



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice Tunisia

Tunisia – TUN35892 – Movement of
Socialist Democrats

15 December 2009

- 1 Please provide a brief history of Tunisian Democratic Socialist Party: when formed, leader/s, party colours, symbols etc.**
- 2 Has it ever been banned and if so when?**
- 3 Has it changed its name to Movement of Socialist Democrats and if so when?**

Origins of the Movement of Socialist Democrats

No references have been found on a Tunisian politically party, legal or otherwise, called the Democratic Socialist Party. Some sources do refer to the Democratic Socialist Movement, including the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.¹ According to the Broadleft website, the Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) split from the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) Party in 1978.²

The Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) was founded by Ahmad Mestiri, formerly a minister in the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) government. According to Answers.com, the MDS is not radically different from the RCD, simply with a greater emphasis on Arab nationalism and socialism.³

In her 1995 publication *Human Rights and Reform – Changing the Face of North African Politics*, Susan E. Waltz states that Ahmed Mestiri was the interior minister in the Tunisian government before being expelled “in the early 1970s”. Mestiri and other ‘liberal dissidents’ began secretly meeting “in the mid 1970s”; however, the MDS was not formally organised until 1983. According to Waltz, “[t]hese men sought not to overthrow a system, but to reform and redirect it... By working within a framework intellectually acceptable to the government while exposing internal contradictions, Tunisian liberals hoped to force the political system open and reserve a place for themselves within it”:

After the former interior minister Ahmed Mestiri and a handful of dissidents were expelled from the ruling PSD in the early 1970s, a small group of self-identified “liberals” began to meet privately to discuss means of breathing new life into their proposed program of democratic reform. Among the three principals—Mestiri, Hassib Ben Ammar, and Caid Essebsi—there was a divergence of position. Essebsi hoped eventually to return to the party, Mestiri advocated founding an opposition party, and Ben Ammar wanted to exert pressure through indirect political means. Out of their discussions the Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) was

¹ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1998, *TUN30091.E Tunisia: Whether Mohamed Mouadda and Khemais Chammari are connected to the Tunis section of the Democratic Socialist Movement (MDS) and circumstances of their prison sentences in 1995*, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6aad71b.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 1

² ‘Leftist Parties of the World – Tunisia’ 2004, Broadleft website, 23 June <http://www.broadleft.org/tn.htm> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 2

³ ‘Political Parties in Tunisia’ 2009, Answers.Com <http://www.answers.com/topic/political-parties-in-tunisia> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 3

born, but so, too, were the proposal for a National Council of Public Liberties and in time the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH).

The formal structures of a political party began to emerge in the mid 1970s, although the MDS was not officially recognized until 1983. One of its standing committees, revolving at first around Ben Ammar, reported regularly on work to advance respect for civil and political liberties. This working group, made up of Ben Ammar, Hammouda Ben Slama, Dali Jazi, Habib Boulares, and Mohammed Moadda, sought primarily to exert liberalizing pressures on the political system. Its focus was on political process; the promotion of human rights served as a vehicle to that end rather than as a cause in its own right. Most of those involved were already men in their forties with a substantial investment in Tunisia's political system. Jazi was a lawyer, Moadda a university professor, and Ben Slama a practicing physician. Boulares, a promising young journalist, had already occupied a ministerial post, as had Ben Ammar. These men sought not to overthrow a system, but to reform and redirect it. Tunisia had already ratified the ICCPR and the ICESCR, and its government claimed to ensure the protection of political liberties. By working within a framework intellectually acceptable to the government while exposing internal contradictions, Tunisian liberals hoped to force the political system open and reserve a place for themselves within it.⁴

An article in *The Middle East Report* entitled 'Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia' states that after an initial period of pluralism following his coup, President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's rule became increasingly authoritarian. This "slide into deeper authoritarianism" included a refusal to legalise politically active civil society organisations and mass arrests:

By late 1988, however, the bloom had begun to fade. Ben 'Ali refused to legalize Hizb an-Nahdha (The Renaissance Party), the country's largest Islamist organization, even though the party pledged to accept the rules of competitive democracy. And despite opposition demands for proportional legislative elections, the 1989 electoral code maintained the old majority list system. Those rules, combined with restrictions on media access and other interferences, allowed Ben 'Ali's RCD to win every seat in the April 1989 elections.

Those elections marked the end of Ben 'Ali's honeymoon and the beginning of Tunisia's slide into deeper authoritarianism. Angered by their exclusion from parliament despite strong support for their candidates who ran as independents, an-Nahdha activists intensified protests at the university and in working class neighbourhoods. The government, in turn, stepped up its repression against an-Nahdha and the Tunisian Communist Workers' Party (POCT). Late-night raids and house-to-house searches became commonplace in some neighbourhoods. Stories of torture under interrogation and military court convictions multiplied. The campaign to crush an-Nahdha intensified in 1991 following an attack on an RCD office in the Bab Souika area of Tunis and after the government claimed that security forces had uncovered a plot to topple the regime. Susan Waltz reports that the government's extensive dragnet hauled in more than 8,000 individuals between 1990 and 1992.⁵

No sources unequivocally state that the Movement of Socialist Democrats was formally banned during this period; however, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada does state that the MDS was ordered to "refrain from any political activity". Sources indicate that a number of leading figures in the MDS were arrested and imprisoned. In 2005 the Tunisian League for Human Rights, which was established by the same group of liberals as the MDS

⁴ Waltz, S.E. 1995, *Human Rights and Reform – Changing the Face of North African Politics*, University of California website

<http://www.escholarship.org/editions/view?docId=ft2t1nblvf&doc.view=content&chunk.id=d0e3024&toc.depth=1&anchor.id=0&brand=eschol> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 4

⁵ Alexander, C. 1997, 'Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia', *Middle East Report*, Vol 205, October-December <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer205/alex.htm> – Accessed 14 December 14, 2009 – Attachment 5

according to Susan E. Waltz, was closed due to legal proceedings according to Reporters Without Borders in their annual report on Tunisia entitled ‘Tunisia – the Courage to Report’.⁶

According to Amnesty International, Khemais Chammari, described as “a member of parliament for the opposition party Mouvement des démocrates socialistes (Movement of Socialist Democrats)” was arrested and imprisoned in April 1996 for five years. However, in December of 1996 he was released on condition that he be “kept under constant police surveillance and his passport was confiscated.”⁷ The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) describes Khemais Chammari as “a human rights activist and a member of parliament representing the opposition party, Movement of Democratic Socialists (MDS).” The IRB continues, stating that “[i]n July 1996 he was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment on charges of ‘disclosing national secrets to a foreign power,’ which he denies... He was accused of disclosing information about the judicial investigation into the case of MDS President Mohamed Mouadda, prisoner of conscience, who was sentenced in February 1996 to 11 years’ imprisonment on charges of having secret relations with a foreign power.”⁸

In 2002 Mohamed Moaada, described by the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation as the “head of a dissident wing of the Movement of Socialist Democrats”, was released after 7 months in prison. According to the Centre’s 9 February 2002 edition of Middle East Week in Review, “no explanation was given for his early release.”⁹ According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Mohamed Mouadda (chairman) and Khemais Chammari, the first sentenced to 12 years in prison in October 1995, the second to 5 years in July 1995, were released conditionally from jail on 30 December 1996...The MDS was ordered by government to refrain from any political activity.”¹⁰

In 1995 Amnesty International reported that Ameer El Beji, a member of the MDS was arrested on 9 November 1994. “The following day his family was informed that he had committed suicide by hanging himself with a blanket from the window of his cell.”¹¹

Current Political Status of the MDS

In 2004 election coverage, *BBC News* reported that, “The Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) is the second largest party in parliament, with 13 seats. Although an opposition party, it has endorsed Mr Ben Ali’s re-election bid saying this will ‘complete the process of

⁶ Reporters Without Borders 2009, *Tunisia – The Courage to Report*, RWB website, February http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Mission_Nov_08_GB_PDF_.pdf – Accessed 15 December 2009 – Attachment 6

⁷ Amnesty International 1997, *Tunisia – A Widening Circle Of Repression*, AI website <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/MDE30/025/1997/fr/246ae394-ea79-11dd-b05d-65164b228191/mde300251997en.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 7

⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1998, *TUN30091.E Tunisia: Whether Mohamed Mouadda and Khemais Chammari are connected to the Tunis section of the Democratic Socialist Movement (MDS) and circumstances of their prison sentences in 1995*, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6aad71b.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 1

⁹ ‘Middle East Week in Review’ 2002, Vol. 2, Issue 2, Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation website, 9 February, <http://www.centerpeace.org/MEWIR/Volume%202/MEWIR%20Vol%202%20Issue%202.PDF> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 8

¹⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1998, *TUN30089.E Tunisia: Democratic Socialist Movement (MDS), its founders, history, headquarters, leaders and treatment of its members from 1995 to 1998*, Refworld, 1 September <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6abb060.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 9

¹¹ Amnesty International 1995, *Tunisia: Repression thrives on impunity*, AI website <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE30/019/1995/en/ddca8bb2-eb2c-11dd-92ac-295bdf97101f/mde300191995en.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 10

democratic pluralism.”¹² In the October 2009 elections, the Movement of Socialist Democrats won 16 seats.¹³

A June 2009 report entitled ‘Tunisia: The Life of Others’, written by Kristina Kausch for the Madrid-based Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), states that the registration of a new political party in Tunisia is rare and the decision for approval is possibly made by President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. According to Kausch, there is an unspoken understanding between legal parties and the President; “you are being legalised so we can talk about pluralism, but the condition is that you stay on the margin and play by our rules.”¹⁴

The current leader of the Movement of Socialist Democrats is Ismail Boulahya according to the Experience Tunisia website.¹⁵ The MDS did not field a candidate in the October 2009 Presidential elections. According to Reporters without Border the Constitutional Council only approved four candidates. It is not clear from the 23 October article, entitled ‘Election campaign impossible for opposition media’, whether the MDS submitted a candidate for approval and was rejected by the council:

The Constitutional Council has validated four candidates for the presidency. The outgoing president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), Mohamed Bouchiha of the Party of People’s Unity (PUP), Ahmed Inoubli of the Unionist Democratic Union (UDU) and Ahmed Brahim for Ettajdid (former communist party), who distinguishes himself from the other candidates by refusing to be just an ‘extra’ to give a sheen of “democracy”.¹⁶

List of Attachments

1. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1998, *TUN30091.E Tunisia: Whether Mohamed Mouadda and Khemais Chammari are connected to the Tunis section of the Democratic Socialist Movement (MDS) and circumstances of their prison sentences in 1995*, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6aad71b.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
2. ‘Leftist Parties of the World – Tunisia’ 2004, Broadleft website, 23 June <http://www.broadleft.org/tn.htm> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
3. ‘Political Parties in Tunisia’ 2009, Answers.Com <http://www.answers.com/topic/political-parties-in-tunisia> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
4. Waltz, S.E. 1995, *Human Rights and Reform – Changing the Face of North African Politics*, University of California website <http://www.escholarship.org/editions/view?docId=ft2t1nb1vf&doc.view=content&chunk.id=d0e3024&toc.depth=1&anchor.id=0&brand=eschol> – Accessed 14 December 2009.

¹² “. ‘Tunisia Votes’ 2004, *BBC News*, 23 October http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle_east/3754410.stm – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 11

¹³ Yahia, M. & Arfaoui, J. 2009, ‘Tunisia opposition wins quarter of Parliament seats’, Magharebia website http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/10/27/feature-03 – Accessed 14 December 14 2009 – Attachment 12

¹⁴ Kausch, K. 2009, *Tunisia: The Life of Others*, FRIDE website, June www.fride.org/descarga/FRIDE_WP85_INGLES_FINAL.pdf – Accessed 14 December 2009 – Attachment 13

¹⁵ ‘Tunisia’ (undated), Experience Tunisia website <http://www.experiencetunisia.info/templates/subpage1.php?id=111> – Accessed 15 December 2009 – Attachment 14

¹⁶ ‘Election campaign impossible for opposition media’ 2009, Reporters Without Borders, 23 October http://www.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=34826 – Accessed 15 December 2009 – Attachment 15

5. Alexander, C. 1997, 'Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia', *Middle East Report*, Vol 205, October-December <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer205/alex.htm> – Accessed 14 December 14, 2009.
6. Reporters Without Borders 2009, *Tunisia – The Courage to Report*, RWB website, February http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Mission_Nov_08_GB_PDF_.pdf – Accessed 15 December 2009.
7. Amnesty International 1997, *Tunisia – A Widening Circle Of Repression*, AI website <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/MDE30/025/1997/fr/246ae394-ea79-11dd-b05d-65164b228191/mde300251997en.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
8. 'Middle East Week in Review' 2002, Vol. 2, Issue 2, Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation website, 9 February, <http://www.centerpeace.org/MEWIR/Volume%202/MEWIR%20Vol%202%20Issue%202.PDF> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
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10. Amnesty International 1995, *Tunisia: Repression thrives on impunity*, AI website <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE30/019/1995/en/ddca8bb2-eb2c-11dd-92ac-295bdf97101f/mde300191995en.html> – Accessed 14 December 2009.
11. 'Tunisia Votes' 2004, *BBC News*, 23 October http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle_east/3754410.stm – Accessed 14 December 2009.
12. Yahia, M. & Arfaoui, J. 2009, 'Tunisia opposition wins quarter of Parliament seats', Magharebia website http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/10/27/feature-03 – Accessed 14 December 14 2009.
13. Kausch, K. 2009, *Tunisia: The Life of Others*, FRIDE website, June www.fride.org/descarga/FRIDE_WP85_INGLES_FINAL.pdf - Accessed 14 December 2009.
14. 'Tunisia' (undated), Experience Tunisia website <http://www.experiencetunisia.info/templates/subpage1.php?id=111> – Accessed 15 December 2009.
15. 'Election campaign impossible for opposition media' 2009, Reporters Without Borders, 23 October http://www.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=34826 – Accessed 15 December 2009.