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New Challenges Ahead for the Fakhfakh Government

Unit for Political Studies

New Challenges Ahead for the Fakhfakh Government: ?

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 19 February 2020 Tunisian Premier-in-Waiting Elyes Fakhfakh announced the names of his new governing team, following a month of meetings and consultations held with parliamentary forces from across the political spectrum. The announcement comes after the longest political crisis yet witnessed by the country – a crisis that has dragged on since the legislative and presidential elections held at the end of 2019. The original appointee, Habib Jemli, lost the confidence of parliament after two long months of consultations, leading President Kais Saied to replace him with Fakhfakh. Although this time Fakhfakh looks set to win deputies' trust, major challenges await him and his team.

Difficulties in Formation

As soon as he was asked to form a new government after Jemli's failure, Fakhfakh explained in broad strokes the consultations he planned to hold with different parliamentary forces – as well as political organisations and personalities – in order to put together a governmental team. He promised to work to build the broadest political coalition possible, “avoiding any exclusion or party-political cronyism, loyal to majority opinion.”⁽¹⁾ He then added the caveat that Qalb Tounes (whose candidate Nabil Karaoui stood against Saied in the second round of the presidential elections last year) and the Free Destourian Party (considered old regime loyalists) would be excluded, affirming that only those forces that supported Saied in the second round would be invited to join the coalition.

Fakhfakh's decision to exclude Qalb Tounes from the consultations was the first of several disagreements with Ennahda, which forms the largest parliamentary bloc. Ennahda called for him to form “the largest party and parliamentary base possible in a government of national unity excluding only those who have excluded themselves,”⁽²⁾ citing a principled refusal to exclude any party. They noted that Qalb Tounes represents the second-largest party in the parliament, emphasising that the new political scene will require as broad a consensus as possible in order to push through constitutional legislation and start key governmental institutions working (in particular the Constitutional Court, which requires a two-thirds majority vote – impossible if Qalb Tounes remains in opposition). They reminded Fakhfakh that he should be looking for legitimacy from the parliament and not from the President, and said that they were willing to consider all options – including new elections – if he refused to change his mind.⁽³⁾ Only a few days before expiry of the constitutional time limit, in an effort to bridge the gap with Ennahda, Fakhfakh met with a delegation from Qalb Tounes. But the meeting did not result in representatives of the party being added to the ruling coalition.

The calculations involved in forming a new governing coalition do not seem to have been the only driver of Ennahda's keenness to bring Qalb Tounes into the fold. Other concerns were involved,

1 “Tasrih as-Sayyid Ilyas al-Fakhfakh ‘ala ithr Taklifihi min Ra'is al-Jumhuriyya bi-Takwin al-Hukuma,” Facebook, official page of the Tunisian Presidency, 20/01/2020 (accessed on 20/02/2020 at: <http://bit.ly/2ukiaG2>).

2 “Balagh l'Iami li-Harakat an-Nahda”, Ennahda website, 23/01/2020 (accessed on 21/02/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2V996if>).

3 See: Emel Elhelali, “Akkadat Isti'dadaha Li'ntikhabat Mubakkira... Limadha Turid an-Nahda Ishrak Qalb Tunis bi'l-Hukuma?” *Al Jazeera.net*, 27/01/2020 (accessed on 21/02/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2T4M9Ks>).



including the desire to maintain the existing balance of power within the People's Assembly. This balance allowed Ennahda's president Rached Ghannouchi to secure the speakership thanks to the support of many of Qalb Tounes's deputies. Ennahda also seems to be holding Qalb Tounes over Fakhfakh's head in order to maximise their own representation within the government, using it to protest the appointment of figures it is not comfortable with. This strategy has allowed Ennahda to win several other portfolios in the governmental team and force Fakhfakh to change his mind on the appointment of other ministers.

The Governmental Team: Calculations of Coalition and Disagreement

The new team announced by Fakhfakh is made up of thirty ministers and two ministers without portfolio. Half of them are independents and half represent participating parties. Those ministries offered to parties have been distributed between Ennahda (7 ministries), the Democratic Current (3 ministries), and the People's Movement, Tahya Tounes and the National Reform Bloc (2 ministries each). The list of ministers associated with political parties includes several senior leadership figures, among them Ennahda's Abdelletif El Mekki and Lotfi Zitoun, the DC's Mohamed Abbou and Mohamed Hamdi, Fethi Belhaj of the People's Movement and Slim Azzabi of Tahya Tounes.

Based on the number of ministries granted to each of the parties, it seems that Fakhfakh is seeking a relative balance between the size of the different parliamentary blocs and their representation in government. By this measure Ennahda is one minister short compared to its competitors: it has seven ministers to 54 deputies, while the DC has three for 22 and Tahya Tounes two for 14. The formation of the five-way coalition means that the opposition will now be made up of Qalb Tounes (38 deputies), the Dignity Coalition (19 deputies) and the Free Destourian Party (17 deputies).

Non-party-affiliated members of the coalition, meanwhile, received 15 ministries and two non-portfolio positions. Fakhfakh has been careful to "neutralise" the most important ministries (the Ministry of the Interior, the Foreign Ministry and the Defence Ministry) by employing "independent" figures as requested by the PM and the DC. He has also been obliged to reverse his original decision to name Lobna Gribo as Minister for Communication Technology, instead appointing her Minister for Major Projects in the premier's office after Ennahda disputed her "independent" status on the grounds that she is a leading figure within Fakhfakh's own Ettakatol party. The PM, DC and Tahya Tounes objected in turn to Ennahda being granted this ministry, demanding that it be "neutralised".⁽⁴⁾ The degree to which certain political figures can accurately be characterised as "independent" has been one of the major points of dispute between the coalition's various parties and their prospective premier as well as among the parties themselves. It has been noted that several of those appointed are closely associated with Ettakatol, which failed to win a single seat in the parliamentary elections.⁽⁵⁾

4 See: Donya Hefsa, "Ba'd Maraton al-Liqa'at wa-Tadakhkhat Qays Sa'id wa-Nur ad-Din at-Tubwi: Hal Tamurr Hukumat Ilyas al-Fakhfakh bi-Tarkibatihā al-Mu'addala?" *Al Maghreb*, 19/02/2020 (accessed on 21/02/2020 at: <http://bit.ly/37J37TL>).

5 See: "al-Fakhfakh Yakshif al-Wathiqa al-Marja'iyya li'l-Barnamaj al-Hukumi", *Idha'at Benzert FM*, 28/01/2020 (accessed on 21/02/2020 at <http://bit.ly/2HJcokb>).



Expected Challenges

As soon as Ennahda decided to support Fakhfakh's government it became more or less certain that the government would be able to win the confidence of the parliament. But this will not mean an end to the difficulties that have dogged the prospective premier since his appointment. Managing such a diverse coalition and ensuring it functions smoothly will be no easy task. It is worth noting, however, that Fakhfakh's success in brokering an agreement between such distinct parties – including the PM and DC, which until only a few weeks ago staunchly rejected any partnership with Ennahda – is a remarkable achievement that may allow Tunisia's young democracy to escape ideological exclusion and create an open political space in which coalitions can be formed based on political and pragmatic considerations.

The most important test of Fakhfakh's ability to keep his manifesto promises, meanwhile, will be how he deals with the economic and social issues facing the country. The failure of the previous government's economic and social policies mean that Fakhfakh will be forced to consider a solution for the enduring structural crisis from which the economy is suffering and entirely overhaul the developmental model. This will mean unpopular measures – reforming food subsidies, reviewing state employment, and combatting the parallel economy (which accounts for more than half of the Tunisian economy). These measures may lead to economic tensions if they are not accompanied by carefully considered development plans and communication strategies.

Likewise, the challenges facing Fakhfakh and his team may be exacerbated by a tense regional situation because of events in Libya and their implications for Tunisia's economy and security. There are also many issues that need to be solved with European partners, above all the agricultural free trade agreement (ALECA). ALECA continues to be a point of dispute between different political and professional forces, including some of those now in government.

Conclusion

With Elyes Fakhfakh's success in forming a relatively broad coalition five months after elections that produced a kaleidoscopic political scene, the curtain has finally fallen on this chapter of political transition in Tunisia. Although all indications suggest that Fakhfakh's team will win the confidence of the parliament, the loose makeup of the governing coalition and the depth of the economic, social and regional challenges facing it will require a comprehensive program for national development, putting aside narrow party-political calculations. The new government will have to work together for Tunisia to move past the difficult phase it finds itself in.