

Tunisia: Towards the Return of the Old Regime?

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Seven years after the revolution, the social protests that continue to rock Tunisia bear witness to the stumbling blocks encountered by the transition. Economic and social demands are not being met and the transition from dictatorship to democracy is struggling. Beji Caid Essebsi, the head of state, continues to strengthen his own power and seems to be veering towards absolutism.

The South: Theatre of Major Social Protests

The spring of 2017 was marked by large social movements in various regions of the country, including Kairouan, El Kef and, especially, in the south, more specifically, in El Kamour, in the governorate of Tataouine, where the unrest lasted several weeks and protestors clashed with the government. As in other regions, residents claimed they faced social and economic discrimination compared to the coast, which receives more attention in terms of development policy. Around the El Kamour oil site, 120 km outside Tataouine (some 700 km from Tunis), the protest movement was spearheaded by unemployed youth with three main claims. They called for the creation of 1,500 jobs in the various oil companies (including those located outside El Kamour), the creation of 3,000 jobs in organizations dedicated to 'greening' the production sites (the so-called environment, planting and gardening companies),

and the redistribution of 20% of oil revenues to local communities via a development fund.

On 27 April, the head of government, Youssef Chahed, visited the region, accompanied by several of his ministers (Social Affairs, Environment, and Investment) to try to respond to the demands of the protestors, whose call to strike was blocking the oil site and preventing production. Showing a willingness to dialogue and negotiate, he sought to diffuse the tension, stating that "Tataouine's right to development is not a favour." Nevertheless, he was violently challenged by local residents, who revived the flagship slogans of 2011 – "work, freedom, dignity" – whilst demanding a fairer distribution of income at the local level. The spirit of the revolution was alive and well in this stand-off between the head of government and the angry residents.

Despite the measures announced by the Prime Minister,¹ and deemed insufficient, the conflict grew more severe, until the head of state announced that the army would be deployed to break up the sit-in, protect the oil sites, as well as the phosphate production sites in the Gafsa region, and prevent the demonstrators from closing off roads.

The demonstrations that took place a few kilometres outside of Tataouine show that seven years after the revolution, the country's interior and south remain poor. Unemployment is particularly high, affecting almost one in two young people. Protesters are also exhibiting more experienced behaviour towards government representatives, gladly reviving the 2011 slogans and demanding the presence of sit-in representatives at meetings held at the governorate headquarters. Meanwhile, the government, which

¹ 2,000 of the 4,000 jobs demanded, plus 50 million of the 100 million dinars claimed.

has not undertaken any major development projects in the region, continues to emphasize the damage caused by the halt in production, which has left the country with no choice but to import oil and led to a significant depreciation of the dinar with regard to foreign currency.

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It is in this gloomy economic context that the Prime Minister, who has no true social responses to offer, proposed a plan to fight corruption.

Declaring War on Corruption

This visible social revolt in the country's south, as well as in other regions, has considerably weakened the Prime Minister, who had no political experience prior to his appointment in August 2016. The head of government thus tried to impose himself and turn the situation around by proposing a major project: the fight against corruption. This had been part of the Carthage Agreement, a roadmap signed by nine political parties and three national authorities, and Chahed had also mentioned it in his inaugural address to Parliament, in August 2016. Operation 'Clean Hands' was enthusiastically received by both the El Kamour demonstrators and the population at large, especially since the Prime Minister also explained how he intended to carry it out. He wanted to accelerate the implementation of new laws and a legal framework aligned with international standards and reform the government to make all citizens equal before the law. For Chahed, this war on corruption would make it possible to "boost the economy, foster development and regain the trust of Tunisians." Pledges were made and, on 23 May, the head of government ordered the spectacular arrest of Chafik Jarraya, a notoriously shady businessman with ties to the Ben Ali regime. Jarraya was apprehended and handcuffed by special forces as he left a café in Tu-

nis. Other arrests followed, involving smuggling barons, customs officials, and celebrity TV journalists. But the operation is not yet a cause of concern for corrupt politicians, as it has focused not on attacking the system of corruption itself, but rather individual players, most likely not even the most important ones. Not that it matters, since, through this briskly conducted war on corruption, Chahed has managed to remain at the helm of the government, when his departure had once seemed imminent.

Chahed's popularity has awakened new ambitions in him, and he has dropped hints about a possible run for President in 2019. This independence of action, coupled with his growing ambition, is not to the liking of the two strong men of the political scene, Essebsi and Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahdha. The fight against corruption is destabilizing for them, and they fear their parties and inner circles will be tarnished by the related investigations. They have thus sought in earnest to impede the policy's implementation. Although the Prime Minister had announced the formation of a new 'combat government' to wage his war on corruption and undertake the reforms needed to implement it, 18 ministers (of the 43 who make up the government) were imposed from the old regime, i.e. the ranks of RCD, Ben Ali's party. Today, Essebsi does not bother to hide his commitment to a policy of restoring the former regime. He is also trying to remobilize the base of his political party, Nidaa Tounès, to support him. Ghannouchi is doing the same to rally the ranks of Ennahdha around him.

Reorientation of the Political System

In 2012, when Essebsi founded Nidaa Tounès, he called for mobilization to "rehabilitate and save Bourguiba's modernist project, to restore a state that protects its people." He thus positioned himself as the champion of the continuity of the political history of independent Tunisia, with the mission of pursuing Habib Bourguiba's modernizing project. When he was tapped to lead the government in March 2011, he expressed the need to prolong Bourguiba's modernist project, whilst treating Ben Ali as a traitor to the nation. He depicted the latter's 23-year presidency as a sort of unfortunate parenthesis in the political history of independent Tunisia.

Essebsi was never convinced by the achievements of the revolution. He has always considered it a moment of disorder that could have led to chaos. In the summer of 2013, when the country was paralysed by a political crisis that threatened to derail the transition, the former Bourguiba minister, who had also headed the government from March to October 2011, made overtures to Ghannouchi, the Islamist leader, with a view to redrawing the political map, replacing the pluralism that had emerged following the revolution with a political bipolarity. Nidaa Tounès is the heir to the Destourien movement, whilst Ennahdha continues to be a player on the political scene, although today it operates in the open. However, both are conservative forces that aim to share power in a political game that the two men are working to lock down, wiping the slate clean of the multipartyism that emerged after the revolution. In terms of communication, the emphasis is placed on the compromise between the two parties, which are natural opponents. Other than the two leaders' desire to share power, their respective parties have not bothered to build a common project for a Tunisia in transition.

Following the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014, Essebsi became President of the Republic, although under the new Constitution, his powers are more limited. Under the new semi-parliamentary system, the brunt of the power is held by the Prime Minister, even though the Head of State is elected by universal suffrage. This imbalance between the prerogatives of Parliament, and the actual powers of the Head of State does not sit well with Essebsi's political culture. He aspires to absolute control of the entire executive and intends to reinstate the past. Over the summer of 2016, he announced a national unity project that seemed to disavow the policy of the then Head of Government, Habib Essid. Essid was soon replaced by Chahed, a man in his forties, who was to implement the Carthage Agreement, a sort of roadmap of his government's priorities. Essebsi forged a consensus between the political forces based on their participation and acceptance of the rules of the game. The main lines of this agreement reflected the priorities of the moment, with a focus on fighting terrorism and fostering economic growth and regional development by tackling corruption. A few months later, in March 2017, Prime Minister Chahed

implemented the line related to the fight against corruption with an energy his mentor Essebsi could not have anticipated. Chosen for his dynamism and youth, Chahed was supposed to have been simply taking orders: although the Carthage Agreement included the fight against corruption, he was not supposed to truly lead it. To counter this 'war on corruption,' Essebsi ratcheted up his plan to restore the old regime and consolidate his personal power.

On 13 August 2017, Essebsi reembraced the politics of Bourguiba: modern on social issues and wholly resistant to political openness and democracy. On Women's Day, on 13 August, he repealed a 1973 circular banning marriage between a Tunisian Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man and revived a recurring debate on gender equality and inheritance. Through these two measures, the Head of State sought to rally around him the modernist opinion that had largely voted for him in 2014 and been disappointed by his policies ever since. Three weeks later, on 7 September 2017, in an interview with a newspaper, Essebsi fiercely criticized the parliamentary system, holding it responsible for the government's ineffectiveness, questioning the independent institutions, and advocating a return to a strong, fully empowered presidential system. To achieve that, he said, it was necessary to revise the 2014 Constitution and reduce the checks and balances.

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Since 2014, Essebsi has worked tirelessly to consolidate his personal power in various ways. He remains ascendant over the Prime Minister, has sought to neuter Parliament, and prevents it from working independently. He has also set up a National Security Council, which he has installed at Carthage Palace and which he has taken great pains to place under his direct authority. This coun-

oil not only considers sovereign affairs, but meddles in all issues, ultimately acting as a shadow cabinet. This presidentialization of the system, which departs from the 2014 Constitution, is justified by the priority given to two central issues: national security and the fight against jihadism and the need to revive the economy.

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The reinstatement of the political staff from the old regime has helped consolidate the main powers Essebsi has granted himself. Since 13 September 2017, officials of the former regime have been protected by a law on 'administrative rehabilitation.' This law makes it possible to suspend legal proceedings against them. However, Essebsi has gone

even further to protect these former officials, halting two major projects that had been planned as part of the political transition. Fearing disclosures, he has blocked the Truth and Dignity Commission, a body set up in 2014, tasked with taking stock of the human rights violation committed in recent decades. He also called off the Prime Minister's anti-corruption project.

At 92, Essebsi acts like a man in a hurry, a man who has been weakened by the anti-corruption project carried out by his own Prime Minister. However, he does this because he believes that the time is right, given the lack of any political force with the power to stand up to his absolutism. Deprived of its Qatari ally and somewhat isolated on the international scene, Ennahdha is still keeping a low profile, awaiting better days. Ghannouchi has even abandoned the plan to exclude political officials from the former regime from political life, which his own party had launched, to become an advocate of reconciliation. Meanwhile, the opposition, weak and divided, is in no position to defend respect for the Constitution, nor is it able to propose an alternative project.