

Consensus Politics and Democracy in Tunisia: Challenges for Political Reform

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Brief Analysis

On January 14, Tunisia marked the ninth anniversary of the revolution (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/12/tunisian-revolution-151215102459580.html>)

that overthrew the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Yet this year's anniversary took place amid a tense social and political atmosphere, made even more **strained by Tunisia's fragile economy**

(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/tunisia-elections-disruption-and-hope-for-a-brighter-economic-future). Although Tunisian citizens now enjoy freedom of expression after decades of oppression, they are still waiting for an improved standard of living and better economic prospects.

Tunisians have closely watched the recent failures of the government to form, a process that has dragged on since the country's elections in October until just this week. After the parliamentary **rejection of the government proposed by Habib Jemli on January 10** (<https://www.france24.com/en/20200111-tunisia-s-parliament-rejects-pm-designate-jemli-s-proposed-government>), the current struggle the state faces in finally forming a government has raised additional questions for Tunisians about **the future of the democratic transition in their country** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Anti-establishment-candidates-carry-Tunisian-presidential-election>).

The reality is that **Tunisia's election laws** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-the-run-off-elections-all-options-are-possible>) and its hybrid system of government—based on a split in the executive branch between the Prime Minister and President—have produced a parliament that consists of dysfunctional, isolated blocs that have failed to consolidate into an effective governing body. The country's politics of consensus does not allow the party that wins the elections to govern on its own, requiring a belabored process of consensus bloc formation in order to form a government.

This was a deliberate choice: Tunisia chose to adopt consensus politics when forming a broader coalition government **between Islamists and secularists** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/tunisian-elections-suggest-a-move-beyond-secularist-and-islamist-politics-i>) in 2015, an approach that has continued in the years since. However, there may be too much focus on consensus at the expense of other necessary aspects of governance in Tunisia. In other words, the prioritization of “democratic consensus” has become a real obstacle to

democratic transition and political reform.

Under the banner of consensus, the state has abandoned key issues such as transitional justice and reforming the security sector. The state has also failed to take bold measures on economic matters or form a constitutional court. Consensus politics has also led to a system of political party quotas where positions are filled by officials who lack the necessary competencies, political awareness, or experience in running the affairs of a country. Naturally, this process has also opened the door to rampant corruption and cronyism.

Many of the Tunisian electorate have responded to this disappointing reality by boycotting politics altogether. Tunisian youth in particular have decided to punish political parties for their inaction and failure to solve the major problems that the country has grappled with since the revolution—most importantly, unemployment and poverty. This punitive impulse is reflected in the low levels of turnout for the **parliamentary elections in 2019** (**<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-election/split-vote-complicates-government-formation-after-tunisia-election-idUSKCN1WL033>**) (less than 42 percent) when compared to earlier national elections.

The Islamist party (the Ennahda Movement) has also faced repercussions from the electorate: their candidates took about **52 seats** (**<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/tunisia-election-preliminary-results-show-ennahda-lead-191010054629881.html>**) in parliament during the previous elections—notable when compared to their **89 seats in 2012** (**<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15487647>**) and **67 in 2014** (**<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/2014-12-23/democracy-necessity>**). This decline can be attributed to the dissatisfaction among Tunisians with the policies of the Ennahda Movement and its failure to achieve the goals its leaders espoused during the revolution.

On the other hand, Ennahda's "modern" stances have brought them a great deal of criticism among right-wing Islamists, who consider Ennahda to be a secular movement that has consistently compromised on issues related to Islam, especially personal status law, women's rights, and inheritance. These issues have produced major rifts between Ennahda and leaders on both sides of the political spectrum.

But Ennahda does not bear all of the blame for Tunisia's anemic political policies. Tunisia's successive coalition governments since the revolution—with both Islamist and secularist pluralities—have lacked any coherent political or economic program, and their parties continue to lack an overall vision for the affairs of the country and its future. Politicians instead focused on routine day-to-day matters without a clear vision or strategy for governing. Tunisia's rising state debt, trade deficits, and the collapse of the Tunisian dinar have reflected this performance. Most parties remain only elite forces that attempt to fight for the people but lack the capacity to actually communicate with the Tunisia street or to present concrete programs that would help everyday citizens.

Tunisian voters' choice of President further emphasizes their frustration with the status-quo, and may suggest some popular support for revising the current consensus model altogether. The outsider status of Kais Saied, a professor of law who received the overwhelming percentage of the vote at **72 percent** (**<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/tunisia-presidential-election-kais-saied-declared-winner-191014163712569.html>**), reflected this frustration by receiving a greater margin of victory than any presidential candidate has received since the revolution. This overwhelming victory was considered by most as a popular mandate for Saied's leadership.

And in the midst of the stagnation that plagued the current political block in Tunisia's parliament, some voices emerged calling for the establishment of a "president's government," especially given Saied's popularity and grassroots support. There are those who have gone so far as to call for a change in the nature of the political system that would create a presidential regime until Tunisia's constitution can be amended.

If the country's established political parties would like to avoid the repetition of this most recent political stagnation,

they need to change the kind of political discourse they are producing. They must reflect in structure, as well as their attitudes and general vision, the will of the people who carried out the revolution, giving them an opportunity to find their place in the country's new political order. This willingness to evolve is of particular importance for political elite's ability to connect with Tunisia's youth; political parties must pay greater attention to training youth inside political parties to become political leaders rather than become increasingly disaffected.

Other reforms must be performance-based; the government should fight corruption and promote development projects that will uplift the country and underserved sectors while promoting investment and partnerships between the private and public sectors. Additionally, legislative measures should be taken to review the country's electoral law and issuing legal prohibitions on 'party tourism,' the current phenomenon where politicians switch political parties after election, revising the constitution if necessary. Finally, laws that criminalize tampering with elections or funding parties and organizations through suspicious means must be enforced.

The new Prime Minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, has touched on some of these very issues in his first speech in his new office, emphasizing the country's desperate need for political and economic reform. But implementing these reforms is another matter. The state indeed faces a daunting task; restoring the Tunisian people's hope and providing reassuring messages about the future, thereby establishing a climate of reciprocal trust. But these are all vital elements necessary in any successful democracy, and Tunisian political elites are responsible for maintaining the legacy of the Tunisian revolution through its first decade. ❖

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