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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Protests in Tataouine: Legitimate Demands, Incompetent Government

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

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Introduction

A wave of protests broke out in the Tunisian Governorate of Tataouine in mid-April in response to a series of economic and social policies which have harmed marginalized groups in the country. Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed visited the Governorate together with a ministerial delegation on 27 April, and undertook a number of measures, including the dismissal of Finance Minister Lamia Zribi and Education Minister Naji Jalul. While this briefly calmed the rallies and stunted the momentum of the protests, a latter surge of demonstrations has taken in unprecedentedly large and diverse groups, who are now adopting aims which go beyond the demand for greater services.

A Growing Movement

Tataouine is today the site of the latest flashpoint in a long series of confrontations between the Tunisian state and protestors, the intensity of which has increased in recent months. Unlike previous years, the protests have fanned out across the governorates of Tunisia, culminating in March which witnessed some 1,089 acts of protest, whether individual or collective acts; the vast majority (more than 1,000) were collective actions. The largest and most persistent of this latter group were located in the Governorate of Tataouine, followed by Gafsa and Kairouan. The social unrest in the City of Tataouine on 28 April 2017 led protestors to the area of "Kamour" located 100 km south of the municipal boundaries. Protestors there prevented oil company trucks from accessing the oil fields in the surrounding desert. They also closed the Dhehiba crossing on the Tunisian-Libyan border.

The diverse group of protesters hailed from all sections of society: blue and white collar workers alike, employed in both the public and private sectors. Recent protests have been joined by self-employed professionals and public medical institutions responding to the deterioration of hospital services and the lack of medical equipment and specialist doctors. Lawyers, engineers as well as employees of the government regulated bakeries sector and customs staff also took part to reject the Tunisian Finance Law and government policies towards their sectors.

The protests have been exacerbated by the presidential relaunch of "The Economic Reconciliation Bill". Led by various civil society organizations, activists have challenged this bill, raising the slogan "We Will Not allow It" even before the recent wave of protests in the Tataouine desert erupted. They are calling out the government for reproducing a corrupt system like that of the former regime under the guise of "reconciliation". Additionally, the protestors are motivated by a belief that the government is evading its responsibilities towards transitional justice in the period following the 2011 revolution which removed the Ben Ali regime.

A Plethora of Problems

The post-revolutionary transition and the nature of the economic and social policies adopted by the Tunisian government produced circumstances that would inevitably have ignited popular protests. Specifically, this is due to:

Economic Decline: The economic growth rate in Tunisia fell to just 1% following the revolution, accentuated by the decline in the production of phosphates. Tunisian exports were at their lowest level due to repeated strikes and sector mismanagement within the governorates most deeply involved in phosphate production and particularly Tataouine. This prompted the exodus of foreign companies and the closure of factories that had stimulated employment. At the same time hundreds of productive enterprises were disrupted because of bureaucratic complications, widespread corruption, lack of good governance and insecurity. Repeated terrorist attacks targeting tourism during the past two years have also subdued an important sector.

As a result of the above factors Tunisia's trade deficit increased by 57% during the first quarter of 2017 year-on-year, ballooning to 3.87 billion Tunisian dinars (US\$ 1.68 billion). This precipitated a decline in foreign exchange reserves, which, according to figures from the Tunisian Central Bank, amounted to about \$ 5.43 billion, enough to cover imports for just 103 days compared to 107 days in the same period last year. Government measures could not halt the sharp and continuous decline in the exchange rate of the Tunisian dinar against the dollar. This angered the Union of Industry and Trade, which called on the Tunisian government and the Central Bank to explain the reasons for the sharp decline and its repercussions on the national economy and internal investment and its inability to stop it.

The Developmental Imbalance at National and Local Levels: In the wake of the revolution, the Tunisian government made successive claims to pursue comprehensive and balanced development policies assuring development "at the national level", in other words development which was equitable for all governorates of the country. Yet statistics from both the National Statistics Institute and the Ministry of Social Affairs reveal a severe regional imbalance in distribution of income and development projects between the east coast and the western and southern governorates.

Socio-economic indicators reveal the extent of the developmental imbalance between governorates. The unemployment rate for the west is as high as 30% compared to a national average estimated at 16.5%. In the western governorates poverty exceeded 38% while the national level was just 15%. Ironically, high unemployment and poverty are largely concentrated among high school graduates, with various statistics indicating that about 50% of them are unemployed.

As the statistics show, marginalization of some governorates continued after the revolution as a result of the faltering development wheel, the disruption of investments, and the government's retreat from its previous promises. The government thus failed to adhere to the provisions in chapter 12 of the Tunisian Constitution compelling the state to "pursue social justice and sustainable development and an equal balance among all parties, based on development indicators and the principle of positive discrimination."

Political Factors: Prevailing Tunisian instability in the political arena is especially evident among the political parties. The majority of the parties are in the process of preemptively restructuring their own ranks, following a series of divisions, ahead of municipal elections scheduled for 17 December. At the forefront of these parties is Nidaa Tounes, the backbone of the ruling coalition. The fragmentation of political parties has contributed to increased political grandstanding between various groups, exacerbating prevailing tensions. In turn, this has expanded the size of the protests in Tataouine and afforded them a political dimension.

Political fragmentation has been particularly evident in the contradictory positions of national parties and organizations towards the protest movement. Most political and civil forces, including parties in the governing coalition and major civil society organizations, led by the Tunisian General Labour Union; the Union of Industry and Trade; and the Farmers Union have expressed their support for the recent movement in various ways. The statements and positions adopted varied in terms of severity and political reach, depending on a specific party's representative clout, its involvement in existing alliances, and future electoral aspirations.

The Popular Front, as the opposition, claimed leadership of the recent protests, while the Tunisian Labor Union and the ruling coalition parties shouldered the responsibility for the social tension in the internal governorates. Most surprising was the way in which some parts of the ruling coalition, especially Ennahda, adopted an escalatory rhetoric. The Islamist Ennahda's Tataouine delegate, Hussein Yahyaoui declared that "the wealth of Tataouine is looted and is carried to El Saleh [a coastal governorate]." He also asked the head of the parliamentary bloc of Ennahda, Nouredine Bhiri, to dedicate 20% of the wealth extracted through phosphate mining to the people of Tataouine Governorate.

On the Brink of Another Crisis?

Protestors' demands concentrated on the improvement of social conditions, expansion of employment, reduction of poverty, limiting social marginalization, and the equitable distribution of wealth. Yet with the accumulating protest movements and the weak government response on the one hand, and political polarization among the increasing number of political parties on the other, the protests are increasingly polarizing on the Tunisian political front.

Additionally, the protesters have started making unfeasible demands such as the distribution of oil and gas revenues, and for operating ratios in sectors of government to return to the region. This may strengthen regionalism at the expense of national unity and prioritize regional loyalties at the expense of national loyalty because natural wealth is a public property and no one has the right to own it. Accordingly, the emergency measures taken by the government to deal with past and current protests may contribute to a "gradual lull", but their effects quickly fade away from the lack of public policies and their inability to deal with the economic problems of the Tunisian citizen or to mitigate their effects.

Today, the Tunisian government's emergency measures to deal with past and current protests may succeed as a stop-gap measure, contributing to produce a momentary calm. In the long-run, however, the effects of these government measures will evaporate; government policies to address the roots of economic problems, or at the very least to alleviate their impact on the average Tunisian citizen, will fail. In light of this, the protests will likely be reinvigorated and stand to expand further, ahead of the next elections and threaten partisan conflict and increased political infighting. Ultimately, this could have implications for the "Carthage Declaration", which lays the

foundations for a governing coalition, and the very roots of a political consensus in Tunisia. Finally, despite the legitimacy of the protest movement in Tataouine and other marginalized areas, its continuation coupled with the government's inability to address the root causes entails several risks. At the present time, the most worrying threats is a potential deterioration in the security situation: the diminished capacities of the military and the security forces place Tunisia at great risk.