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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Implications of Essid's Dismissal and the New Cabinet's Chances of Success

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2016

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**Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

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## Introduction

A no-confidence vote in the Tunisian parliament ended the premiership of Habib Essid on July 30, 2016, terminating what had been a 19-month tenure as prime minister. The vote also saw Tunisia's President Beji Caid Essebsi appoint the former Minister of Local Affairs, Youssef Chahed, as Essid's replacement. The Tunisian Constitution gives Chahed 30 days to form a new cabinet from the date of his appointment. He must present a list by September 3, 2016, and time is running out for the formation of a new cabinet that will be able to tackle the range of social, security, and economic problems faced by the state.

## Unravelling of Tunisia's 6th post-Spring Cabinet

Since the toppling of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime in early 2011, Tunisia has seen six government cabinets formed and dissolved, with Essid's government the latest to fall. The recent rocky path of Tunisia's governments includes the first two post-2011 cabinets, which preceded legislative elections and were effectively remnants of Ben Ali's outgoing regime. Next came two separate cabinets formed by the Ennahda movement in the wake of the electoral outcomes, followed by a non-partisan "technocratic cabinet" formed after Ennahda gave up the reins of power on January 9, 2014. Habib Essid's government took shape following the first presidential and legislative elections held in late 2014.

Essid was appointed prime minister by President Essebsi in February, 2015 following an agreement between the Nidaa Tounes parliamentary bloc—the same party to which Essebsi belongs, and which had won a majority of seats in the country's legislature—and the Ennahda Movement—which had won 69 of a total 217 seats in parliament, bringing it into second place. In its early days, Essid's cabinet had enjoyed remarkably wide support from the Tunisian political spectrum: Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, the Free Patriotic Union and Afek Touness were all supporters. These groups each supported Essid's ruling coalition, and gave a total of 166 votes for the formation of the new government. This same parliament also approved the changes to the composition of Essid's government the following January.

Facing the twin threats of terrorism and societal chaos, Tunisia's political forces rallied around the Essid government. With unprecedented political backing, the cabinet worked quickly to tackle these threats. Within a few short months, however, figures in the leading Nidaa Tounes party began to openly demand that the prime minister be replaced with someone more closely in line with their own political positions. These machinations precipitated a move by President Essebsi to call a nation-wide convention that would bring together the country's leading public figures and political parties to help prop up Tunisia's government in June, 2016.

## Bringing Essid Down

President Essebsi's national convention brought together nine political parties and three trade unions (the General Labour Union, the Agrarian Union and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts), which all met at the presidential palace. The communiqué issued by those present at the close of the meeting was termed the Carthage Document.<sup>1</sup> It set out a list of principles that the groups would expect the next government to abide by; the implication was that Essid was not living up to these retrospective expectations. The communiqué, issued on June 13, explicitly called for the formation of a new government that would implement the demands set forth by the parties.

More widely, the communiqué was viewed as an explicit request to Essid to step down from power. This was just the beginning of what would continue as a pattern of indirect, circumspect requests for the prime minister to leave office. These eventually snowballed into open calls for Essid's resignation, which included average Tunisians expressing their eagerness for him to leave office.<sup>2</sup> The former prime minister himself acknowledged these calls as a growing challenge to his tenure in a televised interview. Yet, the fact that the very same political blocs which put Essid in place were the same bodies that later called for his removal left many on the Tunisian street perplexed. This was in particular because of Essid's undeniable achievements on the security front, a major concern for the country.

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<sup>1</sup> To read the Carthage Document in its original Arabic, see here: <http://www.babnet.net/cadredetail-128240.asp>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ziad Kraishan, "Dear Mr. Essid: Clinging on to Power Harms the National Good", *Le Maghreb* (Tunisia), July 15, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://goo.gl/OcGdGF>

Essid's response to the growing instability and lack of popular support was to request a vote of confidence in the country's legislature on June 30, 2016. In asking for the vote of confidence, Essid explained that the failures of his cabinet should not weigh on him alone, and that a number of other parties, including leading political blocs, the presidency and civil society groups, should also be held to account. To force resignation, Essid said, would be equivalent to his taking sole blame for the difficulties Tunisia was facing. This did not seem to assuage the parliamentarians; however, while nearly all of them acknowledged his accomplishments in the security domain and in the battle against terrorism, a majority nonetheless voted to push Essid out of power.

With Essid obdurately holding on to his constitutional responsibilities, President Essebsi tried to reclaim the initiative by attempting to form a national unity government. This move only served to create the appearance of an open conflict between the two heads of the country's executive. This was unprecedented in Tunisian politics. It also played into the suspicions of many Tunisians that the president was attempting to consolidate power, an impression only heightened by the eventual choice made for Essid's replacement. This new alignment seemed to bring the country back to square one, ignoring the demands for change made by the 2011 revolutionaries.

Now that Essid is out and Youssef Chahed is in, questions have already arisen regarding what, exactly, the new cabinet will be capable of accomplishing beyond what Essid's government had achieved. With half of its term expired, the new cabinet has yet to produce an answer. Moreover, the problems faced by Tunisians are too great for any single political faction to take on. Instead, the country's political and civic leaders must find a way to combine forces first to take responsibility for the present crisis, and then to solve it. Until then, reality is only likely to get worse. The one point of change may come from the decision to incorporate Tunisia's agrarian and trades syndicates into the process of drafting the Carthage Document. This may signal that Essebsi is looking to collectivize responsibility for the upcoming period of Tunisian politics.

However, the internal divisions within Nidaa Tounes are also worrisome, and do not bode well for the competing factions that compose the group. The factions are, in the main, remnants of the former Ben Ali regime; a grassroots support base that sees Nidaa Tounes as an electoral counterweight to an Islamist power; the long-standing patrician families of Tunis, who have lead the country for centuries; and a series of large business interests. The divides between these segments contrast sharply with the

internal solidity of the Ennahda Movement, as well as the local potentates along the coastal provinces of Tunisia (such as Sousse, Monastir and Mahdia). It was these challenges that lead to the selection of Essid in the first place; a personally powerful politician who was expected be loyal to the presidency, and help the ailing politician in his upcoming battle to keep the top post in the next set of elections. With Essid gone, it is unclear how these divisions will be overcome.

At the same time, Essebsi is facing his own challengers from within the Nidaa Tounes party. The former Chief of the Presidential Staff Ridha Belhaj, who is a close confidante of Essebsi, has already become a victim of this infighting, having been forced to leave his post within Nida Tounes.

## Chahed's New Cabinet

In the wake of the Carthage Document, creating a new cabinet also means finding a way to address the three main points outlined in the document, which included a series of priorities for the new cabinet, a shortlist of individuals who could be tasked with forming the new government, and an urging to obtain the backing of the legislature through a confidence vote as the cabinet is formed. This may present difficulties for Chahed.

Essebsi's choice of Chahed, former Minister of Local Affairs, was a shock to political observers. The 41-year-old expert on agrarian affairs and food security, and a graduate of well-regarded Western universities, has long played a role in intergovernmental organizations and international cooperation bodies. Having not held any political posts in the former Ben Ali regime, Chahed comes to the new government free of any political baggage. His first major national appointment came in the wake of the 2014 elections, when he was appointed State Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries before eventually becoming the Minister of Local Affairs.

While deemed to be politically unaffiliated, Chahed is also related to President Essebsi through marriage. This adds to Essebsi's unsavoury image of nepotism: the president's own son holds a key post within the Nidaa Tounes machinery while a son-in-law is now the Chief-of-Staff. These connections have led to fierce opposition from four of the nine political parties that contributed to the Carthage Document, as well as some of the trades unionists.

## Prime Minister Chahed: Chances of Success

Notwithstanding the hurdle posed by his family ties to the president, Chahed has always insisted that he relies on the political backing of Tunisia's "Two Sheikhs," the honorific he gives to both President Essebsi and Rachid Ghannouchi of Ennahda. Chahed has also affirmed that he intends to form a new government within the constitutionally mandated time frame.

Though the deadline is approaching, very little of the composition of Chahed's upcoming cabinet can be divined at this stage, save for a wide belief that Kamal Marjan, the last foreign minister to serve under Ben Ali, is likely to be given a seat. It is also unlikely that Chahed will be given any kind of respite during his tenure, with leftist groups such as the Popular Front and leading unionist forces already voicing their disapproval at anticipated policies. Faced with growing unemployment, rising inflation, and declining development indicators—together with the total collapse of a number of industries as well as the tourism sector—the soon-to-be-formed Chahed government will take shape in very pressing economic circumstances.

Chahed's upcoming cabinet is expected to face big challenges. Some of the most pressing economic questions include servicing financial loans, the need to address public sector employment, inflation, and balancing a government budget. The challenges directly address the state's ability to improve wages, health insurance, and education. The Tunisian General Labour Union has already openly stated its refusal to approve the Chahed government. The Union is expected to continue pressuring Chahed for greater concessions in the run-up to their upcoming congress at the end of 2016. This will likely only limit the government's ability to act to a great extent. At the same time, the Popular Front has declined to even meet with Chahed, stating openly its objections to what they call Chahed's liberal political outlook. Ennahda has made clear through a number of channels that it will not be appeased by a purely symbolic participation in the Chahed cabinet, although it has agreed to support a Chahed prime ministership in principle. Other sectors within the parliamentary opposition have so far not explicitly ruled out taking part in the deliberations leading to the formation of the Chahed cabinet.

## Conclusion

Chahed must form a ruling government by September 3 to present his proposed formation to the Tunisian parliament for approval. All indications are that Chahed will form a politicized cabinet, where members enjoy partisan backing and not merely a government ruled by technocrats, but without strict partisan quotas. Chahed is also expected to draw heavily on the young, on women and well-respected experts. It was only through tireless effort that Chahed has thus far been able to neutralize objections to this proposed balancing act. Once his selections for the cabinet are made, the main task of charting a path for the country will remain. Given the vital importance of this experiment not only to the Tunisian democratic model but to the fate of democracy across the region, he will have to employ all of his powers to make his first government a success.