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Infighting in Nidaa Tounes: A Danger to Tunisia's Democracy?

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Brief Analysis

Tunisia is the Arab Spring's single democratic success story, and has remained so—though not without hiccups—for the past seven years. Yet rising unemployment rates, corruption, and a generally unstable political environment are increasingly major threats to the continued success of Tunisia's democracy. Moreover, the struggle between the President's son Hamed Caid Essebsi and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed is increasingly pushing the government into a position where it is unable to respond to Tunisia's economic and social challenges in an effective manner.

Tunisia's 2014 constitution established a quasi-parliamentary political system, which grants the Head of Government top executive powers. Indeed, whereas the President of the Republic controls defense and foreign affairs issues, the Head of Government controls most other governmental sectors. Due to this power balance, incumbent President Beji Caid Essebsi of Nidaa Tounes and leader of Ennahda—Tunisia's leading party in parliament—Rachid Ghannouchi have governed Tunisia through an unwritten political consensus since the constitution's implementation.

Beji Caid Essebsi had used his charismatic personality and tacit support from Ennahda to enhance the limited powers given to the President. Yet the tide has now changed in response to Essebsi's appointment of his son, Hamed Caid Essebsi, to lead Nidaa Tounes in May 2014. Ennahda has since shifted its support to Nidaa Tounes' Head of Government Chahed, who until recently was also a member of Nidaa Tounes. In consequence, a power struggle within Nidaa Tounes has left little structured opposition to the majority party of Ennahda within parliament.

The reality is that Hamed Caid Essebsi lacks political legitimacy, with his interest in politics emerging only after his father's winning of the presidential election. Many Tunisians are concerned about the optics of this father-son relationship: why else would Hamed Caid Essebsi enter politics other than an attempt to take over the presidency from his father?

There are a number of indications that political discontent with Essebsi the younger is also what prompted Chahed to break from Nidaa Tounes and announce the creation of a new 'National Coalition bloc' in September. Yet while spokesman Ahmed Ben Mustapha argues the new movement is designed to secure a minimum of governmental stability, the bloc is also centered on the identity of Youssef Chahed. Little information on the political platform or goals of the movement is available, leaving potential voters in the 2019 election increasingly confused.

The October 14 [fusion](#) between the Patriotic Free Union, founded by Slim Riahi, and Nidaa Tounes has similarly muddled the line between political platforms and personality. Riahi is a controversial businessman who is under a travel ban and was accused of issuing bad checks. This has made the merger all the more scandalous since Riahi has now become Nidaa Tounes' new Secretary-General, despite never previously being a member. Like Chahed's new party, no information on an updated party platform is available, which speaks volumes for the durability of this political project.

Perhaps most concerning has been President Essebsi's response to these personality-driven political shifts within his own party. Rather than challenging his son's positions in light of the deep political divisions his leadership has caused, the President appears unconcerned with these increasingly polarizing events. And for the Tunisian voters, it is clear, despite the lack of information on policy from either group, that the struggle between Hafedh Caid Essebsi and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed playing out has nothing to do with their concerns. Nevertheless, Tunisians have the right to see their aspirations taken into consideration by political elites; it is exactly because of government failures to address these issues that the revolution occurred in Tunisia in the first place.

Democracy is recognized as an inherent good, yet if infighting among political elites continues and economic conditions fail to improve, the whole structure of democracy may increasingly be viewed as a luxury rather than necessity. With almost 36 percent unemployment among youth in Tunisia, the political reforms that have been accomplished during the past seven years are increasingly losing their relevance for many younger Tunisians. What's worse is the loss of trust in the state's future, evidenced by an interest among Tunisian youth to leave Tunisia altogether. So far, over 4,000 young Tunisians have immigrated illegally this year alone.

A healthy democracy needs strong and well-structured political parties. The presence of at least two major, stable parties is sine qua non for the success of a democratic experience. These conditions confer to the government the ability to govern, and to the opposition the ability to perform its role within a democratic structure. The drama between Chahed and Essebsi is only demonstrating that this is far from the reality in Tunisia; Ennahda appears to be the only strong party at the moment, with individuals rather than political platforms driving the events among the largest secular bloc. In order to remedy to such a dangerous situation, Tunisia's secular political parties must unify their efforts and modernize their methods to present a viable alternative to the current situation. So far, Hafedh Caid Essebsi's leadership of Nidaa Tounes is only pushing the party in the opposite direction. ❖



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