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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 27 January 2021

Tunisian Night Protests: Background and Repercussions

Unit for Political Studies

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Since mid-January, several Tunisian cities have played host to violent clashes between security forces and groups of youths taking part in night demonstrations interspersed with acts of vandalism and looting of both private and public property. Although the country has witnessed similar events over the last decade, the level of violence that has characterized the recent activity and the absence of any political or social leadership, raise many questions about the context and prospects of these protests, as well as their connection to the political and social crises sweeping the country.

Context

December and January have been particularly symbolic months for protest movements in Tunisia ever since the 1970s. On 26 January 1978, the general strike declared by the Tunisian General Labour Union turned into bloody clashes resulting in hundreds of Tunisians killed or wounded by police bullets. On 3 January 1984, demonstrations swept across the country against the doubling of food prices. The security forces once again killed and injured hundreds of citizens. Between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011, popular protests turned into a revolution that toppled the regime of former President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. In the decade following the revolution, a number of movements have arisen, with social and living demands remaining the most prominent causes.

The beginning of the new year is a helpful backdrop for inflaming social anger in Tunisia, as it coincides with the approval of the state's general budget, and the unpopular choices that usually accompany it, such as increasing taxes and the prices of certain consumer goods, while also seeing a decrease in the funds directed to creating job opportunities, social welfare, education, health services and infrastructure. Recent events coincide with worsening economic indicators as a result of the declining growth rate (-6%), chronic high unemployment (16.2%),⁽¹⁾ the decline in the exchange rate,⁽²⁾ the high cost of living, and the low quality of health and educational services. Although the Tunisian economy has been suffering accumulated structural problems for decades, the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the repercussions of these deficits given the slowed pace of production, the increase in prices, sudden unemployment for huge groups, and the depletion of public finances in the acquisition of emergency health supplies and in the disbursement of social welfare.

The most violent clashes of late have centred on the security forces and groups of youths, with private and public property being targeted in the western suburbs of Tunis, while Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, Sousse and Bizerte have seen sporadic skirmishes while other states have remained relatively calm. During the five days of confrontations, the Ettadhamen district represented the front line of events. It is an area that was formed decades ago from waves of internal migration, most of which came from poor areas in the northwest to the capital in search of job opportunities. Located in the western belt of the capital among the largest and densely populated areas in the country, with a

1 Key Indicators, National Institute of Statistics Tunisia website, accessed on 22/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/398VJFb>.

2 US \$ 1 equals 2.7 Tunisian dinars, and 1 euro 3.2923 Tunisian dinars, according to currency exchange rates on 21/1/2021, the Central Bank of Tunisia website, accessed on 22/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/39SN5dj>.



population of more than 200,000 people concentrated in a small area, Ettadhamen was one of the first areas of the capital to rise up during the revolution.⁽³⁾

The living conditions in most other areas that hosted skirmishes between the security forces and the demonstrators during recent events are not much different from the situation in Ettadhamen, as development projects in states such as Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan are grounded to a halt, unemployment rises and infrastructure and service facilities falter. Although a decade has passed since the revolution, development policies that have deepened crises in the suburbs for decades have not been reconsidered. And unlike the states of the interior and the capital suburbs, which have seen continual protests throughout the past decade, recent events have spilled into the governorate of Sousse. It is the first time the coastal city has witnessed clashes, looting and vandalism of this level. It seems that the repercussions of the pandemic on the tourism and service sector and the new unemployment of so much of the youth have collided to bring social tensions to breaking point.

Protest Clashes

Despite continual protests in Tunisia during the last decade, especially in December and January, the recent events were marked by an exceptional level of violence, as protesters blocked roads with burning tires and looted shopping centres and post offices. They engaged in violent clashes with the security forces, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails.

The recent events were not unusual just because of the violence; the age group was another significant feature, as children and youth under the age of twenty were shown to have participated in the violence that accompanied the demonstrations. The absence of any clear and declared demands behind the violence was another factor that distinguished these events from those that took place before and after the revolution. The recent events represented a new opportunity for the various political parties to interact, with some expressing their support for what happened as a justified uprising against marginalization, poverty and the failure of the system. The ruling parties responded by condemning the action as an organized riot fuelled by the opposition to sow chaos and target the state. Some other parties reacted by expressing understanding towards the movement without justifying the violence and looting.

On the third day of the events, President Kais Saied headed to the Mnihla area, where violent clashes had taken place the previous nights, and expressed his understanding of the demonstrators' demands, accusing the political parties of "trading in people's pain." In line with the populist approach to his political rhetoric, the Presidency of the Republic webpage was quick to broadcast clips in which the attendees called on President Saied to dissolve the parties and parliament.⁽⁴⁾

³ "Ettadhamen ... Hope for Change and a Warning to Politicians", Anadolu Agency, 23/1/2021, accessed on 23/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3sTC04u>.

⁴ "The meeting of the President Kais Saied, with a Group of Citizens Who Live in the Rafah Neighbourhood of Mnihla," the Tunisian Presidency page, Facebook, 18/1/2021, accessed on 22/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3c5411z>.

Prime Minister, Hisham El-Mechichi, had made sweeping changes in his government, through which the ministers affiliated with President Saied were removed one day before the start of the events. He addressed the Tunisians in a speech, expressing his understanding of these protests, promising that development will hold his government together and that the rule of law will be used to deal with looters and confront chaos.⁽⁵⁾ Parliament Speaker Rachid Ghannouchi expressed his understanding of the conditions of unemployed youth, while stressing that burning institutions will neither benefit Tunisia nor provide work or a decent life to the unemployed.⁽⁶⁾

Political tensions were also reflected in the reactions of political parties and forces, according to their position on the government and their parliamentary support base. The Heart of Tunisia party, which supports the government, denounced the “coordinated” actions and “the incitement” of minors to loot and vandalise in a way that has nothing to do with peaceful demonstrations or freedom of expression.⁽⁷⁾ Ennahda, which has the largest bloc in Parliament, strongly condemned the vandalism and looting, expressing its strong disapproval of hate speech and incitement to violence among Tunisians.⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand, most of the parties opposed to the Mechichi government reacted with sympathy. The People’s Movement considered the protests as a “clear rejection” of the plans established by the Mechichi government and the parliamentary coalition supporting it, expressing its “unconditional support” for the principle of peaceful protest guaranteed by the constitution and the right of citizens to express their rejection of the unpopular and unpatriotic plans that the current government is trying to enforce.⁽⁹⁾ The Democratic Current Party had a similar response, expressing support for peaceful protests and the right to demonstrate without fear of confrontations with the security forces, condemning “the excessive violence” with which the security forces meet the demonstrators.⁽¹⁰⁾ This is in the context of endless demonstrations in which there have been no deaths nor injuries at the hands of the security forces despite the violent demonstrations and vandalism.

A New Phase of the Crisis

A decade after the revolution and the high hopes that accompanied it, many social and economic difficulties that were among the causes of the 2011 revolution have remained, casting a shadow on the political scene and reflected in the public mood. Behavioural and social phenomena such as drug consumption and promotion, robbery, rejection of family traditions, emigration or involvement in organized crime and terrorism are on the rise.

It is clear that the social strata most involved in the recent events were too young in 2010 to keep pace with the demands and finer details of the revolution. As such, they are not attracted by the discourse

5 See: the Tunisian Presidency page, Facebook, 19/1/2021, accessed on 25/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3oapYjp>.

6 See: Rashid Ghannouchi Comments, Rashid Ghannouchi page, Facebook, 19/1/2021, accessed on 25/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2LXeUcp>.

7 See: Heart of Tunisia Party page, Facebook, 18/1/2021, accessed on 23/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2Y731TB>.

8 Statement of the Ennahda Executive Office, Ennahda page, Facebook, 19/1/2021, accessed on 23/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3a0qF9N>.

9 See: People’s Movement page, Facebook 19/1/2021, accessed on 23/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/39bFRH1>.

10 See: The Democratic Current page, Facebook, 19/1/2021, accessed on 23/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2MfDjKa>.



related to transition, construction and accumulation, nor concerned with the narratives of political, academic and cultural elites, their struggles, their interpretations of the economic and living crises and their proposals to progress. Recent events have also shown that the feeling of injustice and falling into the margins of development has left this group representing themselves and their own world. Their involvement in violence and rioting is nothing but an expression of this crisis.

The success in achieving a democratic political transition in Tunisia, compared to other Arab countries, does not conceal the failure to address social and economic issues, which feeds uprising, rebellion and social disruption. The economic and social crisis in Tunisia is not a product of the last decade as much as it is a structural crisis due to political choices and developmental policies that have produced poverty, deepened regional disparities and increased injustice. As long as the elites persevere with their economic and social plans without adjusting them to fit an inclusive national project and fail to adopt an effective communication plan, there will be no solution to the discontentment. It will not be possible to achieve development without stability and without the unions and other institutions refraining from impeding the government plans with endless sectoral protests that do not allow the implementation of the necessary reforms.

The political tensions and the weak will of the elites in dealing with the economic and social issues, over the past decade have exacerbated problems. In recent events, the authorities found themselves facing youth groups without specific demands out on the street at night. Attempts were made by some political parties close to the opposition and the union-led left to impart specific trends to the events by organizing daytime demonstrations in the centre of the capital, protesting the government and its party and parliamentary belt. But their ability to mobilize appeared lacklustre and weak, and the participants did not exceed a few dozen. Noteworthy was the participation of parties that failed to achieve any parliamentary representation in the recent elections despite the absence of an electoral threshold chanting to “bring down the regime.” This indicates the absence of their social and national responsibility, and the major issue of party politics.

Conclusion

Calm has returned to the popular areas of the capital and Tunisian interior following the past few days of night demonstrations punctuated by acts of looting, vandalism and violent clashes. The country is still vulnerable to more tension due to the structural economic and social crisis and the failure of the elites to agree on a national project that breaks from development policies that produce marginalization and regional disparities and remove obstacles to an agreed development approach. The short-sighted treatment of repeated protests contributes to the emergence of social behaviours and cultural representations outside of elite narratives and discourse. It perpetuates the obstacles of the fragile transition and deepens the indicators of social disruption. Despite the possibility of such events recurring and spilling into other areas that have remained calm until now, it is unlikely that they will produce any changes due to their lack of a clear identity and the ambiguity of their demands.