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Political Instability Deepens in Tunisia

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Brief Analysis

The prime minister's resignation throws the country into political uncertainty at a time of mounting economic challenges, coronavirus fears, social unrest, and potential spillover from the Libya conflict.

On July 15, Tunisian prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh stepped down less than a month after being implicated in a conflict-of-interest case involving his business activities. Previously, he seemed determined to remain in office, announcing on July 13 that he intended to reshuffle his cabinet and apparently receiving President Kais Saied's backing to do so. But when a no-confidence vote obtained the requisite 105 signatures in parliament, Fakhfakh had little choice but to tender his resignation. He also dismissed all six ministers from the leading Islamist party, Ennahda (Renaissance), in a parting act of retribution for its withdrawal of support for him.

President Saied now has one month to task a new prime minister with forming a government, after which Fakhfakh's successor will have four months to obtain parliamentary approval for a new cabinet if the country is to avoid new elections. In the meantime, Fakhfakh will lead a caretaker government as the country grapples with serious economic, social, and security challenges.

ROOTS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Fakhfakh's cabinet is barely five months old, having been sworn in on February 27 after a prolonged political crisis. The October elections yielded a deeply fractured legislature, with no party garnering more than 20 percent of the vote. Ennahda won the largest bloc of seats (52 out of 217), followed by its main rival, the populist Qalb Tounes

(Heart of Tunisia), which won 38. Unsurprisingly, efforts to form a government failed for months. The eventual cabinet saw Fakhfakh—a former tourism and finance minister from a small secular party that did not win any seats—presiding over an unlikely alliance between six ministers from Ennahda, nine ministers from a handful of secular parties with varying policy persuasions, and seventeen independent ministers.

Four days after this new government was sworn in, Tunisia confirmed its first COVID-19 case, and the pandemic quickly crowded out most other legislative priorities. A nationwide lockdown beginning on March 20 was credited with bringing the number of infections under control—by the time the lockdown was lifted on June 8, confirmed cases stood at 1,087 with 49 deaths (in a population of 11 million).

Still, the foundations of Fakhfakh's coalition were always shaky given the deep policy disagreements among its members, especially on economic questions. Observers predicted the new government would eschew major economic reforms and focus on the one policy arena that enjoyed consensus: combating corruption. It was ironic, then, that the government's unraveling was sparked by a corruption scandal.

On June 23, an independent member of parliament produced documents demonstrating that Fakhfakh held shares in several companies that had been awarded government contracts, including two inked after he was named prime minister but before he was sworn in. Tunisian law forbids such conflicts of interest, and the affair elicited strong criticism from parliamentarians and local watchdog organizations—notwithstanding Fakhfakh's pledge that he would renounce his shares and step down if an investigation found evidence of wrongdoing.

Attention soon turned to how Ennahda would respond. Although the party was frustrated with its number of ministerial portfolios and the reportedly tense relations between Fakhfakh and Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, it initially refrained from joining the chorus of voices calling for a no-confidence vote. Ennahda's public approval has declined against a backdrop of sweeping populism in Tunisia, and parliamentary opposition to its policies has grown. Part of this opposition stems from the presence of new, staunchly anti-Islamist legislators, including figures from the former regime's ruling party who have capitalized on frustration with Ennahda's performance in government since 2011.

Moreover, Ghannouchi's election as speaker of parliament fed fears that the party harbored deeper ambitions to dominate the political system and advance an Islamist agenda. Ghannouchi did not do himself any favors when he—not President Saied—took an April call from Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, widely seen as the region's leading proponent of political Islam. In the same vein, Ennahda's opposition to a bill condemning the Turkish intervention next door in Libya put it at odds with some of its coalition partners.

Thus, by the time the Fakhfakh scandal erupted, Ennahda was already experiencing strong political headwinds and likely believed that withdrawing support from the prime minister could help burnish its anti-corruption credentials and win it a measure of political reprieve. Yet Ghannouchi himself is now facing calls for dismissal based on accusations that he overstepped his prerogatives and unduly interfered in foreign policy matters; a parliamentary petition to withdraw confidence from him has gained enough signatures for a vote. With Ennahda's cabinet ministers sacked, the party heads into the coming months of negotiations in an ostensibly weakened position.

CHALLENGES AHEAD—AND WHERE WASHINGTON CAN HELP

However the negotiations play out, the current volatility could undermine Tunisia's ability to cope with other pressing problems. An additional 300 COVID cases have been confirmed since the country reopened its borders on June 27, so it can ill afford incoherent governance amid a likely second wave.

Moreover, the pandemic will likely push unemployment up from its pre-corona level of 15 percent to above 20

percent, while the economy is expected to contract by nearly 7 percent this year. Fakhfakh's government doled out an \$876 million public assistance package to mitigate the damage, and the World Bank, IMF, and European Union collectively gave Tunisia \$1.4 billion after the outbreak. But the lockdown's economic effects fueled public frustration, and the number of protests shot up by 80 percent from May to June.

Meanwhile, the Libya conflict [has drawn in](#) Turkish, Russian, Emirati, and Egyptian forces, as well as thousands of mercenaries, greatly increasing the risk of the conflagration spilling over onto Tunisian soil. Nearly all foreign missions to Libya are currently based in Tunis, so instability there could also undermine diplomatic efforts to resolve the metastasizing conflict next door.

Given these risks, Washington should not lose sight of its ally's mounting difficulties—especially since Beijing is sending noteworthy COVID-related assistance to Tunisia (e.g., drones equipped with temperature sensors), potentially facilitating a larger Chinese presence in North Africa down the road. To offset this influence and help Tunisia emerge from the current storm intact, the Trump administration and Congress should quietly reach out to key players in the country's parliament and remind them how urgent it is to reach a political settlement expeditiously. Congress should also increase (or at least maintain) the current level of U.S. assistance, rebalancing it to prioritize economic aid. Finally, the administration should push the IMF to consider another short-term emergency disbursement to Tunisia. Otherwise, by the time Washington emerges from its own election cycle in November, it could find that the world's only full-fledged Arab democracy is no longer functioning as one.

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