



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 19 January 2020

# Jemli Fails to Secure a Vote of Confidence: What Next for Tunisia?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

19 January 2020

### Unit for Political Studies

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The Tunisian Parliament rejected the government proposed by Prime Minister-designate Habib Jemli on 10 January 2020, with representatives voting 134 to 72 against the proposal and 3 abstentions. This historical decision comes after two months of deliberations between Jemli and other Tunisian political players, which saw some moments of tension. Why did Jemli fail to gain the confidence of the Parliament? And what are the implications for the nascent Tunisian democracy?

## Ennahda's Calculations in Jemli's Nomination

On 15 November 2019, Tunisian President Kais Saied charged Habib Jemli with forming a new government based on *Ennahda's* proposal as the largest party in the House of Representatives, according to the results of last September's legislative elections, as stipulated in the Tunisian constitution.<sup>(1)</sup> *Ennahda's* choice of Jemli to form the government was an unexpected step, even within the movement itself. Since the election results were revealed, leaks about the potential prime minister have surrounded high ranking seniors in *Ennahda*, such as Abdellatif Mekki and Abdelkarim Harouni, and on veteran political figures, such as Speaker of the Constituent Assembly and founder of Ettakatol (Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties), Mustapha Ben Jafar. However, most of the members of the *Ennahda* Shura Council, which was held on 14 November 2019, decided to recommend Jemli. At the time, the party affirmed Habib Jemli's "independent personality", praising his economic and financial qualifications and experience and in particular his agricultural expertise, describing him as a figure known for his scruples, enthusiasm for serving the state, fighting corruption and his desire to make a positive shift in the lives of Tunisian people.<sup>(2)</sup>

Jemli, born in 1959 in Kairouan is not known to have had any notable involvement in political affairs, neither before nor after the revolution. He spent most of his career in administrative, technical and research positions at the Ministry of Agriculture and did not assume any senior responsibilities until December 2011, when he was appointed secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, a position he left in January 2014. Since that date, Jemli only reappeared in the Tunisian political scene when *Ennahda* proposed him to form the government following the 2019 legislative elections.<sup>(3)</sup> Although most of *Ennahda's* justifications for nominating Jemli's centred on his personality and competence, the internal party balances and the general political context in the country were among the most important determinants behind the nomination. The party's institutions and leadership bodies have suffered tensions and disagreements that first appeared in public a year ago, and escalated during the formation of the electoral lists, culminating most recently the resignation of its secretary-general Ziad al-Ahdari, who was until recently considered to be in Rached Ghannouchi's camp, and who subsequently voted to reject Jemli's government. Several indications demonstrate that some party

1 In the most recent legislative elections, the *Ennahda* Movement won 52 seats, followed by *Qalb Tounes* with 38. For more, see: "The Tunisian Elections: Surprise Results and Challenges Ahead", Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 10/17/2019, last accessed 12/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/368QyjS>.

2 "Statement of the Executive Office of *Ennahda*," *Ennahda* Website, 16/11/2019, last accessed 12/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2QMTDBZ>.

3 For more, see: "Biography of Habib Jemli, Nominee for Prime Minister," Babnet, 15/11/2019, last accessed 12/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2TnESY1>.

leaders who pushed for the endorsement of Jemli were afraid that assigning a leadership figure from within the movement would be a new point of tension between *Ennahda* camps, at a time when the party is seeking to contain the contradictions of its leadership until its next conference, scheduled for May 2020, when Ghannouchi is expected to leave the leadership.<sup>(4)</sup>

## From a Government Built on Politics to a Technocracy

Besides keeping a lid on its party balances, *Ennahda's* parliamentary weight does not permit the party to choose one of its main personalities to form a government that can win a majority confidence vote. This was evident in the statements of various political actors on the eve of the election results.<sup>(5)</sup> Since being appointed to form a government, Jemli announced that he would be open to all political forces to prepare a joint agenda for governance that serves expectations in the interest of Tunisia, explaining that his government members were chosen based on competence and integrity, whatever their political affiliation.<sup>(6)</sup> In this context, Jemli held several sessions with the Democratic Current (22 deputies), the People's Movement (16 deputies), Tahya Tounes (14 deputies), the Dignity Coalition (21 deputies), along with *Ennahda* (52 deputies) and political, academic, social and cultural figures. The Free Destourian Party (17 deputies) were notably absent from the consultations because of its rejection of a figure proposed by *Ennahda*. There were conflicting reports regarding the consultation of Qalb Tounes (38 deputies), whose leader Nabil Karoui is being prosecuted on charges related to corruption and tax evasion. While the Democratic Current and the People's Movement confirm that Jemli communicated with deputies and leaders from Qalb Tounes to discuss their participation in the government, *Ennahda* denies that the consultations have included the party.

The first four weeks of consultations that Jemli held were marked by a general trend towards forming a coalition government to accommodate a number of parties (*Ennahda*, the Democratic Current, the People's Movement, Tahya Tounes, and the Dignity Coalition). The demands of the Democratic Current focused mainly on granting them the interior, justice and administrative reform portfolios, and the elimination of figures suspected of corruption from government office. The conditions of the People's Movement related to preserving the public sector, refraining from the option of privatizing public institutions, avoiding engaging in regional issues, and excluding technocrats.<sup>(7)</sup> The Dignity Coalition's main condition was the exclusion of those affiliated with the old system and those suspected of corruption.

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4 See, for example: Adel Al-Thabeti, "*Ennahda... 'Differences' not 'Splits'.*" Analysis, Anadolu Agency, 20/12/2019, last accessed 01/13/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2TjFEVC>.

5 See, for example: "The Democratic Current Holds on to Participation in the Next Government with the Same Conditions and Guarantees", Shems FM, 10/27/2019, last accessed 13/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2TkaOwd>.

6 Yusra Wanass, "Tunisia ... Jemli Officially Begins Government Formation Consultations with the Parties," Anadolu Agency, 11/19/2019, last accessed 13/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2FNOaEq>.

7 See, for example: Maher Qassem, "The People's Movement Requires a Political Declaration on the Formation of the Government..." Radio Express FM, 11/25/2019, last accessed 13/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2FOhwmh>.



Jemli's responses to the demands varied. He agreed with the Democratic Current to grant them the justice and administrative reform portfolios, and that the interior would be given to an independent actor that both parties would mutually agree upon. The demands People's Movement, the Dignity Coalition, and Tahya Tounes remained unanswered. A month later, the Democratic Current and the People's Movement announced their withdrawal from the consultations, followed by Tahya Tounes. Jemli subsequently announced his decision to dismiss the coalition government project and start forming a non-partisan technocratic government.

A technocracy was not the easier choice for Jemli. Figures nominated to undertake portfolios in the proposed cabinet were met with opposition from a number of parties on the grounds of incompetence, or suspected involvement in corruption or accusations of secret loyalty to *Ennahda*. Not only did the opposition protest but so did elements of *Ennahda*. Days before he went to the Parliament, he was asked to replace a number of others. Around 10 January 2020, the date the government team was due to be presented and subject to vote, it became clear that Jemli's government would be faced with two possibilities. Either *Ennahda* would secure a small majority vote of confidence by forming a bloc with Qalb Tounes, with the subsequent cabinet being governed by debilitating party balances, unable to get anything done. Or, Jemli would fail to get the vote of confidence, the actual result.<sup>(8)</sup>

## Presidential Options and Second Assignment Chances

In the event that the proposed government fails to win Parliament's confidence, chapter 89 of the Tunisian Constitution stipulates that the "President of the Republic shall consult with political parties, coalitions, and parliamentary groups, with the objective of asking the person judged most capable to form a government within a period of no more than one month to do so<sup>(9)</sup>." In the event that the second proposed government fails to win the confidence of the parliament, the president has the right to "the President of the Republic may dissolve the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and call for new legislative elections to be held within a minimum of 45 days and a maximum of 90 days."<sup>(10)</sup>

In the wake of the Jemli's failure, President Saeid immediately proceeded to activate the provisions of the constitution for such cases, where he met the head of *Ennahda* and the Speaker of the Parliament, Rached Ghannouchi, and held consultations with him, stressing the need to respect the constitution.<sup>(11)</sup> It seems that Jemli's various fruitless consultations, in addition to the fragile economic and social situation, the escalation of the regional conflict in neighbouring Libya, and the potential repercussions on the security and social scene in Tunisia, all prompted President Saeid to

8 "The Results of the Vote on the Proposed Government," Tunisian Parliament, Facebook, 10/1/2020, last accessed 12/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3a5cxeD>.

9 Chapter 89, The Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, last accessed 19/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/38zdGKf>.

10 Ibid

11 The Presidency of the Republic of Tunisia Facebook Page, 11/1/2020 last accessed 14/1/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/36SvGyp>.



expedite the process and reduce deliberations. The President was satisfied with calling on the parties, coalitions, and parliamentary blocs to present their written proposals for the personality they deem most capable of forming a government, with an explanation. The president is likely to name a new person to form the government before the constitutional deadline of 20 January 2020 passes.

## Conclusion

Habib Jemli's failure to obtain confidence in his proposed government indicates the escalated polarization of Tunisian political life, the inability of parties - which are the pillars of any representative democracy - to act in this capacity and the primacy of democratic and national responsibility over partisan differences. Despite various parties expressing their eagerness to respect the constitutional requirements, the failure to select a government in over two months, demonstrates the collapse of consensus politics in light of the fragile economic and social situation, coinciding with the escalating regional conflict in Libya. However, it is expected that all political blocs will abide by the requirements of the constitutional process and contribute to facilitating the formation of a new government, avoiding the looming prospect of fresh elections.