

Tunisia's Fragile Transition

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While potential pitfalls remain, Tunisia's future could be bright amid a region that appears to be regressing.

Earlier this month, Tunisia's main political parties signed an agreement on how to proceed in its transition to a consolidated democracy. While Tunisia's process so far has been slow and steady, it has also been largely devoid of internal or external meddling like the coup d'etat in Egypt or outside interference in Libya or Syria. These factors could actually lead to its ultimate success and should be applauded. When in Tunisia last month, many I spoke to just want things to be normal and to provide for their family, without all of the crises. There are major challenges that remain ahead though, notably on the economic and security fronts.

All of the main political parties including the Islamist party Ennahda, which leads the current government, agreed to a new road map to complete Tunisia's transition period. The only surprise was that the Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki's Congres Pour la Republique (CPR) party did not sign the roadmap even though Marzouki himself attended the ceremony and backed the plan. Four other smaller parties did not sign the document either.

The roadmap calls for parties to choose a new independent leader and to appoint a nonpartisan government. Along the way, the current government led by Ennahda will resign after three weeks and the new appointed government will complete the constitution and electoral law as well as select the electoral board for the forthcoming election in four weeks' time. All three of these tasks were close to completion prior to the assassination of secular political leader Muhammad Brahmi in late July 2013, which led to the most recent crisis and the subsequent dialogue between Ennahda and the powerful Tunisian labor union the Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), or Tunisian General Labour Union.

There are already some concerns in how Ennahda is interpreting the agreement. The day after the agreement was reached, the party released a statement calling for "the continuation of the current government until the completion of the constitutional tasks of the Assembly." This explicitly contradicts the roadmap, by saying that any resignation

would happen only once the constitution is finished.

While the political road ahead will not be easy and all sides of the political aisle (secularists and Islamists alike) still harbor distrust of one another and grievances, there are reasons to commend this agreement. Unlike in other regional countries that have had uprisings, disagreements over the nature of the future political order have not led to major violence between the main political actors in the Tunisian context.

Further, Tunisia has the right ingredients to succeed: unlike Syria or Egypt, there are not outside powers overtly meddling in Tunisia's affairs, thereby allowing Tunisian political actors to grapple with problems themselves and together; Tunisia's military is apolitical and weak in manpower, and has no interest in a coup d'etat; and unlike Egypt, there is not one dominant political party. It is true that while Ennahda has lost support over the past two years, it still has a dedicated base and their electoral ground game is still likely strongest. Further, the secularist parties, civil-society groups, and the UGTT have been enough of a check to rein in any excesses of Ennahda over time. Due to these factors, all political actors must work things out together on their own terms and actually engage in back and forth, which are the first steps to achieving a consolidated democracy.

While there are definitely areas within the political process that could derail this arrangement -- especially if certain parties become too confident in their new bargaining positions, in particular Nida Tunis, which is led by former officials of the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali -- issues related to the economy and security are likelier to be bigger impediments along the way. It is true that the tourism industry has picked up this summer. The government boasted over nine hundred thousand entries for the month of August alone and a slight increase in revenues compared to 2010, the last year before the revolution. But a closer look at the figures shows a darker story. Almost half the entries came from neighboring countries, Libya and Algeria, tourists who generally spend little in the country. While tourism from Eastern Europe and Russia continues to increase, the number of tourists from Western Europe is falling, which was noticeable when walking through tourist areas. Tourism from France has fallen 45 percent from prerevolution levels. And in dollar terms, tourism revenues are still significantly lower than 2010.

On the overall economic front, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) growth forecasts have been cut. While the government has lowered its growth projections to 3.6 percent (from 4.5 percent earlier this year), some economists predict growth could slow down to under 3 percent by year's end. The government is now struggling to close a widening budget deficit through austerity measures that could bring yet more unrest. Meanwhile, donors have appeared restless as the government has failed to deliver on promised economic reforms. While Tunisia just secured an IMF bailout in June, the IMF's most recent mission to Tunisia raised alarm bells. In a statement, the IMF stated "immediate and urgent efforts are required to control external and budget deficits, reduce banking sector vulnerabilities, and generate more rapid and inclusive growth that can absorb unemployment while reducing social and economic disparities." Without such reforms it is unclear if the IMF will provide the second tranche when they review the conditions in November.

And while the economy has avoided a renewed recession, renewed growth seems as far away as ever, especially for new college graduates, who have the highest levels of unemployment in the country. When I spoke with a number of educated youth, many noted that if they had any opportunity they would take a job in the United States, France or Germany in an instant.

On the security front, there have been two prominent political assassinations in 2013. If there is another, especially if targeted at the Nida Tunis party, it could lead to large-scale unrest. Many in the secularist camp blame Ennahda for outright complicity or at the very least ignoring the threats against these two political figures. Therefore, more violence against secular figures or activists will be judged harshly against their new consensus partner in Tunisia's revamped transition.

Similarly, many stand waiting to see what comes of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. The Tunisian government designated them as a terrorist organization in late August 2013. Since then, the group has maintained a low profile. The number of *dawa* events has been considerably less and their online propaganda apparatus has not been as active. Further, the government's fight with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib-linked militants in Jebel Chambi continues along the western border with Algeria with no signs of ending. If the militants decide to widen the battlefield into major city centers, it would also dampen any efforts to complete the transition period. The biggest wild card, though, is individuals that return home from fighting in Syria and whether they decide to either return to their normal lives prior to their trip or take up arms against their own government. Any uptick in the cadence of violence will certainly lead to a massive backlash against the government.

Therefore, many potential pitfalls do remain ahead for Tunisia and one should not be naive about this. That being said, comparatively, Tunisia is doing quite well and its transition at the political level, while not perfect, appears to be steering in a positive direction at the moment. If the key political parties are willing to continue down the path of consensus as well as take serious aim at economic reforms, Tunisia's future could be the one bright spot in a broader region that appears to be more regressing than progressing. The process is fragile and huge risks lurk around the bend, all the more reason for the parties to act with a sense of urgency to get to elections and complete the transition.

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