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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The 2018 Tunisia Protests: Responsibility and Driving Factors

Policy Analysis Unit | January 2018

Protests in Tunisia

Series: Situation Assessment

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

Across Tunisia, protests marked the seventh anniversary of the popular uprising that overthrew Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and which kick-started the Arab Spring. Initially a peaceful demonstration in the heart of the capital Tunis, the protests turned into violent confrontations between the largely young demonstrators and police force, and spread nationally. The immediate spark behind the protests came in the form of the package of austerity economic measures adopted by the government in the 2018 budget, which was approved by the legislature on 9 December 2017. The new measures included in the budget foresee an increase in consumer prices, especially for fuel, and an increase in indirect taxation and duties.

Structural Crisis

Tunisian economic circumstances and the living standards remain stagnant seven years after the revolution. After attempts by a series of successive government cabinets, unemployment, inflation, public indebtedness and a trade deficit remain in place¹. One consequence of this has been the freefall of the Tunisian Dinar². The deterioration in living standards remains true despite the resurgence of the phosphate mining sector and the recent rebounding of the Tunisian tourism sector, which declined due to terrorist attacks targeting tourists. The tempo of public protests, which took place across Tunisia in the two months leading up to the anniversary of the Jasmine Revolution, has risen steadily. They are emboldened also by the massive symbolic significance of the months of December and January, which have been associated with social protests in Tunisia since the 1984 "Bread Uprising" and the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

Most economic observers view the dire present condition of the Tunisian economy as the result of at least 25 years of economic planning in the country. This line of thinking believe the political and economic approaches that paved the way for the popular revolution of 2011 remain in place with only minor changes. One prominent feature of long-standing Tunisian government planning is the readiness to resort to borrowing, and a readiness to liberalize the economy

¹ Inflation in Tunisia stood at 6.3% in November of 2017, according to the country's National Institute of Statistics. See: <http://www.ins.tn>

² Official rates for the Tunisian Dinar stood at 2.95 TND per Euro on 10 January, 2018; two years previously, it had been roughly 2.2 TND per Euro.

without oversight. Additionally, Tunisian economic planning is typified by an unwillingness to tackle the power of smuggling and other black market lobbies. Features endemic to the Tunisian economy include the underfunding of infrastructure in the country, especially in rural, outlying areas. One significant difference with the pre-2011 order of affairs in Tunisia has been that the authorities are currently less able to control events on the ground, or the flow of information related to them, particularly with the reduced power of the police and security services.

From Protest to Anarchy

The latest wave of protests in Tunisia took off in December 2017, when a small group of students aligned with the leftwing “General Union of Tunisian Students” began a small sit-in on Avenue Habib Bouragiba, the main artery of the Tunisian capital and passed out flyers demanding direct action against the planned economic measures. With time, a demand for the release of arrested activists was added to the social demands against the background of the distribution of publications. In a matter of hours, the protest movement showed itself capable of mobilizing large groups of protestors at night, in marginalized suburbs of the capital as well as in cities in the Tunisian hinterlands of Qasserine, Gafsa, Beja and Kebili.

The makeup of the protestors and the nature of the protests also evolved with time. Instead of hardcore political activists, the main driver of the later protests was a group of unemployed youth. Another change was the dropping of any specific demands, in favor of outright violence³. Emboldened and in greater numbers, and also more unruly, the protests now attacked police stations and other state institutions as well as commercial establishments. In contrast to the earliest protests, this wave focused on measures contained in the 2018 budget, and the deterioration of economic living conditions in Tunisia at the hands of the ruling coalition, the nocturnal protests turned into riots not aimed at any particular aim.

Responsibility for the Rioting?

Both state-controlled and independent media in Tunisia ignored the first two days of rioting, when it was relatively geographically contained. With time, however, a growing number of

³ Police reports which are widely available on social media platforms indicate that a majority of those arrested during the protests are either teenagers or even children in some cases. This contrasts sharply with the first student protestors who were largely affiliated with the student body of the Popular Front, a leftist parliamentary group.

politicians, security officials and political party representatives were interviewed on various media networks to discuss the ongoing events. An overview of these media appearances suggests that responses to the protests fall into one of three main categories. The first of these is to oppose the ruling coalition at every turn, and regardless of the policies in question. Such positions are always in support of protests, unreservedly; it is typified by the Popular Front, a coalition of leftwing parliamentary blocs. A second category of responses is sympathetic to the deprivation and hardships driving the protests but less tolerant of the violence which accompanies the nocturnal rioting. This is generally the approach embraced by the Islamist Ennahda and the Neda Touness, two members of the ruling coalition, as well as the Democratic Bloc and other aligned parties. A third category of responses is more of an opportunistic push by politicians who want to place themselves as both protectors of the protestors and of the government, simultaneously. This is embodied by the “Movement of Tunisia’s Project,” led by Mohsen Marzouk, a faction which splintered off from the Neda Touness⁴.

These political disputes extended into parliament, where elected representatives sparred over the responsibility over the riots and their fallout. The groups within the Popular Front placed the blame with Ennahda and its coalition partners, for ratifying a budget without sufficient debate. The retort from Ennahda members of parliament was that the budget passed in parliament with support from Popular Front deputies, only to take their opposition to the protests out onto the streets. Prime Minister Yousef El-Chahed and Minister of Agriculture Samir Beltayyeb were more forthright in their accusations of the Popular Front, suggesting that the leftist coalition was responsible for sowing the seeds of discontent. This was a break with the political rules of engagement established since the revolution of 2011; it now appears unusual for the country’s political leaders to single out specific political parties and individual politicians for criticism.

Map of the Protests

The first nocturnal protests took place in the town of Tebourba, about 30 kilometers to the west of the capital. This was also the first site of violent confrontations between police and protestors. This quickly moved to the deprived neighborhoods of Tadamon, Jabal Ahmar, Kabbaria and Ibn Khaldun on the western outskirts of Tunis. Similarly, the protests later spread to the suburbs of Jabal Jloud, Hamam Al Anf and Medina Jdeida to the south of the capital Tunis. Again, these are areas where there is a noticeable level of poverty. Further afield, the protests quickly spread to the governorates and cities of Kessrine Gafsa, Beja and Kebili. This

⁴ See, for example, the official communique issued by the Movement of Tunisia’s Project.

contrasts with the relative calm to be found in the suburbs to the north of capital, and the coastal cities, especially Sfax, as well as the southeast.

The geographical distribution of the protests illustrates the varying roles played by political, social and economic factors in determining the intensity of protest across different Tunisian districts. In the central boroughs of Tunis—the site of the country's major public sector institutions as well as the home of the major banks—protest remained largely limited and subdued. This was partly because the authorities exercised extreme caution and deployed a large number of police on the streets, sending a clear message that they would not tolerate any disturbance to the peace. This partially explains why the protests in the inner metropolitan area of Tunis remained subdued compared to the violence visible in other districts around the capital and beyond, where unemployment and marginalization are dominant.

Most strikingly, the coastal region of Tunisia has remained peaceable. This includes the governorates of Sousse, Monastir and Mahdia. This reflects the fact that coastal cities have long benefitted, and noticeably, from inward investments which have led to improvements in their infrastructure. Electorally, this was reflected by the victory of the Neda Touness and the current president Beji Caid Essebsi in coastal constituencies. Similarly, the southeast—in the governorates of Tataouine Sfax in particular—were also remarkably peaceable. Unlike the coastal regions, this was probably the result not of relatively better economic circumstances, but rather the dominance of the Islamist Ennahda and the lack of a strong support base for leftist groups. These two governorates were the largest sources of Ennahda votes in the 2014 legislative elections. For Sfax, an additional factor is the relative advancement of artisanal and manufacturing industries. The city of Sfax, seat of the governorate, has in fact not been witness to violence since the successful revolution that overthrew Ben Ali.

Regional Involvement

Most observers agree that the evolution of events in Tunisia since the 2011 cannot be isolated from wider regional and global circumstances. Comparisons with events in the other Arab Spring states—including Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya—are easy to come by, especially as concerns the interference of regional powers committed to quashing the revolution. Noticeably, counter-revolutionary regional powers have failed thus far to achieve a decisive victory in domestic Tunisian politics, despite massive financial contributions since 2014 at least. A body of circumstantial evidence seems to suggest that the United Arab Emirates is implicated in the latest political protests in Tunisia.

The latest violence in Tunisia comes only a few short weeks after a crisis in Tunisian-UAE relations, following a decision to prevent unaccompanied Tunisian women from travelling on UAE flag carriers. That decision was itself a response to the fact that Tunisian politicians associated with the pre-revolutionary old guard were willing to bring the Islamist Ennahda into the ruling coalition, breaking three years of political deadlock. Additionally, President Essebsi has shown himself willing to deal with all of the political factions of Libya next door, disappointing to his presumptive allies in Abu Dhabi who are openly hostile to all Libyan groups other than Khalifa Haftar. Notably, Emirati-funded broadcasters were shown to be very keen to highlight incidents of violence in affected areas of Tunisia. More strikingly still, the protests in Tunisia were preceded by the withdrawal of Nedaa Touness from the ruling coalition—precipitated by UAE government adviser Mohammed Dahlan.

What Comes Next?

There has been an apparent decline in the nightly, violent protests. Most areas which witnessed looting and arson are now much calmer. Similarly, the politicians who had earlier been unmitigated supporters of the demonstrators are now reining in their rhetoric. The military has now been tasked with the protection of public buildings, following the withdrawal of the security services. This has become commonplace in times of political tension since the 2011 revolution and reflects a desire to prevent friction between protestors and the Tunisian security forces and police, who are less popular than the military. It is unlikely that the military would become involved in the suppression of a social protest movement.

However long it takes for this latest wave of protests to play out, it is unlikely to result in a substantial shift in Tunisian politics, or in the country's social or economic affairs. This latest wave of protests is not, after all, unprecedented even if they have been the most contentious so far, a result of the willingness of politicians to intervene in the current climate. The 2017-2018 protest movement in Tunisia is not likely, however, to significantly impact on the durability of the Chahed cabinet. While a collapse of the Tunisian government, or a reshuffling of some of its members, both remain distinctly likely, this will not represent a causal outcome of the latest wave of protests.

