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Reshuffle, Rinse, and Reform: Tunisia's Government Under Strain

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Brief Analysis

While a cabinet reshuffle in Tunisia would appease some parties and civil society groups, ushering in a new government would do little to address the deeper challenges facing the country's democratic transition.

In recent weeks, Tunisia's government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, has faced growing calls from certain political parties and civil society organizations to resign and make way for a new cabinet. Chahed's government, the country's eighth in as many years, has been in place since August 2016, after the preceding cabinet of Habib Essid failed to obtain a vote of confidence in parliament. At the time, nine political parties and three leading labor unions signed an agreement known as the Carthage Declaration calling for a new national unity government that would prioritize the fight against terrorism, anti-corruption measures, and economic reforms. The resulting coalition government apportioned Tunisia's twenty-six ministries to members of the two leading blocs in parliament – Chahed's secular Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) Party and the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance) Party – alongside a mix of independents and members of two smaller, secular parties.

If recent Tunisian press accounts are any indication, Chahed may meet a similar political fate to that of his predecessor Essid. But it is questionable whether another change in government would bring Tunisia the much-needed economic reforms and improvements in state capacity, which have thus far proved elusive for the struggling democracy.

The proximate cause of the current crisis dates to this past March, when as a response to [protests](#) against the implementation of unpopular austerity measures, political parties and civil society organizations began deliberating on a strategy to reverse Tunisia's economic stagnation. In early April, a key signatory of the Carthage Declaration, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), accused Chahed's government of failing to fulfill the goals of the Declaration

and called for a cabinet reshuffle. On May 3, five political parties, including Ennahda and Nidaa, joined the country's leading labor unions in signing an amended Carthage Declaration ("Carthage II") comprising sixty-five social and economic reforms. But this consensus soon broke down over the fate of Chahed's government.

In a meeting at Carthage Palace convened by President Beji Caid Essebsi on May 22, Nidaa Tounes, the secular Free Patriotic Union Party, the UGTT, and the National Union of Tunisian Women all called for Chahed's resignation and a complete change in government. In response, Ennahda, the centrist National Destourian Initiative, al-Massar, and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries pushed back, agreeing to a partial government reshuffle but insisting that Chahed retain his post. Consequently, the Carthage II Agreement was suspended indefinitely on May 22, and the UGTT withdrew from the talks in protest against Chahed remaining in office. As of this writing, negotiations between the parties are ongoing.

On June 6, Chahed did dismiss his Interior Minister, but that move was likely in response to a tragic incident over the preceding weekend in which at least 112 individuals had died when their boat capsized off the Tunisian coast. The birthplace of the Arab Spring has in recent months become a key transit point for migrants seeking entry to Europe, and the shipwreck disaster brought into sharp relief the persistent dangers they face. The tragedy only increased the pressure on Chahed, whose government was accused of being slow to appreciate the gravity of the incident.

Replacing Chahed and his cabinet may temporarily appease key constituencies such as the UGTT, and the move would ostensibly signal to the Tunisian public that the government is aware of their frustration with the lack of progress, especially on the economic front. Still, several contextual considerations suggest that the current impasse may be more about a political power struggle than a comprehensive attempt at reform.

Tunisians have a number of reasons to be frustrated with the economic predicament of their country. These include a stubbornly high unemployment rate (officially 15% nationally but at least double that among university graduates and in the country's interior), rising inflation, and glaring disparities between the country's coastal and peripheral regions. Nevertheless, there is a hefty dose of political maneuvering fueling the efforts to replace the current government. Chahed's initial appointment had elicited concern that his membership in Essebsi's party, and especially his alleged closeness to Essebsi's son Hamed Essebsi, would make him reluctant to tackle the country's corruption problem or pursue deep economic reforms – both actions considered threats to a segment of the country's economic elites concentrated in Nidaa Tounes.

But in the ensuing years, Chahed proved more independent of Nidaa Tounes than many expected, calling for a sweeping "war" on corruption (which included the arrest of several prominent businessmen) and nudging his government to implement unpopular economic measures such as privatization, public sector wage freezes, and tax increases in exchange for a \$2.9 billion loan in 2016 from the International Monetary Fund.

The anti-corruption push, though criticized by some in civil society for not going far enough, did not endear him to certain players within Nidaa Tounes, a party which has struggled to cohere since winning the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections. Meanwhile, the younger Essebsi's ascent within the party further exacerbated the rift within Nidaa's ranks, whatever closeness Chahed may have once enjoyed with Essebsi deteriorated, and the party's fragmentation undoubtedly contributed to its poor showing in the May 6 local elections.

Nidaa's losses at the ballot box, compounded by Hamed's reported efforts in the May 22 meeting at Carthage Palace to push Chahed out, likely emboldened the Prime Minister to publicly accuse the President's son of destroying the party, and the gloves have been off ever since. Whatever else may be driving the current push for a cabinet reshuffle, internal party politics are clearly at play as Tunisia's leading political actors seek to position themselves for national elections scheduled in 2019.

As such, there is little evidence to suggest that yet another government reshuffle would bring lasting improvements in the very arenas opposition groups have cited in calling for Chahed's dismissal. Nor is it clear how a new government would find greater favor with entrenched interests such as the UGTT, given that the incoming Prime Minister would wake up to the same dismal indicators weighing down the country's economy. The emerging pattern, at least since 2014, has seen a new government come in promising broad reforms, making partial attempts to implement them, and receiving push-back from certain constituencies. This sequence then sparks a political impasse, reconciliation talks under the auspices of the Presidency, and the installation of a new government once again promising reforms. The repeating cycle may reflect a certain degree of political accountability, but it has come at the expense of instability undermining the confidence of foreign investors, a political turnover rate limiting the government's ability to build up the capacity of state institutions charged with delivering basic services, and growing public disillusionment with the process of democratic transition.

For policymakers in Washington, the latest political impasse in Tunisia should serve as a reminder of the fragility characterizing the country's democratic transition. Regardless of whether the political infighting and public mobilization will result in a new government this time around, the United States maintains an interest in seeing Tunisia remain relatively stable. As such, the Trump Administration will want to demonstrate America's continued support for Tunisia's democratic experiment and its partnership in facing attendant difficulties. With a new round of fuel price increases in the offing, U.S. officials should be consulting with their Tunisian counterparts about the timing of future price hikes and possible ways to lessen their impact, particularly on poorer segments of Tunisian society likely to suffer disproportionately. Washington would also do well to consider an emergency aid package aimed at assisting Tunisia in more closely monitoring the burgeoning human trafficking networks, such as those facilitating the recent migrant shipwreck tragedy. Political power struggles notwithstanding, economic assistance to Tunisia would help to bring a measure of stability to Chahed's government. ❖



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