



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Kasserine and the Birth of a New Protest Movement in Tunisia

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2016

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## Introduction

On January 19, a massive popular uprising erupted in the Tunisian city of Kasserine, located 300 km from the capital, Tunis, within the Tunisian hinterland and close to the Algeria frontier, on the eve of an anticipated country-wide celebration marking five years since a peaceful revolution toppled Zein El Abidine Ben Ali and established the country's first pluralist government. The protests were led by groups of unemployed university graduates, who were demonstrating against an attempt by a local official to tamper with a list of several candidates that the government had pledged to employ in the public sector. During the protests, 28-year-old Reda Yahyaoui died from an electric shock after ascending a transmission pole to foment further action by the protestors. Yahyaoui's death further angered his fellow protestors, instigating them to rediscover slogans reminiscent of Tunisia's 2011 revolution: "Employment is a right, you pack of thieves".

The protests quickly spread to other cities in the same governorate, as well as to two neighboring governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa, before eventually reaching even further flung areas within the country, including in the marginalized districts of Tunis. The central government alleges that "external actors" worked to distort the once-peaceful protests, despite rapid action by the central authorities in the capital to expel the local official in question and to begin an investigation into alleged corruption, which has so far engulfed a number of local officials. The protests then escalated into a series of violent confrontations that pitted the police and Tunisia's National Guard against protestors. This, claims the government, despite orders given to the security forces to avoid confrontations to the extent it was possible; the authorities point to instances where the police had to withdraw from direct conflict with protestors and even to evacuate police stations.

The Tunisian public is divided on the issue. While some support calls for a second popular revolution, others are quick to point to "enemies" who want to make use of the fragile state of affairs in the country to foment chaos. The government was thus led to invoke a state of emergency and a late-night curfew in the Kasserine Governorate. This was later expanded to cover the rest of the country, after news spread that political groups were demanding the complete overthrow of the ruling regime, and had called on their supporters to attack government institutions nationwide. The plan entailed, according to reports, the creation of a sense of panic and chaos, with the political and

security vacuum to be followed by the premeditated looting of financial institutions and stores in Tunis and in the governorates' capitals.

## Failure to Address the Causes

Three general elections have been held in Tunisia since 2011, paving the way for seven successive governments to rule the country since the triumph of the revolution which ousted Ben Ali. Despite these transitions of power, no government has been able to deliver on a promise made by Tunisia's competing political forces to resolve the social and economic problems which have long plagued the country, particularly unemployment and the standard of living, the economic growth rate, and the absence of social justice. Unemployment has risen continuously throughout Tunisia, reaching 26.2% of the population in the so-called "Protest Triangle" that brings together the governorates of Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa and Kasserine. This compares to a 17.6% unemployment rate for the country as a whole. An estimated one-third of the unemployed in Tunisia are young university graduates.

Equally, successive governments have failed to address the imbalances in the country's development projects, which have relegated a number of governorates subject to an accelerating deterioration of health services. These include governorates such as Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba and Tataouine, where the lack of specialist physicians—including obstetricians—alongside a shortage of medicines, medical equipment and overall neglect has led to an increase in patient mortality. In parallel, authorities made a large number of political appointments within the local and municipal administrations across Tunisia; in some cases, the appointed individuals were associated either with the political parties presently running the country or with corruption dating to the pre-revolution period. In addition, the Ministry of Interior in particular stands accused of reverting to the same methods employed by the former regime in its suppression of activists and its restriction of liberties, particularly in areas outside of the capital. All of these factors contributed to the outbreak of the protests across various regions of the country.

## Conflicts of the Elite and the Worries of the Normal Citizen

The latest presidential and legislative elections were heralded by many as a symbol of Tunisia's successful transition from tyranny to democracy, and citizens hoped that their government would begin to address their economic woes once the political situation

had stabilized. In contrast, Tunisians were deeply disappointed by the way in which the country's political cliques were mired in their own internal discord and intra-elite conflicts for power. This was followed by a prolonged dispute between Tunisia's leading trade union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), the country's employers' organization, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, and the government. Over the course of the tripartite discussions, which dragged on for eight months, the purchasing power of the average Tunisian household continued to decrease, while economic productivity reached historic lows.

These problems were compounded by an internal schism within the ruling Nedaa Tunis, which had a direct and immediate impact on the country's wider political and economic performance. Over the previous two months, this grew into open defiance between the founders and leadership of the party, resulting in a cascade of dismissals, resignations, and reformations of party political committees, with each of the sparring sides resorting to all the means at their disposal—including media bodies and international support—to gain the upper hand. Direct results included:

- The impact on governmental effectiveness on all levels, including on the conduct of parliamentary business, following the resignation of more than 20 members of parliament from the Nedaa Tunis caucus (the largest in the legislature) to form their own parliamentary bloc. This precipitated the loss of Nedaa Tunis' parliamentary majority and calls for the Prime Minister to resign.
- The decline of both domestic and foreign investment in the Tunisian economy, coupled with the difficulties in securing foreign financial support to aid the country's transitional process.
- The deepening of political divisions has restricted the state's capability to carry out deep-seated reforms, denting its prestige and negatively impacting citizens' confidence in the state.
- This has left Tunisia much more susceptible to terrorist attacks, and turned the authorities' attention to combatting terrorism.

Such political disputes have prevented any serious focus on the development of Tunisia's long neglected, rural hinterland. It is this imbalance in the development of the rural and urban areas of the country which has long been the source of social and cultural tensions, and which has previously given rise to popular uprisings.

## (Not) Dealing with the Crisis

Many of the activists taking part in the protests saw the actions taken by the government in 14 of the most highly affected governorates (from a total of 24) to ameliorate the hardships faced by unemployed youth as piecemeal, limited in scope, and even insulting. Despite the gravity of the situation, and the potential risks it poses to the stability of Tunisia, the official response was delayed and the government was seen to drag its feet. An example of governmental hubris was Prime Minister Habib Essid's decision to visit France on January 22, following his departure to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 18. While in Paris, Essid had time to contact Mohammed Ennaceur, President of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, along with other officials, to coordinate the imposition of curfew. For his part, President Beji Caid Essebsi issued his own statement late in the day, where he also emphasized the danger in allowing "registered and unregistered" political parties to exploit the situation in order to "hand Tunisia over to terrorists".

Equally, the official response from the UGTT was delayed, despite its leaders' long-standing stated support for peaceful protests. When it did come, the UGTT statement emphasized the need for the protests to remain peaceful and to avoid giving "terrorists and provocateurs" the opportunity to hide between the marchers. The UGTT also asked that the protestors avoid both destruction of property and the paralysis of economic activity. The Islamist Ennahda also took part in this chorus, emphasizing the need to avoid facilitating the ulterior motives of political movements opposed to the post-revolution Tunisian regime.

While no conclusive evidence could be found linking specific politicians to violence in the Kasserine Governorate, this did not prevent a number of high profile Tunisian politicians from accusing various political factions of "militarizing" the protests. In particular, accusations that the Popular Front (PF), a broad Marxist coalition, was behind the vandalism and attacks on state institutions drove one of the PF leaders to hold a press conference on January 25 to deny that his group was responsible for any wrongdoing. One Ennahda MP, Walid Bennani, accused the PF alongside the extremist Hizb ut Tahrir (officially banned in Tunisia) as well as Al Massar. Former interim president, Moncef Marzouki, meanwhile, openly accused the United Arab Emirates of stoking upheaval in his country.



In contrast, the protestors, and particularly those drawn from the ranks of unemployed youth with post-graduate degrees, displayed a surprising level of sophistication and organization: they appointed official spokespersons to issue statements on their behalf (in particular, in the cases of the local sit-ins at governorate buildings in Kasserine and Kebili) and distanced themselves from attempts by political forces to capitalize on their protests. These protestors also renounced the use of violence within the protests, underscoring the peaceful nature of their movement. The protestors' official spokespersons expressed their understanding of the "red lines" that they would not cross. This led to a tone of conciliation by the government authorities, who expressed their understanding of and sympathy towards the protestors' demands. The government in Tunis, in fact, was conciliatory to a fault: some observers criticized the strategy of avoiding confrontation at all costs as a form of negligence. At the end of the day, however, it did win the approval of a number of Tunisian political movements and actors, including the UGTT.

The government's approach led also to a relatively low level of casualties among the protestors. Most of the protestors who needed medical attention were victims of tear gas inhalation, while the only fatality of the violent protests was a police officer, killed after his car was attacked by Molotov cocktails. In total, 35 cars owned by local authorities and a further six police cars were destroyed, as well as five separate police force buildings. As a response to these acts of vandalism, the police arrested 582 individuals for taking part in wide-scale looting, and a further 523 who violated the nationwide curfew.

## Conclusion

Today, the underlying causes of the protest movement remain in place, despite the reduced intensity of the protests. The severity of the economic crisis, along with the lack of either a clearly thought out economic strategy or the hard work necessary to develop Tunisia's marginalized southern hinterland, has added to problems created by the slowing pace of productivity in some sectors of the economy (and in some cases, a complete cessation of activity), and a sharp fall in tourism revenue. These compound other problems, including internal political strife within the country's political elite, and the need this highlights for a complete overhaul of Tunisian politics. In addition, the way in which the developed countries—and in particular the European states—have washed their hands of Tunisia, does not bode well for the transition to democracy in the country. In the meantime, any and all policies that the government may implement to

address the problem of mass youth unemployment will be purely cosmetic. What is more, such partial steps taken by the authorities no longer enjoy public support. One potential measure to address the present reality was made by Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who suggested convening a national conference to address issues of unemployment in marginalized regions of Tunisia. Other politicians have demanded a "Tunisian Marshall Plan" to be targeted specifically at the marginalized regions which need it most, and which involves all of the country's political parties.

The question remains: is the government capable of implementing any measures to tackle these challenges? So long as the country's political forces cannot agree on the best way to charter a course for the country out of these waters, and to protect the gains of the Tunisian revolution, the country will remain hostage to the volatility of social tremors.