



Tunisia, Summer 2018: Challenges and Questions

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Tunisia's citizens continue to face a multitude of political, social and economic issues that have affected the country since the January 2011 revolution. The country that sparked the "Arab Spring" across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) has been the sole success story to come out of the upheavals of 2011. However, from a Tunisian perspective, the characterization of Tunisia as a "success" is more applicable when compared to other countries that experienced revolutions, like Egypt and Libya, than a confirmation of the reality in their own country.

Since the toppling of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, Tunisia has established new political institutions, held several elections, and adopted a new constitution. However, as with all countries that have sought to evolve into a democratic system of government, Tunisia has encountered considerable difficulties. Recent issues facing the country include the uncertain status of political parties after local elections that were held in May 2018; continuing economic challenges; and, the controversial attempt to advance a legal process of justice and reconciliation that would examine in depth the actions of the *ancien* regime. The most common feelings among ordinary Tunisians regarding the current situation are frustration and a deep disappointment with the political and economic realities. These feelings are common in countries transitioning from authoritarian to democratic regimes and indicate high, often unrealistic expectations regarding the regime change process. In practice, the process is nearly always lengthy, and not always fully concluded. When the expected far-reaching improvements did not occur, the disappointment was palpable.

As in other democratic and democratizing regimes, Tunisians have been particularly focused on the issue of government corruption, even if it is not as deeply rooted as many people believe. Many also are concerned that the hard-

won political freedoms and a budding pluralist environment has been eroded. There is also a widespread sense that state institutions are losing their authority, which radiates out towards the country's political parties. This erosion in the state's strength is especially disturbing to many older Tunisians, who are used to a relatively centralized and stable government over the last several generations. The adoption of comprehensive economic and administrative reforms is essential for improving the state's proper functioning, but the government is reluctant to do so. Such reforms would require painful budget cuts, a reduction of state employees, and structural adjustments, all of which could generate social and political unrest.

The toppling of the old regime and the opening of the political system resulted in the blossoming of many new political parties. This is also a common phenomenon in countries transitioning from authoritarian systems, but the Tunisian public considers the plethora of parties to be yet another reason for the country's instability. In any case, the political arena revolves around two dominant parties, namely the Islamist *Ennahda* Movement ("renaissance") and the more secular "*Nida'a Tounes*" movement ("Tunisia's Call"). These two parties are partners in the governing coalition founded after *Nida'a Tounes*' victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections.¹

The Ben Ali regime systematically suppressed *Ennahda* for more than two decades, almost completely isolating it from public life. The movement's leaders, including Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, languished in either prison or exile. After the 2011 revolution, the movement quickly resurfaced and garnered widespread public support. The party declared its devotion and commitment to democracy and proclaimed its allegiance to values such as advancing the status of women, which are a part of Tunisia's founding principles. At the same time, it presented itself not as an "Islamist" party committed to working towards a state governed by religious law, but as a conservative party whose connection to religion was similar to the numerous Christian democratic parties in Europe.² In the initial October 2011 assembly elections, the party won a plurality votes but had to form a coalition with secular parties to establish a government.

Opponents of *Ennahda* have rejected the moderate image it claims to embrace, insisting that this is a misrepresentation of what is essentially an extremist movement. The secular opposition to *Ennahda* proved to be a formidable force, organizing large public protests, in the summer of 2013 against the government.

¹ ["Q&A: Tunisia in Transition: A Comparative View from Thomas Carothers,"](#) Project on Middle East Democracy, May 30, 2018.

² Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, "Moderation through Exclusion? The Journey of the Tunisian *Ennahda* from Fundamentalist to Conservative Party," *Democratization* 20:5 (2013), 857-875

These protests reflected widespread disappointment over Tunisia's economic situation, disappointment with the pace of implementation of political reforms, and the drafting of a new constitution. *Ennahda* eventually bowed to public pressure, and withdrew from the government in favor of a Cabinet of technocrats that, supported by civil society groups, successfully guided the country through the long-delayed adoption of a new constitution and parliamentary elections in 2014 (in which *Ennahda* suffered a defeat, but managed to remain a dominant party), and after that, presidential elections.

In the 2014 elections, *Ennahda* faced a new opponent, specifically the *Nida'a Tounes* party, founded in 2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi. Essebsi is a veteran statesman who stood at the helm of the transitional government after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011. Essebsi led the anti-*Ennahda* forces and fashioned them into a powerful rival force. *Nida'a Tounes* garnered a broad spectrum of support, ranging from former activists in the Ben Ali regime to veteran left-wing activists and members of trade unions. The party won both the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections, mainly due to the disappointment people had regarding *Ennahda's* performance at the helm of government between 2011 and 2013. Since then, however, public criticism of *Nida'a Tounes* has been considerable. The fact that the party revolves around the nonagenarian Essebsi is a cause for concern regarding the party's future. Efforts led by Essebsi's son, Mohamed Hafedh Caid Essebsi, to strengthen his father's image, and the presence of veterans of Ben Ali's regime in the government have further contributed to public dissatisfaction with the party and have led to internal fissures within its ranks.³

On May 6, 2018, the country held the municipal elections, the results reflected the general public's disappointment in the political system. The *Nida'a Tounes*-led government had repeatedly postponed these elections due to its fear of losing them. These elections were the first to be held at the municipal level since the revolution, and their purpose was to promote the devolution of powers from the government to the local municipalities. Voter turnout was low (approximately 35% of eligible voters participated) reflecting widespread alienation towards electoral politics. Even so, *Ennahda* nominees managed to defeat many of their *Nida'a Tounes* competitors, thereby demonstrating, yet again, that the movement has a strong base of support and that it was far too early to eulogize it. The *Ennahda* party helped itself by emphasizing its moderate vision, and even placed a Jewish candidate on its list in the city of Monastir. It also placed a woman at the head of the party list in the elections in the country's capital, Tunis. At the same time, its electoral support also declined, thereby forcing it to form coalitions in

³ Anne Wolf, "[The Future of Tunisia's Nidaa Tunis Party](#)," July 25, 2014, Middle East Institute. Emir Sfaxi, "[In With the Old in Tunisia](#)," Sada Journal, September 28, 2017.

numerous municipal councils. Many voters preferred to vote for independent candidates and lists, instead of supporting the nominees from the largest parties. It is difficult to say at this point whether the abandonment of the larger parties in favor of independent candidates will characterize future Tunisian elections.⁴

Many Tunisians are dealing with a difficult financial situation along with general disappointment in the political system. This situation is evident in the recent price hikes, increasing inflation rates and the decline in the value of the local currency. This reality led to a decrease in foreign investment, an essential element in achieving economic development. At the outset of the summer tourist season, Tunisian officials were attentive to the number of potential arrivals and their impact on the economy. The tourism sector, an essential source of income for many, has suffered massively in recent years due to terror attacks by radical Islamists, who targeted foreign tourists visiting the country.⁵ The government has worked diligently to revitalize this sector and ensure security to tourists visiting Tunisia. There is a sense of optimism regarding this upcoming tourist season, however, even a successful season will not provide the answer to continued high unemployment and to the economic hardships the country faces.

In addition to the country's economic and political difficulties, it is currently in the midst of an important process of examining the injustices of past regimes as part of the process of national reconciliation. Over the past several months, most of the public's attention has been directed at the work of the "Truth and Dignity Commission," established in 2014. The commission has collected over 60,000 testimonies and millions of Tunisians have watched portions of the televised hearings and testimonies detailing torture and other injuries inflicted under the Ben Ali regime. Its work has stimulated poignant public debates about both the past and the future.

However, despite the commission's intense activity, massive pressure has been placed on it by the government. The commission's directors claim that the heads of government, though mainly *Nida'a Tounes*, has attempted to constrain their actions. An administrative amnesty law passed by the parliament in September 2017 granted a full pardon to government officials of the old regime accused of corruption if they did not benefit from it personally. Supporters of this law argue that it is necessary to establish stable political systems. The heads of the truth commission and human rights organizations see this law as an attempt to undermine the commission's work and to legitimize the injustices committed under the Ben Ali regime, this in order to facilitate the return of senior regime

⁴ Haifa Mzalouat, "[A Step Forward for Independents.](#)" Sada Journal, May 10, 2018. Emir Sfaxi, "[Sustaining Democracy.](#)" Sada Journal, May 11, 2018.

⁵ The most recent tragic event that occurred was the attack in the seaside city of Sousse on June 27, 2015, in which 38 tourists were killed.

officials to government positions. Beyond the amnesty law, the government has blamed the heads of the commission for corruption and poor handling of their investigations. The commission's future is now in limbo. Initially, the Tunisian parliament rejected a request to extend its mandate by another year due to the heavy load of cases and testimonies. Only after contentious debates did the government extend the commission's mandate by a year. However, the government's negative approach casts a shadow over its public status, and weakens the commission's ability to advance the process of more forthrightly confronting the past.

The current situation is hardly rosy, with unemployment rates officially at around 15 percent, a rise in prices of key commodities, and an ongoing gap between the more prosperous coastal areas and the economically underdeveloped periphery. However, Tunisia does have a political culture that places a high value on political and social stability, something that may help it address its considerable problems without undermining the achievements of the past seven years.

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