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The End of the Consensus Government in Tunisia

A New Challenge for Democratic Transition

Policy Analysis Unit

The End of the Consensus Government in Tunisia : A New Challenge for Democratic Transition

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Policy Analysis Unit

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The collapse of the consensus between President Beji Caid Essebsi and his Nidaa Tounes party and Ennahda continues to cast a shadow over Tunisian politics. With the breakdown of the rules governing the relationships between the various actors since the 2014 elections, weeks after the Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's cabinet reshuffle, the details of the political crisis remain complex. This begs the question: What is the outcome of the democratic transition pursued by Tunisia following the 2011 revolution? It also raises questions about the capacity of institutions and political elites in the face of a return to polarizing and alienating politics in which regional parties serve to tip the balance and widen the gap.

Government Stability

The announcement from President Beji Caid Essebsi in late September 2018 that the consensus with Ennahda in force since the 2014 elections had been terminated came as no surprise to Tunisian political commentators.⁽¹⁾ Since the conflict between the heads of the executive branch (Essebsi and Chahed) became public, Ennahda, the largest bloc in parliament, had chosen to prioritize “government stability”, claiming that it should not be subject to fluctuations of the balance of power within Nidaa Tounes. It opposed the demands made by Nidaa Tounes, the Tunisian General Labour Union and other parties for the departure of Chahed and his government. There is no doubt that the support of the European Union and international economic institutions in favor of government stability played a part in this decision. With the support of Ennahda and a large segment of Nidaa Tounes, Chahed received a comfortable majority for his new cabinet members when he introduced them to Parliament in November.⁽²⁾ A few days after Essebsi announced the coalition with Ennahda was over, the prosecution in the case of the assassination of activists Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi revealed what they described as a “black room” in the Ministry of the Interior. This room allegedly contains dangerous documents proving the existence of a secret organization run by Ennahda. The organization was designed to follow and listen in on politicians and military and security personnel and was involved in both aforementioned assassinations.⁽³⁾ This discovery means that security and justice will be harnessed in the service of political conflicts, in a way that does not bode well for the democratic civil culture of the political elite.

The Minister of the Interior in Chahed's government has denied the existence of the black room in his ministry but the case has not been closed. On November 26, President Essebsi met with the prosecution team, which presented him with a “request for the National Security Council to oversee

1 “Is Political Consensus Over for Tunisia?” Situation Assessment, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 8/10/2018, last accessed 10/12/2018 at: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Is-the-Political-Consensus-Over-in-Tunisia.aspx>

2 “Cabinet Reshuffle in Tunisia and the Outcomes of the Political Crisis”, Situation Assessment, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15/11/2018, last accessed 10/12/2018 at: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Cabinet-Reshuffle-Tunisia-Outcomes-Political-Crisis.aspx>

3 Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi were leaders of the Tunisian Popular Front (a coalition of leftist and nationalist parties). The first was assassinated on 6 February 2013, the second was assassinated on 25 July of the same year, during the Troika government made up of the Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic and Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties.

the case and for the formation of a committee headed by a national figure to examine the relevant evidence.”⁽⁴⁾ On the 29th of the same month, Essebsi presided over a National Security Council meeting, which deliberated on the accusations filed by the prosecution in the assassination case against Ennahda. In a remarkable message, the president’s Facebook page broadcast a speech in which he stressed the importance of the prosecution team’s progress, stating that Ennahda had threatened him in a statement issued in response to the charges. Most of the leaks reported by media and political sources indicate that the president’s desire to turn the issue from a judicial into a security matter was met with disdain from the prime minister. However, there are several indications, including repeated discussion of the issue, that the president is still trying to keep the case relevant in order to force his former partner and into a corner. This is a year before the parliamentary and presidential elections expected in late 2019, in which the opinion polls suggest Ennahda and Chahed are ahead while Essebsi and his party lag behind.⁽⁵⁾

Allegations of a Coup against the President

Ennahda is not the only party to find itself in the firing line of the president and his Nidaa Tounes camp. In an act reminiscent of accusations made in the assassination case, the general secretary of Nidaa Tounes Slim Riahi filed a lawsuit against the Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and several other officials with the military court, accusing them of planning to stage a coup against Essebsi.⁽⁶⁾ Sources in Nidaa Tounes confirmed that Chahed’s coup is the subject of the lawsuit, essentially represented in the acquisition of state bodies and the luring of some Nidaa Tounes representatives to the National Coalition bloc that supports him. The next step is allegedly the use of force to extend his influence on the state and isolate the president.⁽⁷⁾ The lawsuit filed by the general secretary of Nidaa Tounes has not been published. However, the strong link between Essebsi and those who remained in his party and the weak influence of new arrival Slim Riahi make it likely that Essebsi and his son Hafedh are behind the new open front against Chahed, especially since Essebsi has appointed the minister fired from Chahed’s government, Mabrouk Korchid, to follow up the matter.

The details of the case are ambiguous; the lawsuit does not indicate any specific evidence. A careful and objective reading, regardless of legal interpretations, sees it as falling within the scope of the escalating conflict between Essebsi and Chahed over the past year. Essebsi seems unwilling to accept the reality of a parliamentary majority and the recent vote of confidence won with ease by

4 See “Meeting with a Delegation from the Prosecution in the Case of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi”, *Présidence Tunisie Facebook Page*, 26/11/2018, last seen 10/12/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2GjB1pl>

5 Ziyad Krishan, “One Year or Less to Go before the Parliamentary and Presidential Elections”, *Le Maghreb* 7/12/2018, last seen 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EjzBK1>

6 Asma Ajroudi & Ramy Allahoum “Tunisia’s Nidaa Tounes in Shambles amid Political Turbulence”, *Al Jazeera*, 5/12/2018, last seen 17/12/2018 at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/tunisia-nidaa-tounes-shambles-political-turbulence-181202090020299.html>

7 Amal Hilali, “A New Chapter of the Nidaa Tounes War. A Serious Charge Against Chahed”, *Al Jazeera*, 25/11/2018, last seen 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2SPCNAA>

Chahed. Chahed and his supporters see this as a question of returning matters to their natural state under the Constitution, which gives the prime minister broader powers over the president. Essebsi, who has spent most of his political career under an autocratic presidential system, has expressed his dissatisfaction with the constitutional limits on the President's powers on multiple occasions. The challenge thus deepens for newly elected Chahed, who Essebsi had chosen for his lack of experience in authority, in the hope of exploiting this in order to consolidate his authority as the president.

Social Protests and Political Questions

Social challenges in Tunisia are just as salient as the ongoing political crises. On 22 November 2018, the Tunisian General Labour Union announced a general strike in the public sector, demanding a wage increase and the reversal of the program of privatization of some public institutions. It is expected that the Union will launch a second general strike, in mid-January 2019, if no understanding with the Chahed Government is reached. Similarly, a month ago, secondary school teachers were engaged in a trade union movement: refusing to hold exams, arranging sit-ins in the education directorates, and demonstrating in the capital and the interior cities to demand an increase in grants and salaries. The unions have not announced any political demands during their protests, but their insistence over the past months on the necessity of Chahed and his government's resignation and the presence of the Nidaa Tounes leaders at the general strike indicate that trade union movements - regardless of the legitimacy of their demands - are telling. The political conflict between President Essebsi and Chahed and their respective political camps has seeped into the protests.

In the context of these social difficulties and their relationship to the general political chaos in Tunisia, calls to imitate the "yellow vests" protest movement in France have appeared. Social media pages are using the campaign name "red vests" to organize demands for an improvement in economic and living conditions. No political or union body has declared its position on this campaign yet, but the discourse primarily targets Ennahda and Chahed's government. Several leaks indicate that financial, political, media, and regional figures are involved,⁽⁸⁾ especially as most social media pages promoting the campaign are sponsored pages, which go beyond the financial capacities of the voluntary activists. The activists from the "red vests campaign" are planning their protests for January given the symbolism of this month, which has witnessed most of the protest movements the country has known since the 1970s. In fact, despite the legitimacy of the demands and the popular belief that there has not been any tangible improvement in living conditions, some party and trade union forces demanding improved conditions oppose any action that would contribute to the development of the Tunisian economy and especially a reduction of bureaucracy and the facilitation of investment.

⁸ On December 6, police arrested an activist from the Destour party led by Abeer Mousi, the former leadership of the National Progressive Unionist Party (the party of ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali) on charges of stocking up hundreds of red vests in the capital.

Regional Projects in the Pipeline

Regional interventions aiming to influence Tunisian politics are now a matter of common knowledge. In 2014, shortly before the general election, documents were leaked showing that the UAE transferred financial and logistical support, including an armored vehicle fleet, to then presidential candidate Beji Caid Essebsi – a fact acknowledged by the Nidaa Tounes leadership. In addition, satellite channels broadcast mainly from Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Cairo were mobilized to promote the moves of Nidaa Tounes and its allies against the Troika government. Talk of a regional interference in the current political conflict has surfaced anew, despite relations cooling between Tunisia and the UAE following Essebsi's entry into a coalition with Ennahda. This followed President Essebsi hosting several controversial figures associated with Arab Spring events in since 2013.

On November 19, 2018, Essebsi hosted Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris at Carthage Palace before his visit to the Nidaa Tounes headquarters, where he met with a number of leaders, including Hafedh Caid Essebsi. On the 28th of the same month, Essebsi hosted the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the palace, despite a huge public backlash on social media and demonstrations in the capital protesting the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Saudi human rights record. On December 3, Essebsi received the credentials of the new UAE ambassador to Tunisia Rashid Mohammed Jumaa al-Mansouri, the former consul to Iraqi Kurdistan, who played a controversial role during the referendum for Kurdish secession in 2017. In the same context media sources close to the Presidency of the Republic are spreading news of forthcoming visits from the commander of Operation Dignity in Libya, General Khalifa Haftar, and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, who represents a genocidal regime.

Most political commentators in Tunisia believe these visits to be closely related to the current internal conflict between Essebsi on the one hand and the Chahed/Ennahda camp on the other. These are not simply routine diplomatic commitments, and the president is trying to establish his position by engaging in regional projects which he can then weaponize and besieging his opponents in preparation for the upcoming elections.

Conclusion

With the disintegration of consensus politics and increasing signs of division and conflict between the Essebsi camp on the one hand and the Prime Minister and Ennahda camp on the other, the Tunisian political crisis is entering a new phase of social, security and judicial difficulty and opens the country up to regional intervention that would tie political elites to foreign projects. With a year to go before the general election, Tunisia's democratic transition exposed to real challenges. These include the potential return of exclusionary politics, the intensification of the power struggle between the heads of the executive branch, and the increasing protest movement. The democratic transition is still fragile and vulnerable both internally and externally, despite the fact that the Tunisian revolution