

Towards the consolidation of democracy in Tunisia

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Summary

Alone among the Arab countries that saw uprisings in 2011, Tunisia has succeeded in constructing a democratic political framework that is endorsed by all the country's non-violent political and social groups. With the completion of the constitution and electoral law, the setting up of a series of commissions to regulate the political sphere and the installation of a technocratic government, Tunisia has closed one stage of its transition. It is now entering a new phase, where **the most important questions are whether these democratic institutions can establish themselves successfully and prove able to address the country's immediate and longer-term challenges.** Tunisia's achievement in finding a consensual route to political transition amid the turmoil and setbacks elsewhere in the region is striking: the failures of transition in other Arab countries make it all the more important that Tunisia stands as a counter-example to these negative trends that shows democracy can work in the Arab world. But the ultimate success of Tunisia's transition cannot yet be taken for granted, and the EU should prioritise support to Tunisia during this period.

Prospects for the elections

Behind the shelter of a non-partisan government, Tunisia's political landscape is composing itself ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections that are due to be held before the end of 2014. The sequencing of elections remains the subject of intense manoeuvring among the political parties involved in Tunisia's national dialogue, but shows no sign yet of provoking a political crisis. The Islamist Ennahda party lost popularity during its period heading the country's "troika" coalition government, but has gained credit for leaving office voluntarily to preserve the transition. **Ennahda remains the most disciplined and best organised political party across the country.** Many Tunisians expect it to do well in the legislative elections, perhaps even coming within range of the 37% vote share it achieved in 2011. Ennahda has not reached a decision on whether to field a presidential candidate; it is unlikely to put up a candidate if parliamentary elections are held first or simultaneously with the first round of the presidential elections, but an Ennahda figure may run if the presidential elections come first.

The main counterweight to Ennahda is Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), the secular-nationalist party founded by former interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi to balance against Islamist dominance. **Nidaa Tounes has established a strong presence in Tunisian political life, but it lacks a clear ideological direction beyond opposition to Ennahda.** The party is divided between centre-left anti-Islamists and figures linked to the RCD party of former authoritarian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The growing influence of the

former secretary-general of the RCD, Mohamed Ghariani, and of Essebsi's son Hamed has caused increasing internal tensions. Party officials justify Ghariani's role as necessary to allow Nidaa Tounes to profit from the former RCD electoral machine around the country (which might otherwise be taken over by Ennahda). Beji Caid Essebsi leads the polls for president, though it is not yet certain he will run.

Beyond these two dominant parties, **smaller political groups are struggling to achieve any influence**. Moves to form significant political blocs have faltered. Politicians complain that the electoral law favours fragmentation, and personal ambition among the aging generation of political leaders (who see a final chance to achieve political office in the new democracy) is overcoming more far-sighted vision. The liberal reformist parties are unable to match the national exposure and reach of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. **There is widespread public disenchantment with political parties**, who are perceived to have spent the last years engaged in political manoeuvres and horse-trading while doing little to solve the country's problems. Many people are concerned that turnout in the forthcoming elections will be low, and the new parliament will see Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes as the two dominant blocs presiding over a fragmented group of minor parties.

There are a number of scenarios for how such a situation would play out. The assembly could divide into a governing and opposing coalition; there could be an agreement to allow the current technocratic government under Mehdi Jomaa (which is popular, internationally respected and seen to be effective) to remain in office for a year or so; or there could be a national unity government bringing Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes together. Unlikely as it sounds, this last option is not impossible: there has been a noticeable rapprochement between the party's leaderships through the dialogue process. Such an approach would offer the advantages of broad political consensus, though it could also worsen the internal divisions on both sides: Ennahda's base (which is already restless because of the pragmatic compromises the group has made) would object to a deal with a party that includes remnants of the old regime, while the more leftist elements in Nidaa Tounes are already trying to set prohibitive conditions for any coalition with Ennahda (such as demanding it renounce its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood). In any case, **the health of Tunisian democracy in the post-election period will depend on the ability of these two parties to reach some understanding, and above all on the country's new institutions including the many oversight commissions**.

Urgent priorities

Two urgent problems dominate the political agenda: **security and economic challenges**. The risk in both cases is that conditions have deteriorated since the revolution and could lead to a loss of support for democracy. Tunisia needs to stabilise the situation to buy time for democracy to entrench itself.

Political violence nearly derailed the transition in 2013. Following a more aggressive approach from the security services, Islamist extremist groups have

struck back, including through the recent attack on the Interior Minister's home in the central city of Kasserine that killed four policemen. **Terrorism is increasingly seen as a dangerous and significant problem, but one that remains poorly understood** (partly through weaknesses in the security forces). In the longer term the fight against violence will involve redressing economic and social exclusion and regaining control of the religious sphere, but more immediately it is a challenge for the security sector.

Weapons and fighters are able to cross the border from Libya freely, and the current chaos in Libya could have a dramatic impact, as General Haftar's campaign drives out militia members and other refugees who threaten to further destabilise Tunisia as well as being a drain on its economy. Extremists also move over the Algerian border, though cooperation with Algerian security forces has improved. **Reinforcing the borders is an obvious priority, though Tunisian officials and politicians also emphasize the need for better equipment and training of security forces.** Since extremists want to derail the political process, violence could rise in the run-up to the election. An increase in religiously-inspired violence would raise tensions between secular and Islamist political groups and a serious breakdown in public order could jeopardise democracy.

The upheavals of the last three years have caused significant damage to Tunisia's economy from which it has not recovered. Unemployment remains higher than before the revolution (15.3% at the end of 2013 compared to 13% before the uprising, with young people prominent among the jobless) and growth in 2013 was down on the previous year at 2.6% - again well below the pre-revolutionary trend.¹ Overseas investors appear to be waiting until the elections before committing to return. **Stability will be essential for investment and for the growth of tourism back to pre-revolution levels.** One piece of good news is that this year's agricultural harvest appears to be promising.

While politicians and financial analysts recognise the need for financial reforms including the reduction of subsidies and improvement of tax collection, they emphasise that this must be done in a way that does not worsen the living conditions of socially deprived groups. There is a broad desire for a consensual approach to the difficult economic decisions that must be taken in the short term, with a national economic dialogue underway to match the political dialogue; few parties have distinct and divergent economic programmes. The necessity of making unpopular reforms may discourage parties from seeking a partisan government after the elections. In the words of a former Tunisian finance minister, the economic situation is a cause for concern but does not threaten an imminent breakdown as long as trends do not turn in a more negative direction.²

The deeper challenge of reform

¹ World Bank figures.

² ECFR interview with Elyes Fakhfakh, 4 June 2014.

These short-term measures to head off any imminent security or economic crisis could be handled by a technocratic government, before and perhaps after the election. **The longer-term challenge is to complete the revolution by addressing the underlying weaknesses and failures of the Tunisian state.** There is a major agenda of necessary and interlinked reforms that have not yet been undertaken: a new development model that redresses social imbalances and roots out corruption; reform of the security forces to eliminate abusive practices, improve transparency and professionalism; reform of the judiciary to entrench a genuine rule of law; reform of public administration to end sclerotic and clientelist practices, and make the state more responsive to its citizens; accountability and transitional justice, where a new commission is just beginning a planned four-year investigation; and decentralisation. The intersecting nature of these objectives calls for an integrated reforming political vision rather than piecemeal measures. Beyond the obvious split between Islamist and secular parties, **the most significant division in Tunisian politics may be between those groups (including the younger generation) who want to develop and take forward a new vision of the state, and those who do not want to go beyond tinkering with the status quo.**

A technocratic government would not be likely to have the vision and legitimacy for this agenda. Ennahda or Nidaa Tounes will also need a change of approach to become convincing vehicles for reform. **Paradoxically, these two opposing and dominant parties are in many ways similar to each other.** Both have opaque and undemocratic internal structures, led by men who have been involved in public life for decades. Both see themselves as social movements as well as parties, lacking a clear political-ideological orientation. Both have been linked to extra-state groups accused of intimidating political opponents (for Ennahda, the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution; for Nidaa Tounes, the police unions which are an increasing focus of concern). In this light, while a coalition between Ennahda and Nida Tounes would offer political stability to the country, it would also require outside pressure and oversight to help ensure it remained committed to a path of genuine reform.

Nevertheless **many young people in Tunisia remain passionately engaged in public life, even if they alienated from the current political parties.** Pressure from outside and a change of leadership within the parties can be expected to maintain the impetus for reform, which will in any case take at least a decade to carry out. If the immediate threats of a security and economic crisis are defused, Tunisia will have more time to develop a more democratic culture and political class to respond to the aspirations of its citizens.

Implications for European policy:

- Step up immediate assistance in dealing with violent extremism, including through reinforcing security on Tunisia's border with Libya and improving the effectiveness of Tunisian security forces. This could be coupled with steps aimed at cementing Tunisia's regional security (for instance, partnership programs within the OSCE initiative for Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation and similar initiatives).

- Stand ready to offer further short-term financial assistance, including offering and encouraging others to provide budget support and loan guarantees in a way that is sensitive to current social conditions (including through EU influence within the IMF), and encouraging private sector investment.
- Continue high-level engagement with and sustained political support for Tunisia to show that the EU recognises the significance of the Tunisian transition to democracy at a time of deteriorating regional trends.
- Maintain and increase longer-term development assistance that is directed to promote projects in Tunisia's more deprived areas, improving the country's infrastructure and creating employment in the regions – and not just channelled through central state structures.
- Engage with current political leaders to encourage them to continue seeking broadly-supported solutions to problems that arise in the run-up to the elections and in their aftermath. Here the EU can build on its successful role in helping to foster a consensual solution to the political crisis of 2013 through intense mediation.
- Develop contacts with civil society and younger, emerging reform-minded politicians who may offer the best hope for the country's medium-term political development. Enhance support directed to civil society groups that monitor the development of democracy through EU instruments including EIDHR and the European Endowment for Democracy.
- Consistently offer encouragement and assistance with reform of state institutions, including decentralisation, reform of public administration, the security sector and the judiciary, and transitional justice. If applicable, such efforts could be offered in partnership with other international institutions such as the Council of Europe, and with other powers such as the United States.
- Support steps to enhance Tunisia's democratic culture by promoting exchanges with Europe, especially with young people and emerging members of political groups in the national assembly.
- European donors operate in a resource-constrained environment – but the amounts required to have a constructive impact in Tunisia can be comparatively modest, given the country's size. A Tunisian positive model can still be important regionally, and failure would deal a potentially devastating setback to hopes for Arab democracy. Europe should therefore look at considerable ramping up of assistance to Tunisia, including diverting democracy support resources that can no longer be meaningfully invested in countries like Egypt where transition to inclusive and accountable government has stalled.

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