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Is the Political Consensus Over for Tunisia?

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Tunisian Political Consensus in Crisis

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Battle of the presidencies	4
Ennahda: Consensus in turmoil and its future	6
The Chahed-Essebsi Schism	7
Where is the Crisis Headed?	8

Introduction

The Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi has recently announced the termination of the five-year consensus with Ennahda party¹. He has also called for the departure of Youssef Chahed's government. Although Essebsi's statements come as no surprise, considering the ongoing political crisis in Tunisia, the Tunisian political scene has been flung wide open to several possibilities and faces a rocky road to re-formation.

Battle of the Presidencies

The declared dispute between Carthage (the seat of the Presidency) and Kasbah (the seat of the Prime Minister) did not emerge in the last few weeks, but dates back to January 2018, when Essebsi invited the parties signatory to the Carthage Declaration², which forms the basis of the National Unity Government, to a meeting to put together a new roadmap for government action. This subsequently became known as the "Carthage Declaration II", but was not signed because of disagreement over item 43. This core item called for government change and, implicitly, the departure of the Chahed government. The rest of the items are related to economic, social and security matters and do not differ from the first Carthage Declaration.

¹See: "Dialogue of the President of the Republic on Monday, September 24, 2018 on the *Tunisian Dialogue channel*, Facebook, 24/9/2018, last accessed 30/9/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2E8bMpl>

²The Carthage Document is an agreement signed by nine political parties as well as the UGTT, the Union of Industry, Commerce, and Crafts (UTICA), and the Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP). For more, see: Sarah Feuer, "A National Unity Government for Tunisia, *The Washington Institute*, 12/08/2016, last accessed 30/9/2018, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-national-unity-government-for-tunisia>

Nidaa Tounes, the Tunisian General Labour Union (TGU) and some less influential parties insisted on the departure of the government while, Ennahda insisted on maintaining "government stability", prompting President Essebsi to suspend the Carthage Declaration. The political crisis subsequently entered a new phase, in which the political consensus that had characterized Tunisian government since the "national dialogue" in 2013 crumbled. It has been replaced by a new policy based on partisan and parliamentary balances of power. This was after Ennahda became the largest bloc, by 68, and the Nidaa Tounes bloc fell to third place due to the loss of many of its members to Chahed's National Coalition party. Ennahda also consolidated its position by coming first place in the last municipal elections (2018), compared with Nidaa Tounes, who placed third after the independent lists³.

The intense dispute between the Presidency and the Government goes beyond divergent visions of major programs and options for the government. It is an extension of the internal crises experienced by Nidaa Tounes since its inaugural year following the 2014 elections. Shortly thereafter, before the elections conflicting opinions began to emerge about whether on President Essebsi would be able to form a political entity capable of competing with the Ennahda movement without giving much consideration to organization, structure, institutions or program. In September 2015, the secretary general, Mohsen Marzouk left the party, taking with him a group of cadres, members and deputies, to form the Machrouu Tounes party. Eventually the resignations reached the point that Nidaa Tounes' parliamentary bloc sank from first place to third.

Moreover, conflicts between Nidaa Tounes leaders over their own interests have further weakened the party. Since Essebsi, who has headed the party since its establishment in June 2012, gave up his leadership in order to assume the presidency, the upper structures have become the scene of a hidden power struggle that has gradually turned into open warfare between a number of personalities who see themselves as qualified to fill Essebsi's vacuum. Executive Director Hafez Caid Essebsi was present at various stages of the power struggle within the party, giving the impression that a battle was raging between the ambition of various leaders to advance their status on the one hand, and the President and his family's attempts to consolidate their influence and future political position on the other.

³ "Municipal Elections Results and their Repercussions in Tunisia," The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15/5/2018, last accessed 1/10/2018, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Municipal-Elections-in-Tunisia-Results-and-Implications.aspx>

Ennahda: Consensus in Turmoil and its Future

After winning the 2014 elections with a slight lead over Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes formed the Habib Essid government, bringing in a limited number of Ennahda ministers but maintaining the majority of ministries for themselves. This participation was considered by many to represent a breakthrough in a regional and international discourse dominated by calls to exclude and eradicate political Islam. Others argued that it was not so much a choice as an electoral inevitability, considering the tight margin of victory that precluded one political trend monopolising government. It also appeased broad popular demographics and calls from external forces to maintain relative stability in Tunisia through the calculated inclusion of Ennahda, despite the symbolism of this participation.

Ennahda's participation in the successive post-2014 governments (the first Essid government and the Chahed government before and after amendments) did not carry much parliamentary weight. It did however contribute to fuelling the ongoing conflict within Nidaa Tounes, splitting the party between those who prioritised maintaining the party consensus and those who refused to accommodate any kind of political Islam. The secularists in particular, who are for some reason considered leftists, found Ennahda's participation difficult to swallow. Having said that, the inclusion of Ennahda was not the main and direct cause in this conflict.

Equally, the consensus has not prevented the occasional voicing of dissatisfaction with this decision, which some believe has imposed a heavy electoral and political price on Ennahda – in spite of the commitment of the movement's leadership to consensus discourse⁴. The dispute between those who call to preserve the détente with President Essebsi and those who call for his removal and support the stability of Chahed's government has recently entered a new phase. A letter sent by several Ennahda leaders to party president Rached al-Ghannouchi, a few days after Essebsi's announcement that consensus with Ennahda had been terminated, primarily stressed the need to maintain the agreement with Essebsi and not rely on a new agreement with Chahed⁵. These forces fear that Chahed will not be able to put together a strong secularist alternative to Essebsi in the secularist-Islamist

⁴ Ennahda's share of votes declined compared to the parliamentary elections in 2014, despite coming first in the recent municipal elections (2018). See "Municipal Elections Results and their Repercussions in Tunisia,"

⁵ See: "Ennahda Leaders send a Letter to Ghannouchi", Mosaique FM Website, 2/10/2018, seen on 3/10/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2C21Ta5>

alliance needed by Ennahda, nor work up strong support for the government in the process of democratic transition. The mere emergence of conflicting visions within Ennahda, a party known for keeping disputes between its leadership within its organisational structures, is an indicator of just how critical this moment is for the party. But this conflict is yet to reach the stage of fragmentation witnessed in Nidaa Tounes.

The Chahed–Essebsi Schism

Youssef Chahed was not known for his political or activist experience before joining the Essid government as minister of local development in 2016, with the exception of his brief involvement in the Republican Party and then his departure to join Nidaa Tounes. Chahed was not discussed by the parties that met under the so-called "Carthage Declaration" in their search for an alternative to former Prime Minister Habib Essid until he was proposed by President Essebsi in a move that surprised observers of the Tunisian political scene. Some observers suggested that his lack of political experience and his recent arrival to government were the real motive behind this decision – although at the time the President did not give his reasons for choosing Chahed as head of the National Unity Government – as in their view it would be easy to transform him into a mere "First Minister" who would carry out his work under the power of the President. Under the Constitution the President is granted less powers than the Prime Minister, a provision which Essebsi has expressed his dissatisfaction with on more than one occasion.

Despite relative mutual flexibility between Chahed and Essebsi in the first year of Chahed's government, news of disputes quickly spread across the media in the second year. Chahed did not simply play the role of "first minister" in the President's Government, but began to act as actual prime minister. The President was present for all of the various stages of the conflict. Although the apparent disagreement was then between Chahed and Essebsi's son Hafez, Executive Director of Nidaa Tounes, discussing Hafez Essebsi's ambitions is not possible outside the context of his father's authority. Chahed's speech on 29 May 2018 holding the president's son responsible and accusing him of destroying the party⁶ is a clear indication that fragmentation within Nidaa Tounes has escalated, and that the rift in the relationship between the prime minister and the president will be difficult to rectify.

⁶Youssef Chahed speech 29/5/2018, YouTube, 29/5/2018, last accessed 3/10/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2OJ4RqD>

Where is the Crisis Headed?

Essebsi has so far refused to make use of Chapter 99 of the Constitution, which gives him the right to call a vote of no confidence in the government. This is despite advising Prime Minister Chahed to go to Parliament to renew confidence in his government. It seems the President fears that any attempt to force a vote of no confidence would fail considering the expected votes of the Ennahda bloc and dissident MPs from Nidaa Tounes, who together represent an absolute majority in favor of the Chahed government. This would represent another defeat for the President by the Prime Minister.

With his announcement terminating the consensus, along with the decline of Nidaa Tounes' parliamentary bloc in favor of the National Coalition bloc loyal to Chahed, and the continued stream of resignations from his party, the President has found the political balance weighing against him and his room to maneuver reduced only one year ahead of the legislative and presidential elections scheduled for late 2019. The President has assured Tunisians that the elections will be held on schedule without disclosing, as yet, what his role in them will be.

It is unlikely that a political veteran like the incumbent President will step down, despite a notable decline in his political presence compared to the beginning of his term in 2014. From another perspective, the debate among Ennahda leaders about disengaging from consensus with the President and his party shows a desire to maintain a minimum level of communication with him. This is unlikely to bring back the status quo of the past four years, however, especially given recent events. On 4 October 2018, the Popular Front (a coalition of nationalist and leftist parties) held a press conference, in an attempt to re-ignite polarization by raising the assassination of leftist leader Chokri Belaid. They explicitly accused Ennahda of forming a covert wing, in cooperation with regional and international actors, directly involved in the assassination of Belaid⁷. This was denied by Ennahda, and Sufian al-Sulaiti, spokesman for Tunisia's counter-terrorism apparatus. Al-Sulaiti stressed the need to move away from this case and to distance the judicial authority from disputes.

This campaign against Ennahda follows Essebsi's announcement, and calls to mind the one time "National Salvation Front" alliance, which united Nidaa Tounes, the Popular Front and other parties to overthrow the Troika government, led by Ennahda in 2013. The most striking differences between these two events is the dispersion of this former coalition and the difficulty

⁷Basma Barakat, "Tunisia: Return of the Popular Front and Ennahda Rivalry" *The New Arab*, 3/10/2018, Last accessed 4/10/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2OMeOUi>

involved in reuniting its parties. In a similar context, the position of the Essebsi-Popular Front aligned Tunisian General Labor Union, which calls for the departure of Chahed's government, represents a considerable source of pressure. However, Chahed seems to have been able to shake off the trade union attack relatively smoothly, taking advantage of the public opinion's opposition to and condemnation of recent strikes by Trade unions. The Labor Union continues to threaten a general strike in November 2018, an occasion that could serve to measure the balance of power between the union and the Chahed government.

Given the current political and parliamentary balances, the massive exodus from the Essebsi camp to the Chahed camp within Nidaa Tounes, and Chahed's breakthroughs in the interior, particularly in some of the traditional strongholds of Nidaa Tounes, and the Sahel, the fall of the government is unlikely to be subject to anything more than a limited reshuffle in the foreseeable future. The possibility of Chahed stepping down just months before the 2019 elections, even after securing a heavy parliamentary bloc and an influential party following, could be a preamble to the elections.