional social and moral constraints. They were able to form a political dynamic and a presence in the public spaces through their work on specific problems: the reconciliation law for the “Manish Msemeh” movement and the financial law for the “Fesh Nestanau” movement. The “Manish Msemeh” movement was lenient in some sense, as its criticism of the authority did not exceed protesting the law of reconciliation with corrupt businessmen, and it was unable to expand the scope of its protests or to give it a political content, while the “Fesh Nestanau” movement adopted a more radical approach, as a reaction to

the finance law with its injustices towards the poor and middle classes. This exposed the movement to oppression, especially since it succeeded (relatively) in mobilizing part of the youth of the popular neighborhoods. The protests were violent and had many political and social implications. They ended with a confrontation with the police, especially in the slums adjacent to the capital (the January 2017 protests).

Nevertheless, the two movements subsided and did not last very long, especially since they were both based on specific issues or transient occasions. These are movements that do not offer themselves as continuities in the first place and do not seek to assume the responsibility of formulating a political vision on the basis of clear programs and goals. Fragmentation and transience characterize such movements which restructure themselves in an inconsistent manner and therefore become less effective or temporary. This is in clear contrast to the political Islamic formations that can only operate in permanence and continuity.

In the end, perhaps what makes a difference between the “Ennahda Movement” and the rest of the leftist forces, mainly in their relationship with the urban margins, is that the former is politically engaged in these spaces and views them as a political wager that should not be neglected, while working diligently to expand the scope of its work towards other classes and sections. This is what the left lacks in both its partisan and civil wings. It remains torn between partisan activism centralized in major cities and excessive elitism while abandoning the margins. The absence of leftist parties from the margins is not only explained by the fact that the poor classes “are not prepared” for leftist ideas, but, ironically, it lies in the fact that those spaces have remained outcast from the political perceptions of the left-wing forces.





## The Realities of the “Left” in Morocco

Abdullah Al Hareef

Leftist activist from Morocco

A map of the forces of the left in Morocco and of the left’s multiple schisms, noting its weaknesses, its characteristic fragmentation and its intellectual dilemmas, as “the Left” becomes, in itself, a vague and cloudy concept. This article also documents the strengths and potentials of the Moroccan Left as assessed by one of its most prominent activists.

It is true that the objective conditions in Morocco, including the many deep and deepening economic, social and political crises, are appropriate for the rise of the left to the forefronts, however, the left in Morocco is characterized by weakness, fragmentation and intellectual disorientation. The concept itself has become obscure, especially because of the widespread prevalence of “postmodernism” and its influence, which focuses on “superstructures” for defining the left (“conservatism” versus “modernity”), and amplifies sexual and factional identities and particularities at the expense of social classes. These concepts resort to fragmented action, especially in the civil society which is often confined to non-governmental organizations that are – in turn- often funded by Western institutions, at the expense of class struggle and its tools (unions and political parties). So, what is the “Left” in Morocco today?

### **Who is the Left Today?**

The current stage in Morocco is characterized by the struggle for national liberation from the hegemony of Western (and especially French) imperialism, and for democracy. This struggle is being waged by the popular classes (working class, jobless proletariat in both rural and urban areas, the petty bourgeoisie and part of the middle bourgeoisie which is in line with the aforementioned classes). The left consists of the forces that aspire to represent the popular classes and strive for their immediate interests (improving their material and moral statuses), and for the strategy of national liberation and democracy that defends the values of progress, freedom, secularism, equality and dignity.

**The left in Morocco today consists of the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party, the National “Ittihadi” Congress, the Unified Socialist Party, the Democratic Way, and small Trotskyist groups (the “Militants”, “Democratic Liberation” and the “Communist Action League”), in addition to groups that descend from the “Qa’idiyyin” (Basists), mainly from Al-Barnamaj Al-Marhali (“The Conjuncture Program”).**

Thus, the left is divided into a radical left and a reformist left.

The radical left consists mainly of Marxist forces formed of the following main directions:

- The Marxist or Marxist-Leninist approach that fights against capitalism and for socialism and seeks to build the working class party as a tool to accomplish the tasks of national and democratic liberation along the path of socialism.

- Trotskyism, which believes that the conflict, in all countries of the globe, is now between the bourgeoisie and the working class, and that the task that must be put forward globally is the socialist revolution.

The reformist left is a social-democratic left that fights the serious repercussions inflicted by capitalism upon the popular masses, instead of fighting capitalism as a mode of production. It considers elections the primary means for change.

### **The Left's Reality on the Eve of the Arab Spring**

The reality of the Moroccan left on the eve of what was called the “Arab Spring”, embodied in the February 20 Movement, has deep historical roots:

- The Moroccan Communist Party, which was founded at the end of the colonial period, made strategic mistakes (it failed to raise the question of the struggle for independence and insisted on linking it with the struggle for an agricultural revolution), leaving the leadership of the struggle for independence to the bourgeoisie. The party gradually retreated, since Morocco's Independence in 1956, from the task of building the working class party and from its Marxist identity, thus becoming a mere appendage of the right-wing. Hence, it lost its public influence and sway, and changed its name to the “Party of Liberation and Socialism” and then to the “Party of Progress and Socialism”. This prompted the withdrawal of some of its cadres on the 30th of August 1970, and resulted in the establishment of a secret Marxist-Leninist organization that would later be known as “Ila Al-Amam” (“Going Forward”).

The National Union of Popular Forces was formed in 1959 as a leftist popular party with both a reformist and a radical approach. The regime worked on weakening this party by targeting the radical trends within it (the armed resistance and the Liberation Army), taming the unions (the Moroccan Labor Union) and strengthening the reformist and technocratic

approach within it. This was evident in the mid-1960s, when the National Union of Popular Forces was unable to respond to the violent repression of the Casablanca uprising of 23 March 1965 (1), the regime declared a state of exception and Mehdi Ben Baraka was assassinated on the 29th of October, 1965. This led, in 1968, to the withdrawal of a group of cadres that later established a secret Marxist-Leninist organization, which was known as “March 23”. This organization lived in a split that led to the withdrawal of a number of its activists who founded the organization “Let’s Serve the People” in 1970. The organization “March 23” gradually abandoned Marxism and the task of building a working class party to build a leftist socialist-democratic party under the name of, “The Organization for Democratic and Popular Action”. The organization “Let’s Serve the People” vanished. In 1972, the trade union wing separated from the party, whose name became the “Socialist Union of Popular Forces”. This union then gradually shifted to the right, leading to successive withdrawals from its ranks:

- The withdrawal of the radical current in 1983, and the establishment of the “Vanguard Social Democratic Party”.
- The withdrawal of its central union, the Democratic Confederation of Labor, which founded the National “Ittihadi” Congress Party in 2002.
- And, finally, the withdrawal of the “Loyalty to Democracy” movement, which was popular among the party’s youth.

Small Trotskyist groups were formed, since the beginnings of the 1980s, not on the basis of fundamental differences over the fateful issues of the Moroccan people, but rather as a reflection of the divisions of the Trotskyist movement in Europe or its internal-conflicts (the “militant” movement, the “Democratic Liberation” movement and the “Communist Action League”). In the late 1970s, a unions’ movement was in action at the center of the “National Union of Moroccan Students”, that became known as “The Qa’idiyyin (Basist) Students”, influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought. The movement soon split into rival groups.

The intellectual disorientation of the left was caused by several factors. The socialist alternative was in a crisis after the collapse of several experiences that strived to build socialism, the efforts to develop a

socialist thought were feeble and the bourgeois penetrated many leftist organizations, especially with “postmodernism”. The latter doubts the foundations of progressive thought and the feasibility of change while promoting the alternative idea that it is sufficient to work on partial issues, identity politics and societal issues such as women’s rights for example and promotes the work of the “civil society”.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, taking advantage of the relative political détente at the time, a debate was launched to bring together the forces that were once part of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement. The discussion resulted in:

- The founding of “The Democratic Way” on 15 April 1995, as a public political organization that considers itself a continuation of the Marxist-Leninist experience in Morocco, especially of the “Ila Al-Amam” (“Forward”) organization. Its central goal was to build the party of the working class and the proletariat. In 2004, it became a legal entity.

- The “Unified Socialist Left” was established through the merger of the “People’s Democratic Action Organization” with one of the groups that descended from the (“Basist”) “Independent Democrats” and another group that was influenced by the experience of the Marxist-Leninist “Movement for Democracy”. The “Loyalty to Democracy Movement” later joined the “Unified Socialist Left” to create the “United Socialist Party”.

**The intellectual disorientation of the left was caused by several factors. The socialist alternative was in a crisis after the collapse of several experiences that strived to build socialism, the efforts to develop a socialist thought were feeble and the bourgeois penetrated many leftist organizations, especially with “postmodernism”. The latter doubts the foundations of progressive thought and the feasibility of change while promoting the alternative idea that it is sufficient to work on partial issues, identity politics and societal issues such as women’s rights for example and promotes the work of the “civil society”.**

Thus, the left in Morocco today consists of the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party, the National “Ittihad” Congress, the Unified Socialist

Party, the Democratic Way, and small Trotskyist groups (the “Militants”, “Democratic Liberation” and the “Communist Action League”), in addition to groups that descend from the “Qa’idiyyin” (Basists), mainly from Al-Barnamaj Al-Marhali (“The Conjuncture Program”).

The Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party, the National “Ittihadi” Congress, and the Unified Socialist Party founded together a common political framework under the name “The Federation of the Democratic Left”, while maintaining their own party organizations.

The most important features of the left today are: the quantitative impairment in its various organizations and its weak ties with the classes, groups and segments that it supposedly represents, especially the working class and the proletariat in general. The left also has weak connections and appeals very little to women (despite its advocacy to full equality between men and women), and to young people, including students, perhaps with the exception of the “Conjuncture Program”, which has a good influence in some universities, mainly in the cities of Fez and Oujda.

There is also a deep fragmentation: if it is normal and natural that two main streams (radical and reformist) exist within the left, why, then, are both streams divided into a number of organizations rather than seeking unification (at least for the Marxist left, which is supposed to work together to expand radiation and implantation in the midst of the working class)? Why are the two currents neither looking for commonalities nor building a front to fight for their shared goals?

- The intellectual disorientation of the left was caused by several factors. The socialist alternative was in a crisis after the collapse of several experiences that strived to build socialism, the efforts to develop a socialist thought were feeble and the bourgeois penetrated many leftist organizations, especially with “postmodernism”. The latter doubts the foundations of progressive thought and the feasibility of change while promoting the alternative idea that it is sufficient to work on partial issues, identity politics and societal issues such as women’s rights for example and promotes the work of the “civil society”.

Many leftists were disheartened by this reality and, consequently, started to move away from Marxism and get closer to liberalism. Most of the

militants who remained faithful to their convictions went on to indulge in mobility, reducing class conflict in the struggle for unions, civil society organizations, global and continental social forums. They over-confidently kept betting on anti-globalization movements despite their vague nature. Interest in theory declined as doubt in the possibility of achieving socialism and radical change rose.

- Tension, conflict, and ready-made judgments marked the relationship between the left and the Islamists. The left considered the Islamists a homogeneous obscurantism. It was convinced that the distinctions or variations within Islamism were minor and did not reflect, in depth, different class positions. The Islamists, on the other hand, regarded the left as a homogeneous force composed entirely of atheists.

### **How Did the Left Handle the February 20 Movement?**

Most leftist organizations were enthusiastically involved in the February 20 Movement and played a vital role in fueling its rise, with the exception of some groups from the “Qa’idiyyin”, who negatively influenced some university students. Islamic organizations, especially “Jama’at Al ‘Adl wal Ihsan” (“The Justice and Charity Party”), and some groups within the Amazigh movement also had a considerable contribution to the February 20 Movement. The movement was opposed by the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), part of the Salafist movement, some of the administrative parties, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the Party of Progress and Socialism. Unionist bureaucracies quickly abandoned the February 20 Movement, especially after the agreement of April 26, 2012, which gave the workers some gains. Hence, the working class became almost absent from the February 20 Movement.

The left considered the Islamists a homogeneous obscurantism. It was convinced that the distinctions or variations within Islamism were minor and did not reflect, in depth, different class positions. The Islamists, on the other hand, regarded the left as a homogeneous force composed entirely of atheists.

Despite the sacrifices the left made in its effort to advance the February 20 Movement, it missed a great opportunity to overcome its weaknesses

and accomplish a democratic breakthrough for the following reasons:

- The left either leads or is a substantial presence in popular organizations for human rights and in significant trade unions. It leads the largest human rights organization in Africa and the Arab world: “The Moroccan Association of Human Rights”, which has international reach. It leads a union federation (“The Democratic Confederation of Labor”) and major unions (the National Union for Agriculture, the Moroccan Workers’ Union, and the Moroccan Syndicate of Education). All of these are affiliated with the central “Moroccan Labor Union”. These two central unions (the Democratic Confederation of Labor and the Moroccan Labor Union) are the most broadly representative union. The left also leads several national coordinating committees, both factional and thematic (the fight for education, the Palestinian cause, etc.) or for a specific issue (against the high costs of water and electricity bills, against the scarcity of drinking-water and against the collective land-grabs), as well as the committees for local affairs (housing, transportation, security, etc.). The left is furthermore present in other popular movements and is strongly affiliated with the “National Union for Higher Education” and leads the “National Association of Unemployed Graduates of Morocco”. The left supported the popular movements that pervaded many Moroccan regions (the rural “Al-Reef” movement, the Jarrada movement, and others) and its activists were heavily involved in them.

Despite the foregoing, the left is greatly isolated from the masses. One of the most important reasons is the absence of proper linkage between public, political and organizational work, between the struggle for immediate demands (improving the financial status and morale) and strategic goals (changes in favor of the popular classes). As for the work of the coordination committees, it is occasional, condescending and representational and fails to work in line with the concerns of the popular classes or help them take their affairs into their own hands. This is not to mention the fact that these organizations consume an enormous amount of energy in the struggle over the positions of power among the forces of the left itself, rather than competing to serve the interests of the popular masses and working on rapprochement and the development of common grounds.

The left also suffered from the reluctance of the people, especially the

youth, to join political work or to become part of any kind of political partisan organizations, because of the following reasons: 1- most parties had become political “shops” growing farther away from the people’s concerns and aspirations; 2- the significant attack on socialism that exploited to the extreme the collapse of the Soviet Union and the countries of the eastern bloc; 3- the proliferation of postmodernist thought.

It was no wonder that the Arab Spring took the Moroccan left by surprise. The left was neither ready nor qualified to formulate suitable strategies, tactics and alliances to respond to the regime’s plans and initiatives. And it was not surprising either that the various components of the left disagreed on the slogan of the February 20 Movement (2). The slogans “against corruption and tyranny” and “for democracy, freedom and a decent life” were raised. However, the “Unified Socialist Party”, in particular, insisted on converting the slogan to “A parliamentary monarchy”, while the “Democratic Way” defended the original slogans, insisting that the Moroccan people have the right to choose the form of the system they want. Moreover, apprehension, caution and even direct conflict governed the relationship between most of the left’s components and “Jama’at Al ‘Adl wal Ihsan” (“The Justice and Charity Party”).

**The left is heavily present in popular organizations for human rights and unions, however, it remains greatly isolated from the masses for many reasons.**

The February 20 Movement sparked a wide debate inside the left, leading to different assessments of the situation and the tasks at hand:

The Federation of the Democratic Left considered that the situation required raising the slogan of the “parliamentary monarchy”, stipulating the necessity of the adoption of this slogan before any political collaboration could be considered. It also demanded the recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan and its participation in the elections.

It opposed any joint action with the “Justice and Charity Party”. However, coordination was in place between the Federation of the Democratic Left and the Democratic Way due to many reasons: the exigency to confront the dangerous deterioration of social and economic conditions, the collective involvement in the rapidly expanding popular struggles - especially the rural movement- and the necessity to confront its repression, and, finally, the insistence of the “Democratic Way” on unilateral action and struggle. The national march on July 8, 2018 in Casablanca was an embodiment of

the coordination. It condemned the unjust sentences against activists and leaders of the “Al-reef” rural movement and demanded their release as well as the release of all political detainees. The coordination grew beyond that as more left-wing forces and the “Justice and Charity Party” joined in the national march of July 15, 2018 in Rabat for the same purpose.

As for the “Democratic Way”, it considered that the February 20 Movement was, in fact, the first wave of a revolutionary process that would extend for a longer time and define periods of tidal action. Therefore, it considered that the left’s main and most important task was to rehabilitate itself by strengthening its components and elaborating a unified plan that would make it ready to take action upon the arrival of the upcoming revolutionary tide. It emphasized that the “Makhzen” (the ruling elite) (3) was the real enemy now, and that the people who widely boycotted the elections acknowledged the powerlessness of the institutions that conducted the elections since all authority was lying in the hands of the king and his advisers. The “Democratic Way” positively regarded the participation of the “Justice and Charity Party” in the February 20 Movement and its willingness to open a dialogue with the left, and wished to use this exchange to develop joint field work and launch a public dialogue between all the anti-power forces. Hence, it put forward the necessity of:

- Building a front that includes all the forces negatively affected by the “Makhzen”, whatever its class positioning and ideological background, except for the Takfiris, Wahhabis, and the forces that are non-independent of the system or the external forces. At the same time, it engaged in a public dialogue with the components of this front on the most contentious issues, while seeking the collective development of the desired alternative.

- Building a democratic front with the left as its backbone. Its goal is to secure the democratic path after liberation, and it includes democratic forces, political figures, unions, social movements, and popular movements.

- The Trotskyist forces rejected any political action with other left-wing components, and therefore any tactical or strategic alliance. It struggled for the unions and the human rights movement. The position of some of the Trotskyists was to participate in the elections.

- The groups descendent from “Al Qa’idiyin’s” (“Basist’s”) experience are

semi-secretive and divided between those who sanctify Stalin, Mao, or Anwar Khoja. They propose building the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party in the complete absence of any strategy for change or any basis for their tactics. Most of these groups have been immersed in violence, not against the enemies of the people, but against the other forces who may compete with them for power in some universities, especially the Marxists.

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1) *When hundreds of demonstrators were killed during the protests of high school students against a judge's decision to expel a number of their colleagues for age considerations, the motive was to get rid of the students' surplus due to the economic crisis. Shooting, raids and arrests continued for several days, and victims were said to have amounted to thousands (a note from the editor).*

2) *Following the gruesome grinding of the fisherman Mohsen Fikry on October 28, 2016 in Al-Hoceima in the countryside, a peaceful popular movement erupted in various cities and villages of the countryside, lasted for a full year and raised economic, social and human rights demands. It demanded the lifting of militarization from the region. The regime fought the uprising with repression. More than a thousand people were arrested, brought to trial, and sentenced to unjust sentences of up to twenty years, especially for the leaders of the movement. The forces of the left and the Justice and Charity Party have mobilized to defend the victims by providing media, political and judicial support, embracing families, organizing multiple demonstrations and national marches in Rabat, Casablanca and a number of the country's cities.*

3) *The "Makhzen" is the primary tool of the monarchy to impose its authority and implement its policies. It essentially consists of senior security officials, military, judicial, administrative, and religious officials, most political officials, a number of businessmen, media owners, senior contractors of the official "civil society", some senior union officials and others who have influence in power or in proximity to the ones in power.*



## The Moroccan Left: An Organizational and Ideological Crisis?

Mohammad Sammouni

Journalist and sociologist, from Morocco

How did the coordination between currents of the radical left and the Islamist opposition movement (The Justice and Charity Party) transcend the social level that concerns public services issues, to reach political demands that concern the nature of the power system and the overthrowing tyranny? What was the role of the “20 February Movement” during that phase?

Since the 1980s, the Moroccan left had not been able to take the lead in the Moroccan political scene; that was until the emergence of the “Arab Spring” democratic movements, including the 20 February Movement that took to the streets rising against corruption and political tyranny. With the emergence of the youth protest movement on 20 February 2011, the “radical” left parties (the Democratic Way, the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party, the Unified Socialist Party, the National “Ittihadi” Congress, and some left-wing student movements) recovered and formed a unified movement alongside an Islamist opposition current, the “Justice and Charity Group”.

As for the rest of the parties of the left, that were part of the (prematurely aborted) “democratic transition” experience in the 1990s, they remained “institutional” parties, and drifted farther away from the “popular forces”, until they turned into parties of a “leftist ideology” and a “liberal practice”. They became narrowly utilitarian, bringing in notables who can win seats at elections to expand the party’s representation within official state institutions. Their participation in the 2011 protest movement was very dull, with some of the youth of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, and the Party of Progress and Socialism (which was a communist party in its militant past), taking part in the marches and meetings of the 20 February Movement.

### **The Left and the Uprising of 2011**

Immediately after the calls for demonstrations, launched by the “February” youth on social media, groups of left-wing political currents and also the Justice and Charity Party, issued statements announcing their support and participation in the protests that these young people were calling for.

One of the first political currents to announce its support was the Democratic Left Alliance (consisting of the Unified Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Vanguard Party and the “Ittihadi” Congress Party), which announced in a statement on 13 February, 2011 that “the alliance stands beside all popular initiatives demanding true democracy, including the 20 February Movement.”

Three days later, the National Committee of the Democratic Way Party also published an appeal to the Moroccan people, entitled “Let’s all fight

for a decent life and the elimination of the Makhzen's tyranny," which called on all the party's activists to take part enthusiastically in all the popular struggles, including those of the 20 February Movement.

With the emergence of the youth protest movement on 20 February 2011, the "radical" left parties (the Democratic Way, the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party, the Unified Socialist Party, the National "Ittihadi" Congress, and some left-wing student movements) recovered and formed a unified movement with an Islamist opposition current, the "Justice and Charity Group".

On the same day, the national office of the Justice and Charity Group issued a statement affirming its "support for all initiatives calling for the building of a state of freedom, dignity and justice, including the 20 February protests," stressing the peaceful nature of its participation, and calling on "everyone to be vigilant against any potential provocations." The group's political department stressed that stance a day later, when it announced its support for the 20 February protests focusing on "the peacefulness of the sit-ins, respect for differences and diversity in slogans and demands, and caring for the safety of properties."

### **A Left That is Detached from the Street**

The "government's left" parties (the Socialist Union of Popular Forces and the Party of Progress and Socialism), were, overall, no longer engaged in calls for societal change emanating from the street. The first was silent, neither supporting nor rejecting protest calls during the 2011 movement, until it issued an official statement after the 20 February Movement rallies. However, at the same time, the so-called "20 February Unionists", who are members of the "Youth of the Party", issued a statement on 18 February, 2011 announcing the emergence of a current within the Socialist Union that adopts "the full participation in the 20 February movement, in implementation of the right to peaceful demonstration, renouncing all anarchist ways of expression, holding on to territorial integrity and the demand for parliamentary monarchy and universal human rights."

As for the Party of Progress and Socialism, it officially announced in a statement issued by its Political Bureau on 15 February 2011, that "the

party can only engage in organized and responsible political and social movements aimed at achieving democracy and social justice, through employing the mechanisms and methods of peaceful democratic engagement from within the official institutions. It rejects chaos and works to maintain the stability necessary for any progress.” However, on the 20th of February, a signed statement was issued in the name of the “militant activists of the Party of Progress and Socialism participating in the February 20 demonstrations,” affirming “their unconditional support for the demands of the Arab peoples in true democracy and a decent life against the regimes of oppression and tyranny”, considering that “Morocco, much like other countries in the Arab world, is in urgent need for a true democracy based on a modernist constitution that guarantees the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary system.”

The leftist parties that were part of the (prematurely aborted) “democratic transition” experience in 1997, remained “institutional parties”, and drifted farther away from the “popular forces”, until they turned into parties of a “leftist ideology” and a “liberal practice”, to the extent of becoming narrowly utilitarian, bringing in notables who can win seats at elections to expand the party’s representation within official state institutions.

### **The Left and the Islamists**

Since 2011, the Moroccan regime has reshaped the official political scene by “allowing” an Islamist party to enter the government in order to handle the 20 February Movement. This kind of reshaping was also done in 1997, in coordination with the left’s opposition parties at the time, when King Hassan II appointed the “Ittihadi” (Unionist) Abd al-Rahman al-Youssefi as head of a government that was comprised of national parties that had a long history of opposition. Therefore, the alliances or conflicts between the “governmental left” parties and the Islamic Justice and Development Party fall under the logic of a governmental coalition, that is, by consideration of the number of parliamentary seats to be won and how to achieve the parliamentary majority, as well as to consult with the royal palace. These considerations outweigh the ideological alliance or conflict. This explains the sporadic repulsion and attraction in the relationship of the Justice and Development Party with the Socialist Union, which can be

illogical and not based on ideological-political grounds, as was the case with the dispute about forming the 2016 government. It also explains the ongoing alliance with the Party of Progress and Socialism since the 2012 government until now.

With the exception of the Federation of the Democratic Left (which includes the Socialist Unified Party, the Vanguard Party, and the “Ittihadi” Congress, and participates in the elected local institutions and parliament, albeit with a small number of seats), the leftist currents that were and still are in the opposition outside the official institutions have always refused coordination and alliance with the Islamists. Their political conflict has even amounted to physical violence at certain points, especially in universities that have known a history of dispute in the student arena, mainly between students of the Justice and Charity Group, the The “Qa’idiyyin” (Basist) Students, and other leftist currents.

The rapprochement between the Moroccan leftist opposition and the Islamists opposition in the street (the Justice and Charity Group) emerged at the beginning of 2008, through the establishment in several cities of coordination units against the high costs of life and the deterioration of public services. This was the first coordination between opposition currents from the leftist and Islamic sides, as all these initiatives, coordination units, and protests were focused on the social dimension of the high prices and the deterioration of public services, such as water and electricity networks and public cleanliness. These coordination units began to diminish in the beginning of 2011, due to the “solid-core” monopolization of decision-making by the coalition of the Islamists and the radical left parties, which distanced the rest of the leftist currents and individuals from influencing decisions.

In conjunction with the lack of coordination between Islamists and leftists over social issues, the “Arab Spring” movements emerged, demanding the overthrowing of the tyrannical regimes and, at the same time, the 20 February youth also called on social media for protests against corruption and political tyranny. Thus began a more robust political coordination between the currents and parties of the radical left and the Justice and Charity Group. For the first time, they addressed publically their political opposition and protested the political, social, and economic situation in Morocco. Whereas, before that, the two currents only agreed on issues

such as supporting the Palestinian cause or condemning the war in Iraq.

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### **A Liberal Left**

After the protests in the Moroccan street subsided again, and with the rise of the Islamists to power, part of the radical left, whose majority harbored liberal tendencies, chose to polarize in a “partisan federation”, in order to join the elections and become part of the political game. This decision by parties that were earlier supportive of the youth movement demanding “comprehensive” democratic change, exposed that these parties were more than ready to enter the official political spheres with its stakes and political “requirements” for governance.

Right before the parliamentary elections of 2016, the leaders of that left began to sever any link or dialogue with the leaders of the Justice and Charity Group, to the extent of attacking the group in media statements (as Nabila Munib, the coordinator of the federation and general secretary of the Unified Socialist Party, did). All coordination with the Islamic group on the ground was halted, including coordination with regard to the sit-ins and protests condemning the arrests or protesting the sentences of activists of the “Rif movement”. Matters came to the point that one “leftist” current would organize a march condemning the sentences, without the participation of the Justice and Charity Group, while the latter would be calling for another march of solidarity later.

### **A Left with a Mission for Human Rights**

At an early stage in the history of independent Morocco, the radical current within the radical left (the Democratic Way, which contains within it voices

calling for tactical coordination with the Islamists for democratic change and confronting political tyranny), chose to work for human rights, by joining the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, alongside members who were “on the left” of the Socialist Union Party; named “The Comrades of the Martyrs”.

The “human rights’ front” became the arena where left-wing radical currents expressed their political stakes in the public space, by working on issues concerning human rights. However, in parallel, the radical left had not been able to attract large numbers of Moroccan popular groups, not even when local and international political conditions were compatible to their plans. Eventually, most of these left-wing parties, whether radicals or reformists, became hollowed out, with no real presence among the popular bases.



## The Left in Morocco: A Question of Effectiveness

Said Oulfakir

Journalist, from Morocco

The reputation of the left in Morocco was smeared by its adoption of privatization. Leftist parties who had participated in the “rotational government” have approved the selling of institutional shares or entire governmental contracting deals in a historically unprecedented move for the country. As a result, the Moroccan people started to regard the left as nothing but an “exploiter”, selling the people illusions for its own utilitarian purposes.

The fragmented reality of the Moroccan left is due to the absence of an overarching vision or project. In the past, leftists had a social discourse that, despite its many shortcomings, was able to touch the popular and poor classes throughout different economic and social events and crises (droughts, structural adjustment policy, the “years of lead” revolution 1981...) and spread its ideas among people. The Moroccan left has often attributed its failure to the repression it faces. It is not possible to deny the harsh repressive measures with which the ruling authority has struck the left, such as arrests, abuse, kidnapping, accusations of treason, and demonization. However, the discourse of injustice cannot solely account for the left’s failure.

The experience of the “Socialist Union of Popular Forces” (USFP) - the main historical leftist party - has been described as a “Makhzen” experience (1) (meaning that it is related to power, benefits from it, or is contained within its circles). Despite the militant history of many left-wing political entities, their stand against all forms of tyranny and corruption and their fierce demand for change and enlightenment, their participation in what is known as the “rotation government” in the late 1990s has altered this picture.

That government made mistakes, errors and transgressions to the extent that some of its ministers and politicians became involved in cases of corruption. Worse, however, was its adoption of a policy of privatization, through its approval of selling institutional shares or entire governmental contracting deals, unprecedented in the history of the country. As a result, Moroccans started to regard the left as nothing but an “exploiter”, selling them illusions for its own utilitarian purposes.

“The left is not responsible for these errors.” Some leftists exonerate themselves from this political experience, to the point that they now classify the “Socialist Union of Popular Forces” and the “Party of Progress and Socialism” as non-left parties. In their view, these are “Makhzen”, “Administrative” parties. Many regard this experience as the beginning of the downhill slide of the Moroccan left. The left-wing Democratic Way Party considered this a complete surrender to the “Makhzen”, as the rotation happened purely within the power elite’s circles, that is, a continuation and strengthening of the Makhzen’s power, which has helped the latter to overcome the deep economic crisis that the former king called “a risk of

cardiac arrest.” This “happened at the expense of the mainly impoverished and industrious groups, and facilitated a swift transfer of power from one king to another.” (2)

### **The Left and The Parliamentary Monarchy**

Since the beginning of the “20 February” movement in 2011, loud voices of opposition have been calling for the removal of corruption and tyranny. At this stage, the left, represented in the parties of the “Federation of the Democratic Left”, began to demand a parliamentary monarchy, within the framework of the current political system. The left participates in elections that do not usually respect democratic conditions and transparency, and are manipulated to accommodate the interests and balances of political scores that satisfy the ruling class. “We do not want to remove the king, but to further strengthen him.” Omar Belafrije responds to those who question the intentions of his political bloc, confirming that a parliamentary monarchy would safeguard the king’s prestige while, at the same time, guaranteeing the cohesion and stability of the country. “Logically, whoever rules must be held accountable, yet we do not want and we cannot hold the king accountable. His status and prestige must be safeguarded, whereas the normal procedures must be taken care of by the government. If the Moroccans do not like these procedures, they can protest and vote against them. But if they do not like the King’s decisions, what can they do?” (3)

“We do not want to remove the king, but to further strengthen him.” Omar Belafrije responds to those who question the propositions of his political bloc, as he confirms that a parliamentary monarchy would safeguard the king’s prestige while, at the same time, guaranteeing the cohesion and stability of the country.

The Radical Left movement, represented in the “Democratic Way Party”, has avoided, for its part, raising the slogan of a “Parliamentary monarchy”. To them, the issue goes beyond that slogan and involves a struggle that every Moroccan should partake in, to break with all forms of feudalism and wild capitalism and to establish a parliamentary system governed by “a constitution of the people”, formulated by an elected constituent assembly. The party also stands against monarchy, and its position stems

from philosophical and intellectual arguments which see monarchy as a consecration of reactionary patriarchy, tyranny and control.

### **The Left and Regional Movements**

Since the early days of the Rif movement (Hirak Al-Rif) in Morocco, after a fish vendor was killed in October 2016, the Federation of the Democratic Left, the Democratic Way Party, and organizations affiliated with the left, have backed the popular movements of Al Hoceima by issuing strong statements on the human rights' violations committed against protesters. They have also organized marches and sit-ins to support the demands of the rural people. During this period, the Secretary-General of the Unified Socialist Party, Nabila Munib, criticized the government and attacked it for what she described as being "a poor response" to the demands of the people in the streets. She also stood against the issuing of a communiqué by the government's majority which accused some Rifan activists of separatism and betrayal.

From the beginning, Leftist activists and legal professionals took action by establishing the "National Committee to Support the Rif Movements". The first thing this committee did was to organize a national solidarity convoy departing from all regions of the country towards the city of "Al-Hoceima" to support the demands in the countryside. However, this support convoy never happened due to insufficient response. This failure did not prevent other left-wing activists from taking the lead again. The leftist activist and former political prisoner, Salah Al-Wadii', called for visiting Al-Hoceima in June of 2017, accompanied by civil and human rights figures. The purpose was to meet the activists of the movement, and attempt to act as mediators between them and the authorities to reach a solution to the crisis. However, the protesters refused the initiative, and demanded the release of their detainees first. Despite being limited to economic and social demands, the position of the Federation of the Democratic Left was a wager on winning people's sympathy, and the federation employed it to criticize concepts such as "neoliberalism", demand the distribution of wealth and social justice, and raise other mottos such as "Freedom and Human Dignity". However, these deeds were criticized and considered as mere showcasing in front of the government, and an attempt to gather supporters for the upcoming elections as the Democratic Left had only won two seats in Parliament during the 2016 elections.

The radical left was not silent about the uprisings and protests that occurred in the post-2011 period. It was present in the streets in the various marches and sit-ins that it had called for. The strongly-worded statements and reports against the authority, represented by the “Makhzen”, accused the authority of not responding to the demands of the protesters and standing behind the violations and police arbitrariness. In contrast to this loud and clear radical approach screaming in the face of the political system, the Parliament’s left, or the so-called reformist left (The Federation of the Democratic Left) merely pointed a finger at the government, not daring to do as much as to touch upon the topic of the “deep state”, as it is referred to in the media.

**The leftist opposition took the regional “Rif” movements as an opportunity to re-emerge into the streets, and as a compensation for the fading of the “20 February” movement. However, its new actions were criticized and considered as mere showcasing in front of the government, and an attempt to gather supporters for the upcoming elections, since it has only won two seats in Parliament during the 2016 elections.**

In fact, the sociological examination does find stark differences in the social / class origins of the two streams. Not all members of the federation’s parties are similar to Omar Belafrije, the bourgeois urban dweller. Rather, it includes mostly middle-class people, university professors, researchers, writers, intellectuals, engineers, doctors, and contractors. Whereas the radical left organizations mostly attract university students and university graduates from the unemployed, political activists, organization-workers, civilians, artists, and independent intellectuals.

The federation’s parties try to exploit their presence within the official institutions, while the radical left tries to win over some trade unions and professional syndicates (such as the Democratic Confederation of Labor) and civil and human rights associations (such as the Moroccan Association for Human Rights or the feminist and Berber movements). Yet, in spite of its desperate defense of the vulnerable classes and the marginal geographies, the presence of the radical left among the masses, both organizationally and ideologically, remains almost nonexistent in these areas. In a way, the disagreement between the two left-wing groups is essentially cultural and intellectual. The differences appear on the political level, as the radical left

strongly opposes the current state policies represented in the “Makhzen” and deems it a barrier to the achievement of the demands of freedom, social justice and human dignity, while the reformist left, represented in the parties of the Federation of the Democratic Left, sees no problem at all in opposing the authority from within.

### **The Left and Political Islam: Conflict and Amity**

During the revolutionary spring of the “February 20” protests, the leftists and the Islamic Justice and Charity Group were on good terms. There was an agreement on the levels of planning, goals, slogans, and movements in the street. The amity lasted a few months and produced a popular movement that attracted various societal, union, independent, and factional groups, garnering a general popular approval in the country.

In December 2011, the Justice and Charity Group withdrew from the February 20 movement. An exchange of accusations between the left and the Islamists commenced: left-wing activists accused the Islamists of betraying the covenant when they abandoned the streets suddenly and without justifications or explanations. It was a decision shrouded in a lot of ambiguity, intriguing the media and raising many questions and analyzes. The group, for its part, justified the departure, stating that the movement had “exhausted all its energy and slogans since the constitution has been amended.” Moreover, the “brothers” of the group in the “Justice and Development Party” had won the early election.

In the beginning of 2018, the separation was announced unilaterally. In January 2018, the comrades of the “Unified Socialist Party” gathered for their fourth convention and invited all political and factional bodies and committees from the opposition and the government alike, except for figures with the Islamic parties’ figures. The step was a strong indicator of a “divorce” heavy with criticism, and an attack on the “Justice and Development Party” that had “killed off the gains of the popular class” and “engaged in the corruption chain rather than fighting against it.” The party, affiliated with the Federation of the Democratic Left did not only criticize the Islamists of the government, but also implicitly blamed the “Justice and Charity Group” for the failure of the February 20 Movement because of what it considered “the hegemony of Islamist and extremist slogans in its marches, and the absence of a central slogan that condenses the democratic project.” (4)

The separation between left-wing parliamentary opposition (the Federation of the Democratic Left) and the Islamists cannot be explained by certain events such as the Islamic “justice parties” leaving the streets, or because the government Islamists abandoned the fight against corruption. The disagreement is fundamentally ideological. The leftists believe that these movements stand in the way of building progressive societies in which freedom and equality between genders prevail, and there is no agreement over the concept of a “caliphate state” (adopted by the “Justice and Charity Group”), which the former see as “new tyranny, not different from that of the “Makhzen”.

**Despite the militant history of many left-wing political entities, their stand against all forms of tyranny and corruption, and their fierce demand for change and enlightenment, their participation in what is known as the “rotation government” in the late 1990s has altered this picture. That government committed mistakes, errors and transgressions to the extent that some of its ministers and politicians became involved in cases of corruption. Worse, however, was its adoption of a policy of privatization.**

Initially, the reformist left, represented by the “Unified Socialist Party” (which later became a member of the Federation of the Democratic Left that emerged in 2014), welcomed the relationship with the “justice parties”, but their proximity soon turned into a struggle over the substantive demands. While the reformist left demanded establishing a parliamentary monarchy, the “justice parties” stressed the demand of a “democratic and popular constitution” that was interpreted as an implicit expression of the slogan “toppling the system”.

On the other hand, no dispute appears to be present between the Islamic group and the leftists of the Democratic Way; they do communicate. Both parties express their complete refusal to participate in any election. According to them, there is no real and effective democracy under a political system that completely controls the electoral processes. The difference between the two entities in terms of ideology and intellectual reference did not prevent them from agreeing, at least on the grounds of fighting corruption and tyranny and establishing social justice in the country. They are close to each other in terms of their essential vision for a desired

political system, which would only be achieved by implementing change. The Democratic Way seeks to change the existing “Makhzen” system and replace it with a socialist system that eliminates class discrimination, while the “Justice and Charity Group” seeks to revitalize and establish a “caliphate” system.

### **An Attempt to Gather the Pieces**

In 2014, the “comrades” decided to confer in order to establish a political bloc that includes left-wing parties, namely “the Unified Socialist Union”, “the Vanguard Social Democratic Party”, and “the National Ittihadi Congress”. The Democratic Way Party did not join this bloc because it disagreed with the parties over the nature and form of government. The Federation’s parties roots for a parliamentary monarchy, while the Democratic Way believes that the form of government should express the will of the people through a democratic constitution.

But “why” was the Federation established?... Because it aspired to integrate and unite the “family of the left”, but also to be a “third way” opposed to what it described as the “fundamentalist blocs”, whether it is the authority of the “Makhzen” or Islamic parties such as “the Justice and Development Party”. This discourse has been considered exclusionary for Islamists, however, the federation defends its proposition based on objective givens and not as an ideological hostility to a specific party. It stresses that Benkirane and his brothers have destroyed the gains of Moroccans for a decent life and have targeted the people’s natural rights while adopting neoliberal policies (liberalizing the prices of fuel and basic materials, steering towards the privatization of social sectors).

The Federation is well aware of the difficulties of merging the forces of the left. According to them, harsh self-criticism and assessment are needed, the “comrades” must try to “downsize some inflated egos” and accept the reality that different powers, balances and interests would continue to govern the scene. They see the positions of the radical left as utopian, unrealistic, and merely an exhibiting of protest. After its foundation, the critical testing phase was the elections. The Federation won two seats in Parliament during the 2016 election, which was less than what was expected. Omar Belafrije and Mustafa El-Shennawi became the representatives of the Federation in the Parliament. From the very

first day of the opening parliamentary session, they refused to wear the red Tarboush (traditional headwear) and considered it a symbol of the “Makhzen” and its authoritarianism. Some considered this refusal to be mere “media stunt”, but months later, the two deputies began voting with a “No” and discussed every small and big detail in the Parliament: they objected to the budgets of the royal palace and the army and demanded to discuss their expenses, cancel the salaries of parliamentarians, abolish all forms of economic rent, reconsider the tax law, and enhance the public education and public social services sectors by making their budgets larger.

All of this is very well. It is consistent with the stances of the leftists in the eighties and the nineties, as well as with those of the Islamists of the third millennium when they were in the parliamentary opposition (the Justice and Development Party, before it took over the government). A citizen once asked Omar Belafrije (5): “What guarantees that you will always commit to your principles?” He replied, “the guarantor is a parliamentary monarchy.” Of course, establishing parliamentary monarchy cannot be a guarantor without fighting corruption and its affiliations, or withdrawing from the struggle clean-handed, with honor. Who is capable of this? No one among those who have had any political positions within the official institutions has taken this step.

The experience of the leftist opposition, whether of those who work within official institutions such as the parties of the Federation of the Democratic Left, or others who have decided to stay outside power such as the Democratic Way Party, is loaded with a lot of condemning statements and protests, while it suffers a scarcity in presenting a modernist leftist project that touches on the concerns and expectations of the Moroccan people in all their various affiliations and directions. For the time being, this leftist current has not brought about the desired change, and it is, in any case, invited to renew its blood, rejuvenate its elites, break with the hierarchical organizational structures and with all forms of bureaucracy. Otherwise, it will continue to inhibit the effectiveness of its projects.

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- 1) *The “Makhzen” refers to the state / center of authority.*
  - 2) *According to the opinion of the leader of the “Democratic Way” party, Abdullah Al-Hareef.*
  - 3) *From an interview with a local website.*
  - 4) *A statement issued by the Unified Socialist Party on February 20, 2016.*
  - 5) *During a conference organized by the leader of the Federation of the Democratic Left, Omar Belafrije, in the city of Agadir during June, 2018. “You make promises like other parties... What is the guarantor of your commitment to your principles?”, a citizen asks, to which Belafrije responds, “Establishing the parliamentary monarchy alone is the guarantor.”*

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# The Left in the Arab Region and the Question of Deficiencies

## Case Studies

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Is a leftist whoever “claims” that s/he is, or one who adopts certain ideological concepts? And, what does it mean to be a leftist today in the region?

The texts of this folder cover the experiences of the left in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco in the sectors of the students and workers’ movements with a focus on the geographies of anger and their numerous outposts.

Rabab Al Mahdi has inaugurated these research papers with a question that accurately sums up the paradox: “Has the left died while its essence still mobilizes people?”. The demands for social justice, bread, freedom and equality which have imploded in 2011 represent the “essence” that the researcher refers to.

So, where are the deficiencies? How do we identify them and shape their contours without falling into easy ready-made answers? What is the place of the ideological defeat and the lack of political imagination which are the two most important features of our topic?