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Tunisia's Political System: From Stagnation to Competition

Sarah Yerkes and Zeineb Ben Yahmed

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Introduction

Tunisia's 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections will be major milestones in the country's path toward becoming a consolidated, liberal democracy. But merely holding elections will not produce a government that can address urgent challenges, such as youth unemployment, regional socioeconomic disparities, and rampant corruption. Delivering the needed political and economic reforms will require Tunisians to move beyond the stagnation and instability that have prevented progress. Since 2011, Tunisia has witnessed ten major government changes, and public trust in political parties and institutions has plummeted. Reversing the trend will demand a shift from the consensus model the country embraced during the early transition years to a system that creates real political opposition and acts as a check on those in office.

In the lead up to the elections, political parties, in particular, will need additional support from civil society and local government to develop clear policy platforms and communication strategies. This should help parties differentiate themselves and move away from personality-driven politics. Beyond 2019, parties, parliament, and the executive branch will need to undergo transparent, well-communicated institutional reform. The international community and private sector can provide essential additional resources, but political resolve and government effectiveness will be the fundamental factors in Tunisia's success.

Ten Governments in Eight Years

Mohamed Ghannouchi   Ali Laarayedh   Youssef Chahed
Beji Caid Essebsi   Mehdi Jomaa
Hamadi Jebali   Habib Essid

2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019

○ = Prime Minister   ● = Cabinet Reshuffle
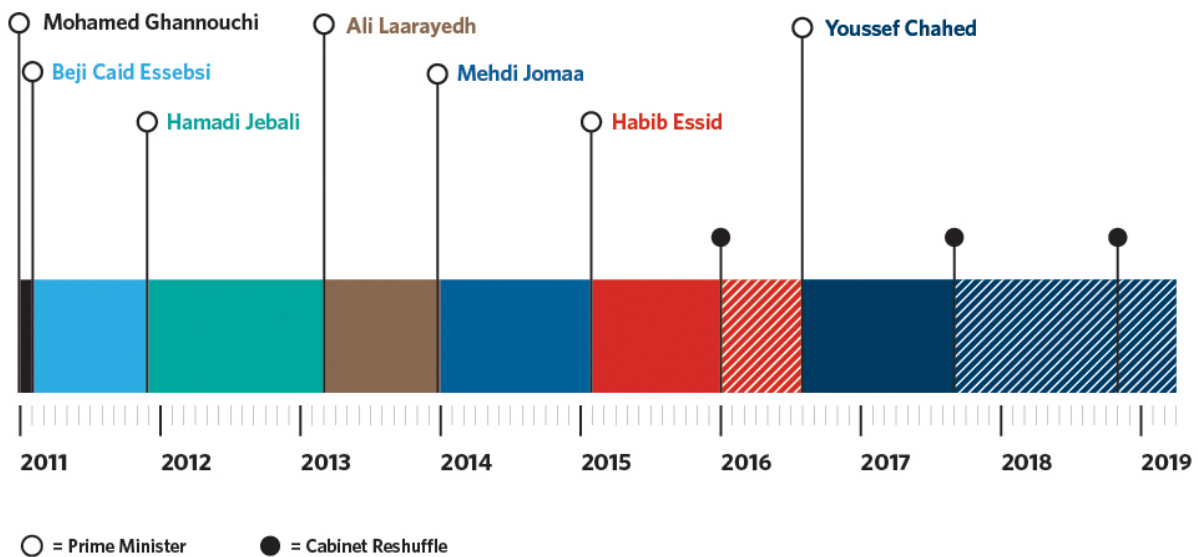
Weaknesses of the Consensus Model

The success of Tunisia's political transition is often attributed to the ability of the ruling political parties, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, to overcome their differences and achieve consensus, especially since the 2014 elections.[1]

That consensus was built on a "secularist-Islamist rapprochement" during the 2000s.[2] While the coalitions formed after 2011 were far different from those under former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, as political scientist Michele Angrist notes, the practice of consensus was "crucial to both the felling of the Ben Ali regime . . . and the ability of Tunisian civilians to navigate successfully the transition period from then to the Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011."[3] However, the constitution-drafting stage of the transition in 2012 and 2013 was marked by intense political polarization between Islamists and secularists. Islamist party Ennahda emerged victorious in the country's first democratic elections. But in the wake of the assassination of two prominent secular political figures, the polarization reached its climax and threw the transition into turmoil. The implication of the political tensions was clear: either compromise or risk chaos.

One year later—through an exercise of compromise, inclusivity, and restraint—the country adopted a new constitution, replaced the incumbent government with a technocratic cabinet, and successfully carried out the second democratic national elections.[4] An instrumental player in that effort was the National Dialogue Quartet, a group of human rights activists, labor union leaders, and lawyers who helped the warring political actors achieve consensus and who were later awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.[5]
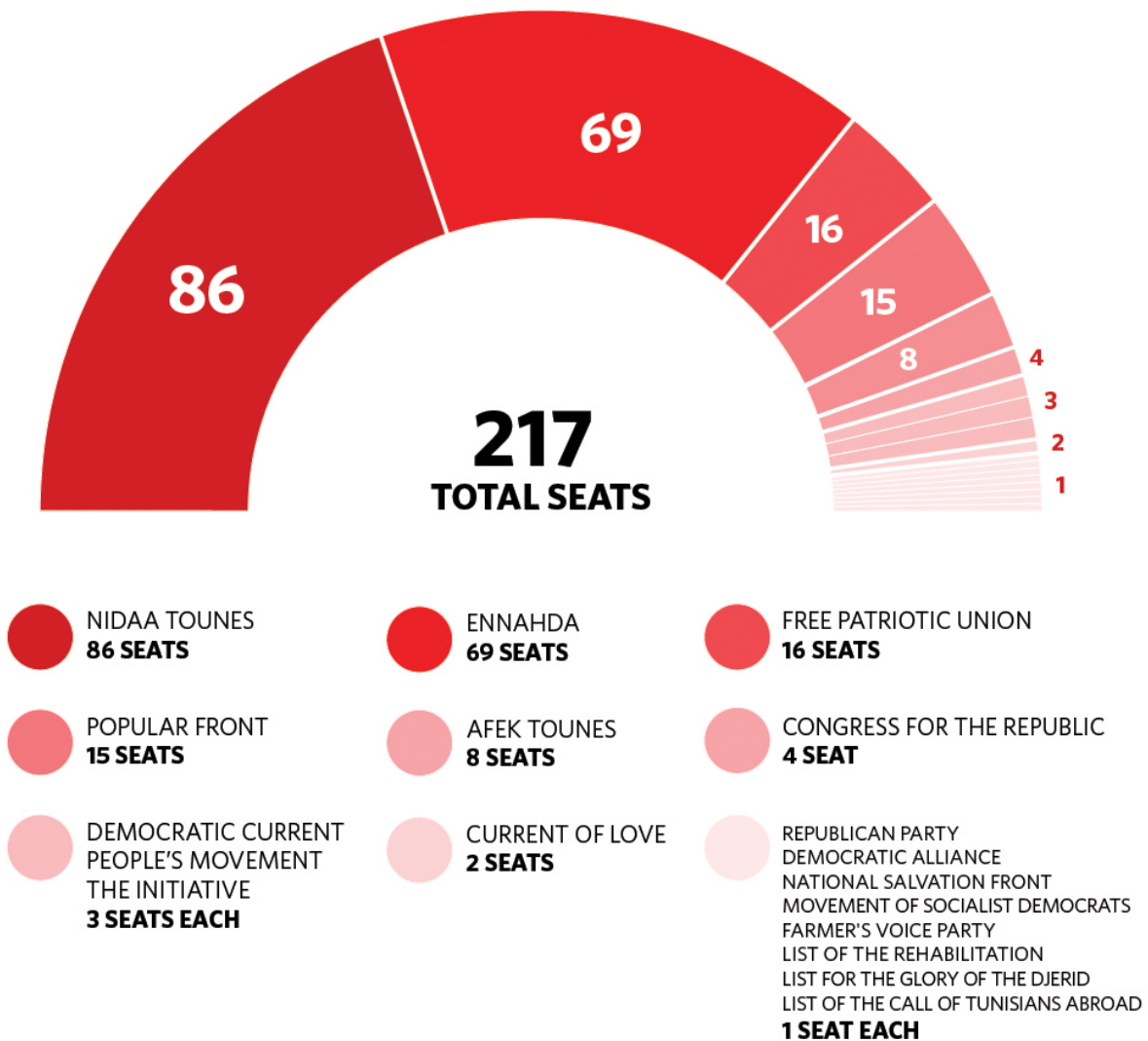
After the 2014 legislative elections, in which Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda won eighty-five and sixty-nine seats, respectively, the two parties chose to share power. The coalition between the two largest political forces marked a new phase in the Tunisian transition: one that would tame political polarization and put ideological differences aside to focus on Tunisia's urgent socioeconomic needs. As one public official put it, Tunisia went through a "dark time in 2011, 2012, and 2013 (political assassinations, major protests, raising the black Salafi flag in universities, etc.), which threatened civil peace in 2013. It was the culture of dialogue that we find on all levels that has allowed us to get through crises and big struggles."[6]

President Beji Caid Essebsi and his party, Nidaa Tounes, further expanded the political tent in July 2016, creating the Carthage Agreement that formalized the establishment of a National Unity Government (NUG). Under the NUG, the ruling coalition (Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes, Afek Tounes, and the Free Patriotic Union) expanded to bring in five opposition parties (Machrou Tounes, al-Moubadara, al-Joumhouri, al-Massar, and Harakat el-Chaab), as well as three unions (the Tunisian

General Labor Union, the Tunisian Union for Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishery).

The goal of the NUG was to stabilize the country by allowing major political parties and influential civil society groups to play a formal role in helping the country achieve its most important priorities: combatting terrorism, improving governance and fiscal policy, reducing unemployment, fighting corruption, and addressing regional disparities.[7] The coalition government's first major action was to replace then prime minister Habib Essid with Youssef Chahed, whose new cabinet was tasked with advancing the Carthage Agreement's reform agenda.[8]

Parliamentary Election Results, 2014

NIDAA TOUNES
86 SEATS

ENNAHDA
69 SEATS

FREE PATRIOTIC UNION
16 SEATS

POPULAR FRONT
15 SEATS

AFEK TOUNES
8 SEATS

CONGRESS FOR THE REPUBLIC
4 SEAT

DEMOCRATIC CURRENT
PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT
THE INITIATIVE
3 SEATS EACH

CURRENT OF LOVE
2 SEATS

REPUBLICAN PARTY
DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE
NATIONAL SALVATION FRONT
MOVEMENT OF SOCIALIST DEMOCRATS
FARMER'S VOICE PARTY
LIST OF THE REHABILITATION
LIST FOR THE GLORY OF THE DJERID
LIST OF THE CALL OF TUNISIANS ABROAD
1 SEAT EACH

While the consensus model was crucial in protecting the fragile transition in 2012–2013 and helped society heal from a painful period, the NUG failed to move the country forward at the legislative level. First, it did not put an end to ideological polarization. As some scholars have noted, "Despite much fanfare of bringing together Islamists and secularists, as well as revolutionaries and the old regime, the national unity government continued to be plagued by these issues. Both in terms of levels of polarization and the issues of debate, power-sharing in Tunisia appears to have had little effect."[9] Bringing all parties—many of whom hold vastly different views on core political and social issues—into a single governing entity has not resulted in unity and policy coherence, but rather stagnation on most key policy matters.

The NUG left the country without a strong political opposition, leading to watered-down policies and an ineffective legislative agenda. The consensus model has thus acted as a brake on the state's machinery by weakening institutions and undermining governmental performance. The policies that emanated from the power-sharing agreement blocked, postponed, or reversed core demands of the 2010–2011 uprising for change. While national unity governments are designed to make difficult policy decisions more feasible—as blame is shared between parties—in Tunisia, this did not occur. Both parties avoided passing much-needed reforms that were perceived as "politically costly and potentially explosive issues" that "could have caused the basic consensus in the political arena to collapse."[10]

Reflecting the ongoing polarization within the political system, parliament has failed to fully establish constitutionally mandated bodies, such as the Constitutional Court, or has long delayed appointing their members. While all politicians agree that these actions are necessary to the healthy functioning of Tunisia's democracy, the actions have become highly politicized, leaving parliament deadlocked. For instance, parliament took seven months to elect the new president of the Independent High Electoral Commission (ISIE), Nabil Baffoun, on January 31, 2019. With only seven months until the parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled for October 6 and November 12, respectively, the ISIE has little time to raise public awareness about voter registration, register millions of new voters, and organizationally prepare for the elections.

Another consequence of the consensus model is that the coalition has avoided structural economic reforms, such as reducing the size of the public sector and fighting corruption, which would have fostered economic growth and entrepreneurship.[11] The ruling government has so far failed to bring about the two most essential 2011 revolutionary demands: work and dignity.[12] Indeed, by most economic indicators, the socioeconomic situation in Tunisia has worsened since 2014. The unemployment rate, especially among the young and educated, increased from 23 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2018; the corruption perception index improved by only two points from 2012 to 2018.[13] And as a public official noted, "Today there are over ninety bills in parliament that have still

not been debated or voted on. This policy of dialogue and consensus (despite the fact that it preserved peace) led to a slow political process that has affected the Tunisian economy and citizen's faith in the system. This is one of the many negatives of this framework."[14] An international diplomat agreed, noting, "If every decision is made by consensus, it allows political leaders to avoid responsibility for taking decisions."[15]

Not only has the Ennahda-Nidaa alliance failed to achieve its intended goals in the name of consensus, it has also threatened the democratic process by adopting regressive laws that reverse progress on revolutionaries' aims. Without meaningful political opposition and a Constitutional Court to serve as the final arbiter in any controversial legislation, the coalition government, dominating more than 80 percent of the parliamentary seats, has been able to pass laws that have moved the country away from liberal democracy.[16] The most poignant example is the 2017 Economic Reconciliation Law that granted amnesty to civil servants who carried out corrupt practices during the Ben Ali era, as long as they themselves did not benefit from their actions. This law undermined the work of the official transitional justice mechanism, the Truth and Dignity Commission, which was tasked with reviewing both economic and physical abuses during the prerevolutionary period. Despite strong civic activism against the law, the lack of credible opposition parties made it impossible to stop the law's passage.[17] Another example is the application of an existing 1978 Ben Ali–era emergency law, which granted the government the freedom to monitor the press, quash protests, and close mosques and civil society associations.[18]

The NUG and subsequent cabinet reshuffles have also brought more members of the prior regime into positions of power. As Yadh Ben Achour, former president of the official commission tasked with overseeing the constitutional reform process, noted, "The current majority coalition is increasingly implicated in the return of the *anciens* [old] and in blatant forms of corruption," which he calls an "extreme insult to the revolution."[19] However, he acknowledged, "This is probably the price we have to pay for civil peace, even though it must break the heart of the friends of the revolution."[20]

Jump-Starting the Political System

Moving past the consensus model toward a more traditional form of democratic contestation is a lengthy and difficult process that will require strengthening Tunisia's political parties and implementing institutional reforms. Weak parties founded around individuals rather than ideas lack both the ability and incentive to take strong stands on policy issues. In addition, the entire political apparatus is hamstrung by a lack of adequate human and financial resources to allow lawmakers and executive officials to make informed decisions based on the needs of their constituents.

Strengthen Political Parties

Strong and effective political parties are crucial to any successful democratization effort.[21] As some have argued, a principal reason why Southern European democracies have been more successful at consolidation than their Latin American counterparts is the more advanced state of political organizations in countries such as Spain, Greece, or Portugal.[22] Eight years after the revolution, most Tunisian political parties have not developed clear and refined platforms, remain highly personalized, and lack strong organizational underpinnings.[23]

The party of Caid Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes, is particularly weak and may not survive the 2019 elections. As one former Nidaa member said, "Nidaa Tounes failed to become a party. It was an electoral machine, but not a party."[24] During the past two government reshuffles, Nidaa Tounes has added more figures from the Ben Ali regime, leading to criticism from the public and other parties.[25] The party base comprises an unwieldy alliance of ideologically incompatible factions, set up to defeat Ennahda, and thus lacks a coherent political vision.[26]

Consequently, after four years of governing, the Nidaa Tounes–led government has failed to deliver the most important goals of the 2011 revolution and has little positive progress to highlight in the upcoming electoral campaign.[27] As such, the party may focus on polarizing issues such as anti-Islamism to attract voters and differentiate itself from Ennahda. For instance, on September 24, 2018, Caid Essebsi announced the end of his party's alliance with Ennahda after four years of governing as a coalition.[28] Shortly thereafter, he publicly supported the accusation that Ennahda planned the assassination of leftist leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013, although he refrained from accusing Ennahda directly.[29]

Except for Ennahda, the other political parties have also failed to build strong party institutions and develop competing political and economic agendas ahead of the 2019 elections. Numerous parties seem to have versions of the same three-point platform: strengthen state capacity, improve the economy, and reduce regional inequalities—but none has a concrete plan for how to do these things.[30] While parties recognize the need to improve their communication strategies and develop clear public policies, with less than a year to go until the elections, some parties—such as Tayyar, Machroua, and the Popular Front—have only just begun to define their positions on certain issues.

Tunisia's Major Political Parties and Coalitions

68 seats

44 seats

41 seats
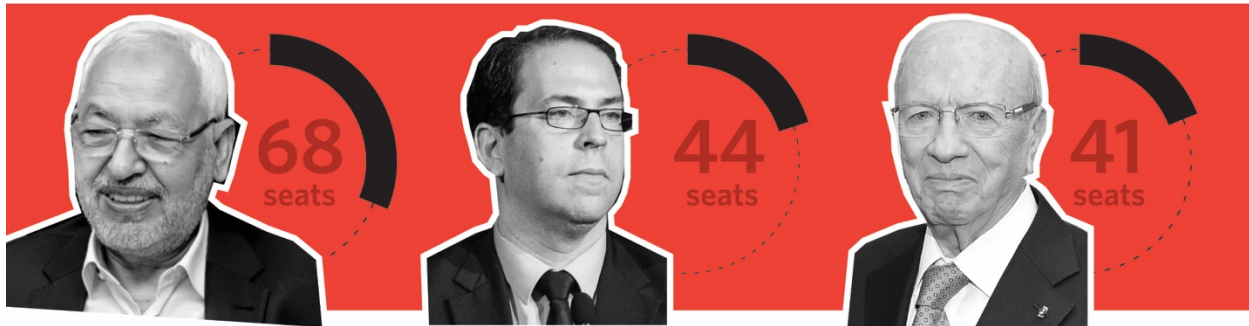
Ennahda
(68 seats in current government)

KEY FIGURE
Rached Ghannouchi

KEY FACTS
Founded in 1981 as Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI)

Relabelled in 2016 as a party of "Muslim Democrats" to emphasize the separation of religion from politics

Won the most seats (89) during the 2011 elections but lost almost one-quarter of its seats in the 2014 elections

National Coalition/ Tahya Tounes
(44 seats in current government)

KEY FIGURE
Prime Minister Youssef Chahed

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2019 as a coalition primarily of former members of Nidaa Tounes, Machrou Tounes, and the Free Patriotic Union

Now the second-largest parliamentary bloc

Centers on countering both Hafedh Caid Essebsi and Ennahda and supporting Chahed

Nidaa Tounes
(41 seats in current government)

KEY FIGURE
President Beji Caid Essebsi

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2012 as a coalition of diverse actors, including liberals, leftists, trade unionists, and former regime members

Initially formed to counter Islamism (and Ennahda, in particular), further polarizing party politics in Tunisia

Won the most parliamentary seats (86) in 2014, as well as the presidency

Following a crisis in party leadership, experienced a series of resignations that dropped the party to third place within parliament

OTHER PARTIES

Machrou Tounes
(16 seats in current government)

PARTY LEADER
Mohsen Marzouk

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2016 by a former member of Nidaa Tounes, Mohsen Marzouk

Centers on fighting terrorism and implementing reforms to improve social and economic conditions

Focuses on outreach to youth and women

Popular Front
(15 seats in current government)

PARTY LEADER
Mohamed Jmour

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2012 to consolidate the divided Tunisian left wing and compete more effectively in the 2014 elections

Leftist political and electoral alliance that comprises nine political parties

Afek Tounes
(0 seats in current government)

PARTY LEADER
Yassine Brahim

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2011

Liberal, centrist party that advocates secularism and emphasizes the importance of civil liberties

Often seen as close to the upper class

All eight members of Afek elected to parliament in 2014 left to join the National Coalition bloc

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Beni Watani
(0 seats in current government)

PARTY LEADER
Said Aidi

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2017 by Said Aidi, former minister of health under Habib Essid

Centers on education, health, infrastructure, agriculture, and transportation

Focuses on outreach to youth and civil society, with an emphasis on youth employment

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Al-Irada
(0 seats in current government)

PARTY LEADER
Moncef Marzouki

KEY FACTS
Founded in 2015 by former president Moncef Marzouki

An offshoot of Marzouki's former Congress for the Republic party (CPR), which formally merged with al-Irada in 2016

Center-left secular party whose main objectives include guaranteeing civil liberties and defending human rights

All four members of CPR elected to parliament in 2014 left to join the National Coalition bloc

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SOURCE: Author analysis; number of parliament seats as of March 2019, Bawsala Parliament Monitor, https://majles.marsad.tn/2014/fr/assemblee.

Afek Tounes seems to have the clearest platform, with tangible policy proposals, and is developing an aggressive Facebook and ground campaign to communicate those ideas.[31]

Most political parties are hindered by inadequate party financing, limited access to media resources, and few offices outside of Tunis. According to a prominent opposition party previously in power, the media is largely "governed by lobbyists," evidenced by its refusal to cover the party's annual national conference in order to maintain focus on the dominant political party.[32] In addition, a majority of political party offices are severely understaffed and underequipped.

Another significant shortcoming is that political parties in Tunisia are often closely identified with the party founder or current leader. The ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, is a case in point. As many political observers have highlighted, Caid Essebsi seems to be the only person holding the party's ideologically diverse members together.[33] Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, one founder of Nidaa Tounes, argued that Nidaa is Caid Essebsi's party and he is responsible for its failures. He also stated that it is not a democratic party and that Caid Essebsi does not believe in democracy within the party—"he is the party." Romdhane argued that because secular Tunisians were "so afraid of Ennahda," they accepted Caid Essebsi's "undemocratic ways."[34]

Regardless, strong leadership is not sufficient to maintain party cohesion, specifically when it is coupled with poor internal management and a lack of democratic decisionmaking.[35] For instance, in 2015, Caid Essebsi was criticized for having helped his son Hafedh seize power within Nidaa Tounes in a "non-democratic way." This led to a public fight between Hafedh and Youssef Chahed, despite being from the same party. The battle over who would control the levers of power following Caid Essebsi's departure led to multiple resignations that left the party with only forty-one parliamentary seats, from an initial eighty-six, and made Nidaa the third-largest party in parliament. The leadership crisis led the ruling party to lose its parliamentary majority but also significantly weakened the party attachment among voters.[36]

A similar fate befell the Congress for the Republic (CPR) party, which, in 2011, became the second-largest party in the National Constituent Assembly with twenty-nine seats. After the founder and head of the party, Moncef Marzouki, left his position to serve as Tunisia's president, his party could no longer maintain its strong position in parliament. During the 2014 parliamentary elections, the CPR's share of parliamentary seats fell from twenty-nine to four, and shortly afterward, the party decided to dissolve.[37]

Mohsen Marzouk, founder of Machrou Tounes, noted that Tunisia is in a difficult situation where "you have to create parties in a time when people do not believe in parties." Marzouk also pointed to the need for a new model of political bodies, based on new social groups such as entrepreneurs or protesters, with a vibrant center for meeting and exchanging ideas. He said, "Parties based on one leader will not work. The parties need to include social movements."[38]

Party tourism—in which members of parliament (MPs) frequently change parties or split off from their original party to form a new, smaller party—is another characteristic of Tunisia's political landscape. For example, due to internal divisions within the ruling party since it was elected in 2014, Nidaa members have split into four different political parties, including Machrou Tounes, which became a major party holding fifteen seats.[39] More recently, Chahed formed a new parliamentary bloc, the National Coalition, as well as a political party, Tahya Tounes, after months-long political infighting between him and Caid Essebsi's son.[40] Chahed, who used to be a marginal figure in Nidaa

Tounes when he took office in 2016, has already attracted forty-four MPs, making his bloc the second-largest parliamentary group between Ennahda (sixty-eight) and Nidaa Tounes (forty-one).[41] For instance, as another civil society activist stated, "The political process is not built on political programs but on personalities, which discourages people from voting and being involved. Despite the success we achieved since 2011, trust in the electoral process is diminishing. Since 2011, every election has had a lower turnout—this is why we are facing a legitimacy crisis."[42]

Due to the absence of a strong base, deputies continuously resign and switch from one party to another, creating an incomprehensible political landscape.[43] Parties need to endure to present voters with clear, distinct, and consistent policy platforms and to allow them to evaluate past performance and express preferences. Regularly building and breaking coalitions may contribute to the erosion of accountability and democratic representation. It may also turn voters away from the democratic process toward other ways of expressing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. The country has witnessed a continuing cycle of intense protests by frustrated citizens. In 2018 alone, there were more than 9,000 protests, signaling a massive erosion of trust between the public and the political system.[44]

The continually expanding political landscape has now raised the number of officially registered political parties to about 215.[45] The 2018 municipal elections generated 2,074 electoral lists, including political parties, independent lists, and coalitions.[46] This may be because, under the current electoral system, a party only needs 3 percent of the votes to obtain a seat in parliament, likely encouraging the proliferation of smaller parties and alliances and therefore party fragmentation.[47] Some parties have proposed increasing the threshold, an issue that will probably to lead to contentious debate over the coming months.

It is true that a mosaic of fragmented Tunisian parties could hamper the ability of voters to make better political decisions and undermine governability, but simply raising the threshold for parties could backfire. As a former Nidaa member noted, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda dominate the Tunisian political scene. While he initially left Nidaa to form his own party, he found there was no space for alternative parties.[48] The system must include a safeguard for smaller parties to play a role and allow for a diversity of voices within parliament, but it should not allow the party switching that has hurt the credibility of the entire system. One option would be to require parliamentary committees to include an opposition member within the committee leadership. Regardless, while individuals should not be prohibited from changing their personal party affiliation, lawmakers should consider preventing MPs from continuing to hold their seat in parliament should they switch parties. Thus, if an MP leaves the party for which he was elected, he would give up his seat, allowing the next person on the electoral list to take over that seat.

Polls suggest a growing disenchantment with not only the performances of political parties but also with democracy itself. According to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey, 81 percent of Tunisians do "not feel close to any political party," and 79 percent either would not vote or would not know whom to vote for if elections were held tomorrow, which is alarming given the upcoming elections. The 2018 municipal elections may be an ominous indicator of what to expect. Voter turnout was only 36 percent, and independent candidates gained 33 percent of the vote, compared to 29 percent for Ennahda and 22 percent for Nidaa Tounes. This could easily be interpreted as a rejection of the entire political class.[49] Thus, it is not surprising that overall support for democracy dropped from 70 percent in 2013 to 46 percent in 2018.[50] Meanwhile, the support for democracy's alternatives—such as military rule or one-party rule—has reached 47 percent and 41 percent, respectively.[51] As a civil society actor from the long-marginalized rural city of Sidi Bouzid, where the uprising started, said, "Our elected political leaders must find solutions for the deep problems, as for now they are detached from the sufferings of everyday people."[52]

Implement Institutional Reform

Institutional reforms will be crucial to moving the country forward and reversing the current trend of public disillusionment. Parliament and the executive branch need sufficient human and financial resources to carry out legislative work and ensure the separation of powers, as mandated by the 2014 constitution. Most MPs do not have dedicated personal staff, and committees often share staff members between them.[53] MPs also lack an adequate travel budget to allow them to regularly visit their constituents.[54] As one civil society actor noted, "We cannot implement reforms without the means to do so. The parliament has the weakest budget of the three branches of government. A semi-parliamentary regime should give a lot of powers to the legislative branch, but today the parliament is weak . . . there are no rooms for the MPs to work in, no advisors to MPs, etc. This has a negative impact on parliament and slows reforms."[55]

To help restore its credibility, parliament must also work to address absenteeism, a trend that has been growing since 2014. Almost half of the ruling party deputies are absent on any given vote, as exemplified by the average voter participation of Ennahda (68 percent) and Nidaa Tounes (54 percent) in 2018.[56] According to Bawsala, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in charge of monitoring parliament's activities, the absence rate by legislators has climbed from 35 percent in 2014 to almost 50 percent in 2018.[57] Due in part to absenteeism, only one in five constitutionally mandated bodies has been established.[58]

One clear step toward ensuring a separation of powers is to fully establish the Constitutional Court, which will act as a safeguard for the democratic transition. Doing so will be a major signal to the Tunisian public that the transition is moving forward and should ease some of the burden on the judiciary and parliament, which have each taken on aspects of the court's role. The court should also

oversee parliament and the executive branch, making sure that they carry out their duties according to the constitution, including providing adequate time for public review of draft legislation and complying with the asset declaration law. The court must be able to arbitrate disagreements among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches should the president become incapacitated, as well as settle disputes that may arise over election results.

Lastly, the court should ensure that the president does not encroach on the duties of the government. According to the constitution, the president oversees defense, foreign relations, and national security. He has several enumerated powers in the constitution, including serving as the commander in chief of the armed forces, declaring war, appointing the grand mufti, and appointing and dismissing certain senior officials within the presidency. However, Caid Essebsi has sometimes taken on powers designated to the government, such as pushing for the removal of then prime minister Essid and initiating multiple cabinet reshuffles under current Prime Minister Chahed, whose appointment he also orchestrated. In November 2018, Caid Essebsi and Chahed engaged in a public fight over Chahed's replacement of thirteen ministers and five state secretaries without first getting the president's approval.[59] But the constitution clearly states that the prime minister is responsible for "creating, modifying and dissolving ministries and secretariats of state, as well as determining their mandates and prerogatives, after discussing the matter with the Council of Ministers." Thus, Caid Essebsi was inserting himself into the prime minister's duties in a manner inconsistent with the constitution.[60]

The Role of Local Government

Local institutions, which are in the early stages of a comprehensive decentralization process, also require reform and could provide a bridge between the government and citizens. The municipal councils elected in May 2018 are new and operating under a confusing legal framework. Although parliament passed the Local Authorities Law—which describes the role of municipal councils—ten days before the local elections, the decrees that put it into force have yet to be passed. One international NGO representative noted that there is "huge confusion on multiple levels" because citizens and local councilors do not understand the new Local Authorities Law or the relevant roles of the mayors and councilors. He noted that the international community has put pressure on local actors to "go and be effective" now that the municipal elections are over. But "local officials are under the most pressure of anyone in Tunisia—they do not have the tools, means, or position to do" what they need to do.[61] The mayor of Bizerte, a traditionally marginalized city on the northern coast, noted that Tunisia was a highly centralized state for sixty years, so it is difficult to remove the reflexes from the old system.[62]

To help speed along the decentralization process, parliament and the Ministry of Local Affairs should quickly devise a timeline for regional elections, which have yet to be scheduled. Today, regions are overseen by an unelected governor, who serves as an intermediary between the democratically elected municipalities and the central state. Some local officials described a difficult relationship between the municipal council and the governor, noting that there are "some problems of demarcations of power" and that the administration is used to dealing only with the governor, not with the municipalities.[63] Holding regional elections would help further devolve power from the national level and foster more transparent and democratic coordination among municipalities.

However, the mere existence of a democratically elected local government is cause for optimism in Tunisia, particularly among youth. During a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace workshop in Tunis, a Tunisian analyst noted that people have been "desperate and disappointed at times, but are now optimistic" about reaching the right balance between centralization and decentralization.[64] Large numbers of youth and women participated as candidates and were elected in May 2018, due in part to progressive gender parity requirements and a youth quota (see Box 1). Along with the high number of independent candidates, they represent new voices on the political scene who are not seen as tied to the party structures at the national level. Furthermore, as one national party leader noted, the municipal elections "widened the plurality" of the country by bringing in "7,000 new rulers."[65] One local official noted, "Party politics is not as important as street pressure" at the local level. Municipal work is "much closer to the beneficiary" than national politics, so there are not the same issues around party consensus that you have on the national level. And a local official in Bizerte noted that simple things, like providing trash bags in various neighborhoods, could help build public trust.[66]

Local officials could serve as a more direct conduit between citizens and government. Many newly elected leaders are energetic and want to make real change in their communities, but they often lack the financial and human resources to do so.[67] The mayor of Thala, a municipality in the interior region of Kasserine, expressed frustration both with his former party (Nidaa Tounes) and with the central state: "I do not want to do business with any of those parties . . . We have been waiting for the government to build a football stadium here for eight years, and they did nothing. We collect barely 10 percent of the money owed for services because people refuse to pay. Our youths have no diversion so they turn to drugs and contraband [with neighboring Algeria]; there is little hope."[68] But the mayor of Bizerte was more positive, noting that people are beginning to feel the municipality is "theirs" and that some of the town's public meetings have been full.[69]

Nevertheless, one problem is that local engagement is not attractive to many Tunisians. A local official described the council meetings and citizen engagement meetings as "boring," arguing that if she cannot get excited about them, why should the citizens?[70] Furthermore, many Tunisians have a hard time understanding the benefit of local government and therefore are hesitant to give their time

or money to local initiatives. The same local official noted that in the rural areas, the number of inhabitants and services needed has doubled over recent years, but the budget for the municipalities remains the same. "We are asking them to pay municipal taxes when they do not have enough money to survive themselves," she said.[71]

Women and Youth

Women and youth have an important role to play in strengthening Tunisia's political system. Youth, in particular, can act as a counterbalance to older officials with ties to the prior regime. Both groups have seen increases in their numbers in parliament and local office. Today, women represent more than a third of the seats in the Tunisian parliament (34 percent), a higher percentage than in the European Parliament (27 percent) and the U.S. Congress (23 percent) and well above the global average of 18 percent.[72] And Tunisian women won 48 percent of the country's municipal council seats in the 2018 election.[73]

This unprecedented level of women's political participation is the result of the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, which guarantees "[achieving] equal representation for women and men in elected institutions based on the principle of parity," as well as the local elections law, which requires both vertical and horizontal gender parity. However, women are still largely absent at the highest decisionmaking levels. No political parties are headed by a woman, and no woman has been president or prime minister. Among the twenty-seven presidential candidates in 2014, Kalthoum Kannou was the only woman, receiving a mere 0.56 percent of the votes. While gender-focused civil society and political figures praised her candidature, none of them officially endorsed her, showing that supporting woman political figures still remains controversial in Tunisia.[74]

The increase in youth participation can also be attributed to a quota, which requires the presence of one youth (thirty-five years old or younger) within the top four party list positions. The quota helped youth secure 37 percent of the municipal council seats in May 2018. However, youth are also absent from the highest levels of party leadership. Furthermore, most young people do not vote. Nearly 80 percent of young Tunisians (eighteen to twenty-five years old) did not vote in the 2014 parliamentary election, and a similar percentage abstained from voting in the presidential elections.[75]

One reason for youth disengagement is that young people continue to distrust their political institutions. According to several surveys, 95 percent of youth say that they do not trust political parties and 91 percent do not trust parliament.[76] Another reason is that the dominant messages of various political parties are not compelling or convincing to young people. Thus, few parties have been able to connect with younger generations by articulating concrete solutions and policies. While some parties have effectively used social media, many young people feel that parties use youth for campaigns and then discard them after election day.[77]

Nonetheless, since 2016, younger people have been brought into the political scene, evidenced by the appointment of Youssef Chahed, Tunisia's youngest prime minister, and the average age of his recent cabinet (forty-eight years old). However, the age gap between youth and most politicians remains wide, as more than 93 percent of parliamentarians are older than thirty-five.[78]

As parties plan their strategies for 2019, they should examine ways to bring women and youth into real positions of power. This includes ensuring that the gender parity requirements from the municipal elections are carried into the electoral law governing national elections, as well as finding opportunities for women and youth to assume leadership roles that will increase party credibility and help create policies that better reflect the country's demographics.

The Role of Civil Society

While trust in the political system is low, Tunisians tend to have faith in civil society, which can help bolster political parties and institutions. In the political sphere, three types of civil society groups in Tunisia play separate yet complementary roles: traditional civil society organizations (CSOs), labor unions, and constitutionally mandated independent institutions.

CSOs play a key role in monitoring and holding political institutions accountable. For example, Bawsala, an organization that reports on parliamentary debates and the voting behavior of parliamentarians, provides the Tunisian public with a portal into legislative activities. Another very successful CSO, iWatch, tracks the country's efforts to combat corruption, informing the public and demanding accountability from the government.

CSOs also play a role in training future political leaders—through formal candidate training programs and through learning about the policy process from their interactions with government

and then moving on to governing themselves. The head of a large CSO said that he expects to see many civil society actors presenting their candidacy for government in 2019.[79] While this may blur the line between CSOs and politicians, which could lead to some loss of credibility for civil society, this is unlikely to fundamentally shift public perception of civil society or the relationship between the government and civil society. Politicians need civil society actors to keep them honest. One MP noted, "Support for this transition will not last forever," highlighting the important role civil society must play in pushing politicians toward reform. He said, "If the pressure from civil society on me, a politician, decreases, the [democratic] balance will be lost."[80]

CSOs played a crucial role in keeping the democratic transition on track during the National Dialogue process. They, together with labor unions, devised a plan to help warring political factions put country ahead of party, "resulting in the sealing of a 'historic compromise' between Islamists and secularists, [that] has served as a guarantee against violence in consolidation of the democratic transition—and consequently, has furthered the resilience of both state and society."[81] Nevertheless, the ability of civil society to push the government to act is limited. The outcome of the National Dialogue was a return to political peace, but little has been done to address the economic and social demands that necessitated the dialogue.[82]

The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the most prominent labor union and a member of the National Dialogue Quartet, is in a strong position to be an intermediary between the public and the government. The union carried out two nationwide strikes in November 22, 2018, and January 18, 2019, bringing the country to a temporary standstill. However, many see the UGTT as "an obstructionist that risks the nation's welfare for its own clientele."[83] The union walks a difficult line between a political organization, dedicated to moving the country forward, and a grassroots activist body, focused on raising wages and fighting back against a shrinking public sector. Today, these two goals are often at odds, as the country seeks financial support from the International Monetary Fund, whose 2016 promise of a $2.9 billion loan is predicated on Tunisia addressing the bloated public sector and keeping wage hikes under control.[84] While the UGTT has already played a political role as a signatory to the Carthage Agreement, its leadership has said they may play an even bigger role in the 2019 elections, perhaps running their own candidates for parliament. Party leaders from across the political spectrum noted that there is no way to envision a Tunisia without the UGTT. However, some were more critical of the concessions the government has given to unions.

Independent institutions, the third category of civil society groups, are unique to Tunisia. The government creates these entities to provide oversight on everything from corruption to the media to elections. They have the potential to play a particularly important role in moving the transition forward. But the government's politicization of them (the heads are elected by parliament), as well as the lack of a clear vision, has left most of the constitutionally mandated bodies either powerless or

nonexistent. As one civil society actor noted, "Many politicians do not want to see the independent bodies working independently."[85]

A former head of the ISIE, a high-level independent entity, noted that, in preparation for the 2014 elections, it did not have any budget or staff and was only able to carry out the 2014 elections due to a 45 million euro grant from the European Union. This highlights one of the inherent contradictions with independent institutions—because they are "independent," there is less pressure on the Tunisian government to give them financial support. But without adequate funding, they cannot carry out their work. Consequently, they sometimes seek additional funding from abroad, leading to accusations that they are foreign tools rather than domestic bodies. If the Tunisian government is serious about consolidating the democratic transition, it must give adequate, sustained financial and rhetorical support to independent institutions. These bodies help build credibility among the public for the democratic transition and help protect Tunisia from forces that wish to see a return to authoritarianism.

Conclusion

A lot is riding on the 2019 elections. These will be the second democratic presidential and parliamentary elections in the country's history (in addition to the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections). Tunisia will be passing Samuel Huntington's two-turnover test, where democracies "may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election."[86] This has implications far beyond Tunisia's borders.

With the January 31 election of the ISIE's new president and three final members, it seems likely that the elections will go forward on time. Yet there are still many hurdles Tunisia must overcome over the next six to nine months. On top of growing public apathy, there are also major issues with public outreach. One party leader noted that people must register to vote in a central locale in a city, thereby making it costly and challenging for many poorer and rural-dwelling Tunisians to register. Furthermore, due to the delays in selecting the new ISIE leadership, there has been no broad public campaign notifying Tunisians when voter registration opened, and the phone number used to verify whether you are registered was not working as of March 19, 2019.

Over this year, Tunisia will embark on a difficult yet crucial phase of its democratic transition. Current leaders are unlikely to take meaningful steps to address the growing socioeconomic problems or public discontent for fear of hurting their electoral chances, but party candidates have a

great opportunity to develop specific policy ideas and to work with civil society and local government to communicate these ideas and regain the public's trust. If, however, parties simply enter the 2019 campaign process with the same generic slogans of fighting terrorism and corruption and addressing unemployment, they will turn voters away from the ballot box and into the street.

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Acknowledgments

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