

# The Roots of Tunisia's Current Political Crisis

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Brief Analysis

**As Tunisia's political crisis continues, it is crucial to understand how the disputes between the President and legislative branch have unfolded over the past few months, contributing to Tunisia's economic and public health emergencies.**

**S**ince the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2019, Tunisia has experienced unprecedented political turmoil and fundamental divisions due to the weakened state of the Tunisian parliament and the political struggles between ruling institutions. These factors have dominated the overall scene and upset the priorities of those in power who were already in conflict, especially the power struggle between the two leaders of the executive authority—which has most recently expanded as president Kaïs Saïed removed the prime minister and suspended parliament.

This is the public unfolding of a behind-the-scenes war between the prime minister, the president, and parliament—one which has disrupted attempts at economic reform and revitalization to prepare for the post-COVID-19 phase and identify the country's basic problems with regards to driving growth, providing job opportunities, and improving the purchasing power of citizens.

## **Hichem Mechichi and the Circumstances Surrounding his Mandate**

From the outset, Mechichi's government reflected the ongoing challenges within Tunisian democracy by becoming the ninth government in the decade since the 2011 uprising that overthrew President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, with Tunisia now averaging almost one government per year.

The circumstances that brought about this most recent government in September 2020, which was not nominated by any of the country's parliamentary blocs or parties, emerged as a response to suspicions of corruption and conflicts of interest surrounding his predecessor, former Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh. The uproar was due to his illegal possession of shares in waste companies that do business with the state, leading to Fakhfakh's departure in

record time after only six months in office in the wake of intense political pressure from political parties.

According to popular circles and public opinion poll organizations in Tunisia, it appeared that the former prime minister, Hichem Mechichi, enjoys the confidence not only of opinion-makers in Tunisia but also an important segment of the population, including people with higher education, due to his academic background and his clean political credentials.

Unlike Saïed, who appealed to voters due to his outsider status, Mechichi has held numerous positions in Tunisia's post-revolution government. In 2014, Mechichi was appointed chief-of-staff for the minister of transportation. He then held the same position in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Health, before being appointed Director-General of the National Agency for the Sanitary and Environmental Control of Products.

However, Hichem Mechichi's path towards the position of Prime Minister emerged after he was appointed by President of the Republic, Kaïs Saïed, as his first adviser in charge of legal affairs on February 11, 2020. He then quickly became Minister of Interior in Elyes Fakhfakh's government on February 27, 2020.

Five months later, on July 25, 2020, President Kaïs Saïed selected Mechichi to serve as Prime Minister, with the intention that he would form a government independent of Tunisia's political parties in a step aimed at distancing the country from the polarization and the political conflicts effectively destroying the country's democratic experiment and what remains of the faltering economy. Upon Mechichi's official installation as Prime Minister and the assumption of his duties, he recognized the seriousness of this task in his first statement, declaring "This confidence is a grave responsibility and a great challenge, especially in light of the current situation of the country."

The government of Hichem Mechichi faced its first obstacle in December of last year, after it was revealed that 282 containers of waste from Italy, described as dangerous, did not have licenses that matched the type of waste they contained. This waste hastened the Prime Minister's dismissal of the Minister of Environment, Mustapha Aroui.

### **A Ministerial Reshuffle**

The crisis between Mechichi's government and the President of the Republic erupted the following month, when President Kaïs Saïed refused to invite the appointed ministers to take the constitutional oath. Saïed made this decision despite the parliament's approval, by an absolute majority, of the reshuffle that included eleven ministers, which was done at the request of the political parties participating in Hichem Mechichi's government. The President's refusal came amid suspicions of corruption and conflicts of interest surrounding certain appointed ministers, and he continued to send veiled messages that the coalition supporting the Prime Minister was covering up this corruption.

By contrast, Hichem Mechichi dealt with the crisis in stages. He expressed in the first stage that he had followed the correct approach for appointing new ministers that had been adopted previously and falls within the framework of the Prime Minister's clear constitutional powers. Mechichi also sought the counsel of experts in the legal and constitutional field, who asserted that the crisis was a primarily political rather than constitutional one. They also called for the need to convene the Constitutional Court, which decides such issues.

In similar steps to contain the crisis, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi wrote an official letter to the President of the Republic on February 11, 2021, calling on him to provide him with the names of the ministers suspected of corruption and conflicts of interest. The letter also demanded that Saïed immediately invite the rest of the ministers who had gained Parliament's confidence to take the constitutional oath to avoid disrupting the functioning of state institutions and the service of the public interest and the Tunisian people. However, these efforts failed to achieve tangible results, and no breakthrough occurred until Saïed's dissolution of parliament.

In the interim period, the Tunisian cabinet continued its work with a third of its members. There were only 18 ministerial portfolios left in Hichem Mechichi's government, half of which remained unconfirmed, despite the known economic and social conditions in Tunisia. This situation fueled and became an extension of the current crisis.

What made matters worse and created a climate of distrust was the sacking of the Minister of Health, Fawzi Mahdi al-Tabib—a member of the military establishment—by the Prime Minister due to his poor handling of the vaccination campaign during the days of Eid al-Adha (July 19-20) when vaccination centers became packed with crowds of people, along with the unprecedented number of deaths resulting from Covid-19. Moreover, the fragile health infrastructure in Tunisia obliged the government to rely on the current available resources as well as foreign assistance.

### **Unstable Government and an Unstable Economy**

In addition to its chronic political crises, Tunisia's economy is witnessing massive stagnation that has reached unprecedented levels according to many local and global indexes. Rating agencies have now [downgraded Tunisia's rating \(https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/fitch-downgrades-tunisia-to-b-outlook-negative-08-07-2021\)](https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/fitch-downgrades-tunisia-to-b-outlook-negative-08-07-2021) due to the fragility of the economic situation and the absence of a viable reform vision. The global COVID pandemic has also contributed to complicating a naturally thorny situation, deepening the crisis, and making the Tunisian state spend and try to assist affected groups and institutions even without any significant state income.

Amid the eruption of disagreements among ruling institutions and the worsening economic situation, the state was compelled into the embarrassment of taking on debt. After attempts to borrow and unsuccessful negotiations with Arab countries, the Tunisian state found itself forced to come before the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to mobilize their financial resources in exchange for a clear and viable reform program for public institutions.

Tunisia also needed these organizations to establish a climate for investment in line with the country's new situation, especially with regard to revising the investment code. Tunisia has likewise needed them to review the arrangements that the Tunisian government has drafted, in partnership with national organizations, to convince donors—with the help the ambassadors of brotherly and friendly countries—to support Tunisia's reform program and mobilize the necessary support.

### **Unconventional Negotiations with Strategic Partners, Including the IMF**

These efforts initially appeared to make some headway. Washington's Ambassador to Tunisia Donald Blome expressed U.S. support for Tunisia in its negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, saying that the U.S. administration is fully prepared to support development efforts in Tunisia and the success of the democratic path. Similarly, the Tunisian Minister of Economy, Finance, and Investment Support, Ali al-Kaali, announced that the United States will grant Tunisia \$500 million, after days of discussions in the US with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), to finance projects related to developing the logistics systems for maritime transport, particularly in the port of Radès, and the control of water resources.

After the Tunisian government's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund last May, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris called Tunisian President Kais Saïed, to say that the Tunisian delegation in Washington was serious about the work and was able to convince them of Tunisia's will to take big steps to advance the economy. Harris also confirmed Washington's continuing support for Tunisia, either through direct relief aid or in its discussions with the International Monetary Fund. As a strategic partner, these moves made clear that the U.S. administration wants Tunisia to overcome its political and economic crisis as soon as possible in order to complete consultations with donors.

### **The President Adjusts towards the People's Desires**

On the 62nd anniversary of the Republic Day, the Tunisian street witnessed the eruption of July 25 protests in many states. So far, it is not known who is behind protests, but it is most likely that Tunisia's miserable youth are the ones who organized those protests rather than political parties. The most important of the protests' demands were getting rid of Tunisia's corrupt ruling system, dissolving parliament, and ending the political stalemate, which has exhausted the people at all levels. Moreover, the spread of COVID-19—which according to the mid-July statistics of the Ministry of Health has claimed the lives of nearly 16,000 Tunisians—and the government's poor handling of the crisis and the vaccination campaign have stirred public discontent and fueled the protests.

Against the backdrop of the events on the 64th anniversary of the Republic Day, and based on article 80 of the constitution, President Kaïs Saïed unexpectedly decided to relieve Prime Minister Mechichi from his post, freeze the Parliament for 30 days and dismantle all members of the parliament from their immunity from prosecution.

It is worth mentioning that while the President's procedures were a surprise, they were not completely unexpected. The president has repeatedly informed the media that he has an arsenal of laws at his disposal that he would launch at the right time. The president's dissatisfaction with the parliament in this case appears to be attributed to its poor performance, its abuse of judicial files, and its entrenching of impunity.

Moreover, the President's move seems to be constitutional; article 80 of the Tunisian constitution stipulates that "in the event of imminent danger threatening the nation's institutions or the security or independence of the country, and hampering the normal functioning of the state, the President of the Republic may take any measures necessitated by the exceptional circumstances, after consultation with the Head of Government and the Speaker of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and informing the President of the Constitutional Court. The President shall announce the measures in a statement to the people."

After his meeting with the heads of national organizations at the Carthage Palace, President Kaïs Saïed claimed that the decisions he took were not a coup since they adhered to article 80, and that it was the ongoing spread of the pandemic that constituted an imminent danger. He also stressed that his knowledge of law as a constitutional law professor had reassured him that the procedures he had taken were legitimate—and that he was ready to bear historical responsibility for his actions.

In the absence of the Constitutional Court—which parliamentarians have been reluctant to form since 2015 due to narrow margins—this situation, called a temporary suspension of power, was imposed until an agreement could be reached in partnership with national organizations.

Whenever possible, the government must also rely on the state's own resources and not lean heavily on those who give conditional aid tied to specific economic positions. Those in power in Tunisia must overcome political differences according to a specific timetable, and accordingly, the ruling institutions in Tunisia are obliged to follow a calendar of political and economic reforms that passes from legislation to implementation.

Even with Tunisia's major political crisis, there must be sufficient focus on assuaging the country's economic woes. In order to stop the continuous bleeding and deterioration of the Tunisian economy, it is necessary to expedite the passage of laws related to economic investment that are directly related to investment. The government should also develop a medium-term growth reform plan in accordance with budgetary capabilities and in partnership with the private sector, including the twenty-four states of the Republic, in line with the priority of affirmative action. There is also a need to activate economic diplomacy, especially with regard to the reconstruction of Libya, profitable projects, and attracting investors in coordination with the government, to set up foreign manufacturing companies in Tunisia and not to sell shares or company stocks. ❖

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