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Cabinet Reshuffle in Tunisia and the Outcomes of the Political Crisis

Policy Analysis Unit

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Introduction

On 12 November 2018, The Tunisian Parliament approved a reshuffle of Youssef Chahed's cabinet, after he gained a comfortable majority vote of confidence after months of controversy and political tug of war.⁽¹⁾ The scene of the head of government (prime minister) going to parliament to garner confidence for members of his team would not have raised any eyebrows under normal circumstances. However, a conflict is raging between the President of the Republic and the prime minister, making it a momentous political event, and one that foreshadows the parliamentary and presidential elections expected in late 2019.

Chahed Gains Credibility

This dispute, over the nature of the government change requested, is only the surface of the bipartisan conflict that has engulfed Tunisia over the past few months. President Beji Caid Essebsi, and his camp in the Nidaa Tounes party, the General Labour Union and opposition parties such as the popular front are demanding a comprehensive change of government and the departure of the prime minister and his team. Ennahda on the other hand decided to stand by what it called "government stability" until the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019 and considered any cabinet amendment limited. Machrouu Tounes, a splinter party comprised mostly of ex-members of Nidaa Tounes, remained hesitant until they eventually decided to vote in favor of the reshuffle and participate in the government, while the remaining minor parties were divided between the two camps.

With the matter of the ministerial reshuffle in the interest of preserving Chahed over, the conflict between the two executive branches entered a new phase of parliamentary balances and partisan calculations. In Chahed's corner, Ennahda still maintains some organizational and party unity, despite disputes that have recently come out into the open about its position towards the ongoing struggle between the presidency and the government. Its parliamentary bloc, with 68 seats, has avoided the schisms that have exhausted others, contributing to Chahed gaining the vote of confidence in parliament.

In contrast to the cohesion of Ennahda and its parliamentary bloc is the accelerated disintegration of Essebsi's party, Nidaa Tounes, and its parliamentary bloc, with no influence to speak of during the vote on the ministerial reshuffle after choosing to boycott. The coordination of the Nidaa Tounes bloc's withdrawals, before and after the vote, suggest that the majority of those who remained are loyal to their bloc may not maintain this position for very long. The National Coalition bloc, loyal to Chahed, may become the destination for all the withdrawals.

The exodus to Chahed's camp has not just been limited to Nidaa Tounes representatives, but also includes ministers. A few days before the vote, the party warned ministers participating in Chahed's government

1 Cabinet reshuffle included 10 ministers and 8 junior ministers.

that the cost of staying in their cabinet positions would be their expulsion from the party, a warning that did not resonate, as they all chose to keep their ministerial portfolios over their party commitment.

In addition to Ennahda's governmental and parliamentary stability, and the ever expanding Nidaa Tounes crisis, the reshuffle offered an opportunity to Machrouu Tounes, to change its official position as the opposition and participate in government with one minister. Perhaps this participation indicates a step towards adjusting the party line and the position of its leader, who previously refused any cooperation with Ennahda because, despite its symbolic value, it is an Islamist party. However, it appears that weakening Essebsi is more urgent than antagonizing Ennahda for now, and the participation adds new credibility to Chahed's portfolio.

A Dual Power Struggle

In his speech in front of the parliament Youssef Chahed denied the existence of a governmental crisis in the country, assuring that the crisis was purely political. Chahed's speech made repeated and explicit references to the context in which the reshuffle occurred, and the power struggle between the two executive branches. He said this battle has "disrupted government work and the reform process", and described it as "friendly fire that is tougher than enemy fire". Although he went on to put forward numbers, indicators and stats that support his government and laid the blame for the country's social and economic difficulties with the general situation and backlog.

Chahed's assurances of the ease with which he gained confidence from his new government, speak to the strength of his parliamentary support in contrast to the weakness of the Nidaa Tounes and opposition blocs. This gave him another reason to dial up his rhetoric against the president and his remaining supporters from Nidaa Tounes. In a reference to the attempts of President Essebsi over the years to transcend the constitutional confines of his position, Chahed assured that he was head of government and not first minister and that he has unrestricted powers in choosing ministers and junior ministers. This was a powerful message warning the president that he must abide by his constitutional role. In the same context, Chahed implicitly suggested the responsibility of Essebsi and his camp in blocking the election and formation of several constitutional bodies such as the constitutional court, or filling vacancies in other bodies such as the Independent High Electoral Commission, stressing that history does not forgive those who make such obstructions.⁽²⁾ It is well known that the Nidaa Tounes bloc and the others refused to approve members of the constitutional court, and Essebsi, until now declined to appoint members, even though legislation provided for the formation of the Constitutional Court immediately after the 2014 elections.

Youssef Chahed's messages come a few days after a press conference organized by the president especially to discuss the reshuffle and his position on the measures taken by Chahed. The conference

² See Tunisian Prime Minister's speech to the People's Assembly, Facebook Page of the head of the Tunisian Government, 12/11/2018, last accessed 13/11/2018 at: <https://goo.gl/Wj4Xjf>

was held a few days after a statement by an official spokeswoman of the president accusing Chahed of not committing himself to consulting the president before turning to parliament for the vote of confidence, implying that he had overstepped his constitutional powers. However, Essebsi directed reassuring messages that he would not obstruct the appointment of the new ministers and junior ministers and their oath ⁽³⁾, without missing the opportunity to express his own foresight and enthusiasm for public interest in contrast to Chahed's limited vision.⁽⁴⁾

This ensuing struggle between Carthage, headquarters of the president, and the Kasbah, home to the prime minister is essentially an overarching war over influence. The constitutional matters are just details in the bigger picture, serving only to complicate matters. Since the 2014 elections, president Essebsi, on more than one occasion, has complained that his powers are limited against the expansive powers enjoyed by the prime minister (in post-revolution democracy) and is a veteran politician who spent most of his political career in a presidential system (as opposed to a dual executive system). Where the president and his team succeeded in curbing the role of former prime minister Habib Essid and forcing him to step down, he failed with his successor. Talk is growing about the president's efforts to groom his son Hafedh Essebsi for a future political role in the conflict within Nidaa Tounes, which has turned into a war between the Chahed and the Essebsi camps.⁽⁵⁾

Ironies in the New Political Landscape

The ongoing political conflict is unique in contemporary Tunisian politics. True authority for the pre-revolution government was negated by the prevailing presidential system, under which the president could appoint and dismiss members of the government at will, and without recourse to Parliament. But this changed after the revolution. This period where Hamadi Al Jabali served as Prime Minister and Moncef Marzouki as president saw some disputes, but they remained limited and never turned into a public battle, with most of the differences falling within the context of their respective visions. The current conflict began as one within a single political family, before turning into attrition. This plays out through the continued displacement of the political and parliamentary base of the Nidaa Tounes from the wing that remains loyal to Essebsi to the Chahed camp, which is yet to clarify a partisan or coalition identity on which it can settle.

The continued breaking of ranks within Nidaa Tounes, which began after less than a year of governing, has led to the erosion of most of its local and regional branches and the estrangement of most of its activists. However, the most severe disengagements were a result of the split of most of the founders,

3 Article 89 of the Tunisian Constitution stipulates that "Should the government thus gain the confidence of the Assembly, the President of the Republic shall appoint the Head of Government (prime minister) and the members of the government. The Head of Government and the members of the government shall swear the following oath before the President of the Republic: "I swear by Almighty God to work loyally for the good of Tunisia, to respect the country's Constitution and its legislation, to defend its interests and bear full allegiance to it"

4 See: Press Conference with Tunisian President, Facebook Page of the Tunisian President, 8/11/2018, last accessed on 13/11/2018 at: <https://goo.gl/57tpdU>

5 See: "Is Political Consensus over for Tunisia?", Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 8/10/2018, last accessed 13/11/2018 at: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Is-the-Political-Consensus-Over-in-Tunisia.aspx>

principal leadership and nearly half of the parliamentary bloc. A number of lawmakers who had initially withdrawn did not join the Chahed bloc, but cast their final vote in approval of the cabinet reshuffle, similar to the Machrouu Tounes bloc, in his favor. Meanwhile, the rest of the Nidaa Tounes bloc became so small that even had it attended the vote, it would not have been able to change or block the outcome backed by the Ennahda and National Coalition blocs.

With Nidaa Tounes bloc's boycott of the vote of confidence in Chahed's cabinet, it would have moved, practically, to the ranks of parliamentary opposition. This is the new political irony in Tunisia. The Nidaa Tounes bloc is loyal to Essebsi, meaning that the party is currently exercising power in the presidency and in the opposition, further complicating the relationship between the two executive branches. Additionally, the Nidaa Tounes bloc, through its final position, finds itself aligned with the traditional opposition inside the parliament, opposition which has based its position, since 2014 on rejecting the ruling coalition policies and Nidaa Tounes, and a rejection of the consensus which preserves Tunisian democracy during the transitional phase. There is potential for all kinds of discrete and open coordination between some components, but the relationship between Nidaa Tounes and some of the opposition blocs remains limited to a circumstantial alliance and has yet to develop into partnership.

The problem that is not being dealt with by any party is the declining public confidence that has resulted from unbridled partisan conflict and constant switches in position. This is especially the case against the backdrop of political culture to an audience that has not yet enjoyed real parliamentary democracy. This scenario is a prelude to a decline in confidence in democracy itself, which all the parties have a common responsibility to be aware of and prevent.

Conclusion

The conflict between the presidential and parliamentary camps enters a new phase after Chahed secured the vote of confidence in his new cabinet. His parliamentary victory, new party alliances with the government, and new representatives in the National Coalition bloc, Chahed adds more points to his scoresheet (as a partner of Ennahda). This comes in stark contrast to Essebsi, whose party wing and parliamentary bloc is rapidly eroding with a year to go until the expected parliamentary and presidential elections. However, that does not mean that radical changes are on the horizon, but rather indicates the redeployment and positioning of Essebsi's 2014 supporters while maintaining a calculated partnership with Ennahda, and a symbolic partnership with other components.