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Mechichi in Power: Can the New Government Deal with the Challenges Ahead?

Unit for Political Studies

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On 1 September 2020, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi's government won its vote of confidence in the Tunisian parliament with a comfortable majority. The vote of confidence in Mechichi's government came just weeks after Elyes Fakhfakh's government resigned amid quarreling between the institutions of parliament and the presidency and transformations taking place within the fragile alliances that took shape after the 2019 elections.

Contexts behind the government formation

Following the resignation of former Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh, against a backdrop of accusations of involvement in conflicts of interest and abuse of power in order to conclude “illegal” deals⁽¹⁾, President Kais Saied asked parliamentary blocs and parties to present written proposals concerning the individual most capable of taking on the task of leading the new government. In doing so, Saied overturned the precedent of direct consultations and meetings set by former presidents Beji Caid Essebsi and Moncef Marzouki. Even though most blocs—with the exception of the Dignity Coalition bloc (*I'tilaf al-Karama*), which rejected Saied's proposed process and instead demanded political consultations—were quick to offer their proposals in writing, this measure failed to conceal the displeasure of the Ennahda Movement, which commands the largest bloc in parliament.

Mechichi, in the wake of his appointment, announced that he would begin forming a technocratic government free of representatives from any political party. Despite his failure to disclose that moving forward in preparing his nonpartisan cabinet had come at Saied's behest, it was clear that the decision was taken at the request of the president, who has made known his desire to formulate a nonpartisan political system on more than one occasion. Saied has also advocated implementing constitutional amendments so as to move away the parliamentary system—wherein parliamentary majorities take the lead role in government formation and the subsequent vote of confidence—and toward a presidential system. The PM, in this model, becomes a mere “chief minister” (*wazir awwal*) tasked with carrying out the policies of the head of state, the president—directly elected by the Tunisian people—making use of the expanded powers of the Presidency.

Backed by President Saied, Mechichi's choice to form an independent technocratic government and marginalize the role of parties faced opposition from the bulk of the active partisan constituents of parliament. The Ennahda movement, Qalb Tounes, Dignity Coalition, and Democratic Current (*al-Tayyar al-Dimuqrati*) all rejected this decision and demanded a “political” government reflecting the results of elections and the balance of power in parliament. The People's Movement (*Harakat al-Sha'b*), however, expressed its intention to vote in favor of Mechichi's government, described by movement leaders as “the President's government.” Opposition on part of some blocs and parties to the “technocratic government” decision escalated in the final days leading up to the announcement of the new cabinet, following a series of reports on pressures officials close to the president placed

¹ *Resignation of Fakhfakh's government: causes and consequences for the political scene in Tunisia*, Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20 July 2020. Accessed 4 September 2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3jF9SfU>.



upon Mechichi to force their close allies upon him. This was regarded as a form of meddling on part of unconstitutional authorities in the process of government formation.

The positions on Mechichi's government remained in deadlock until the final three days before the constitutional deadline, when they began to change rapidly; after the government structure was presented to President Saied, to be directed, in turn, to the head of parliament to designate a session for the vote of confidence, news broke that the president would withdraw his support for the acting head of government and retreat from the escalating disputes between the two. This became clear when President Saied invited representatives of Ennahda, the Democratic Current, the People's Movement, and Tahya Tounes to an unexpected meeting at the presidential palace in Carthage for consultation on the issue of the government—in spite of his previous refusal of any direct consultation on the matter. It was subsequently leaked that the president demanded that attendees vote no-confidence in Mechichi's government, preserve the caretaker government, and replace its head, Prime Minister Fakhfakh, with another.⁽²⁾ Following the meeting, the Presidency was sure to broadcast clips from the speech Saied gave to attendees in a tense tone, where he stressed that “there's no room to establish a new government only to bring forth falsifications against it after a brief period,” and that “the Tunisian people have a new political view that must run parallel to a new conception of the political process.”⁽³⁾

President Saied's sudden abandonment of the prime minister he himself chose, his being forced to accept the direct consultations he had previously refused to hold with the parties, and his subsequent attempt to direct the parties to carry out his wishes when he changed his mind about Mechichi elicited varied reactions. Whereas the Democratic Current and People's Movement adopted a no-confidence stance toward the government, Ennahda organized a meeting of its Shura Council the night before the parliamentary session and resolved to vote in favor of confidence in the government—the same choice taken by Qalb Tounes. As such, Mechichi set off with his team to the halls of parliament on 1 September, convinced he would gain confidence; conversely, the two major parties were aware of how to upturn the prime minister's strong desire for unilateral rule, and how to rebuild their parliamentary majority.

Tensions after the vote

The parliament bestowed its confidence in Mechichi's government with a vote of 134 in favor to 67 opposed, with some members of parliament absent from the session. It appears, from the results of the vote, that MPs outside of the Ennahda-Qalb Tounes-Future Tunisia blocs voted in favor of granting confidence, allowing for the passage of the vote of confidence with a comfortable majority.

² Walid al-Talili, “Tunisia: Saied revokes support for Mechichi and the ball is in Ennahda's court,” *The New Arab*, 31 August 2020. Accessed 3 September 2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2YX8z3O>; Walid al-Talili, “Tunisia: ‘Coup’ in the final hours in Mechichi's favor,” *The New Arab*, 2 September 2020. Accessed 4 September 2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3gU7tvS>.

³ *President of the Tunisian Republic page*, Facebook, 31 August 2020. Accessed 3 September 2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3hUDqpl>.

The success of Mechichi's government in gaining the confidence of parliament by a comfortable majority strengthened the stance of Ennahda, Qalb Tounes, and, to a lesser extent, the Dignity Coalition; its MPs were split between for and against confidence amid their battle with President Saied. However, this has not ended the contention between the two sides. In the production studios of the newly sworn-in cabinet, President Saied gave a speech in which he railed against "parties" who remained unnamed, although the context of his speech appeared clearly directed at the Ennahda Movement, Qalb Tounes, the Dignity Coalition, and those MPs who had critiqued his decisions during the vote of confidence. The president, unable to conceal his strong sense of disappointment in Mechichi, who chose to gain the confidence of the former's opposition, appeared extremely tense during his address, addressing his opponents in harsh terms and threatening to someday hold them to account and bring "their conspiracies" to light.⁽⁴⁾

The fact that Mechichi secured a comfortable majority in the vote of confidence session in parliament, along with the unprecedented tone in which the president spoke in his address, suggests a deepening quarrel between Saied and the parliamentary majority. That the new alliance came to hold such a majority, giving them the power to decide the fate of the government and the policy it produces, represents one possible factor in the escalation of tensions between the two. Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, head of government, is well aware that the stability of his government and its continuing ability to carry out its mandate are contingent on maintaining the confidence of the Ennahda movement, the Qalb Tounes party, the Dignity Coalition, and the Future bloc. This is to be expected in a parliamentary system. On the other hand, Mechichi also understands that, even if the president and his parliamentary bases of support, composed primarily of the People's Movement, the Democratic Current, and other smaller blocs, cannot shift the current balance of power, it is most certainly within their power to obstruct and sabotage him.

It is not impossible that these new balances of power and fledgling alliances, as well as the fissure in Mechichi's relationship with President Saied, could lead to the replacement of Saied supporters in the government and the cabinet with MPs from pro-Mechichi parties and abandonment of a purely technocrat government in favor of a "political" government drawing on technocrat expertise, as in parliamentary systems. Judging by the statements given by some of the party leaders in the Mechichi camp, this is likely to happen very soon. Any such reshuffle is expected to lead to further decline in the president's influence within the government.

The consequences of the resignation of the Fakhfakh government, the rise of the Mechichi government to power, and the reversal in how that government is perceived have not only exacerbated tensions between the president's camp and that of his opposition; they have also left an impact on some of the parties. Directly following the vote of confidence in Mechichi's government, Mohamed Abbou, secretary-general of the Democratic Current who remained in support of President Saied and former prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh, announced his resignation and retreat from the political scene.

⁴ "President of the Republic supervises procession of members of government taking the constitutional oath", Facebook, *President of the Tunisian Republic page*, 2 September 2020. Accessed 3 September 2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3hVbEsl>.



This resignation is expected to impact the cohesion of the Democratic Current, its presence in the political arena, and its fortunes in the upcoming elections. There is, furthermore, the possibility that this splintering disease may infect other parties and blocs.

Fortunes for success in a challenging context

During the vote of confidence session, Mechichi elaborated his perspective on the challenges that await his government, including the rise in the value of public debt to 80 billion TND (\$29 billion USD, about 70% of the country's GDP) and public debt servicing amounting to twice the state's development expenditures; declining consumer demand along with a sharp decline in savings; the investment rate dropping to 13% with unemployment exceeding the 15% threshold; the downturn in phosphate and oil production due to civil unrest; sinking quality of education; and weak healthcare infrastructure. In order to deal with this troubling socioeconomic reality, Mechichi has promised that his government will be “a government of work and success”, with an agenda based on five central priorities:

- stopping the hemorrhaging of public money;
- reforming the public sector;
- regaining trust and promoting investment;
- protecting the purchasing power of the citizen; and
- protecting marginalized groups.⁽⁵⁾

The government agenda put forth by Mechichi during the vote of confidence session does not greatly differ from agendas put forth by previous governments since 2011, with most of it dedicated to socioeconomic issues. It is thus fair to ask whether Mechichi's government will really be able to overcome the conditions that have prevented previous governments from carrying out their agendas given the stark economic outlook – which has only declined further in past months due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the deteriorating situation in neighboring Libya. It is likely that Mechichi, as part of what he dubbed “the great reforms” and his invitation to “share the burden in anticipation of improving conditions,” will start to implement policies that lack popular approval, such as cutting government subsidies on essentials to reduce strain on the national budget; freezing employment in the public sector; making reductions to services; imposing new taxes; and privatizing failing state corporations—measures that, as past experiences have confirmed, are sure to trigger unrest and mass protests.

Inauspicious socioeconomic indicators and potential negative consequences arising from austerity measures of some kind do not represent the sole difficulties awaiting Mechichi's government. Dominated by forces of attraction and repulsion between parties, blocs, and governing institutions,

⁵ *Acting president's speech*, YouTube, “Assembly of the Representatives of the People”, 1 September 2020. Accessed 4 September at: <https://bit.ly/354WRIL>.

the political scene serves as another challenge before the new cabinet. It will find itself trapped between a parliamentary alliance with a majority and a president who is now openly at war with that parliament, and who enjoys wide constitutional prerogatives with regard to foreign relations (including economic relations) as well as the exclusive power to sign parliamentary bills into law – although this power is a purely formal one, since parliament is the real legislative authority.

Conclusion

With Mechichi's government having obtained the confidence of the parliament, the political and institutional scene in Tunisia is entering a new stage—one that is expected to be dominated by conflicts and tensions. Even though Mechichi has vowed to begin work on a package of measures to heal the social and economic crises facing the country, the worsening negative indicators and structural crises from which the Tunisian economic and development model suffers—in addition to the difficulties imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the chaos of the situation in Libya—make it unlikely that radical changes will take place in the foreseeable future. In order for any Tunisian government to be able to simultaneously undertake reforms and development, it must have access to the opportunities to do so. Likewise, president and parliament alike, as well as union institutions and their counterparts, ought to be aware that this is the duty of the government. The duty of the Presidency and Parliament, in turn, is to watch over and manage their government—not to undermine it.