TRT WORLD research centre

The Impasse in Tunisia Continues: What are the Issues at Stake?

Elif Zaim



(Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

Looking at the latest crisis in Tunisia, this policy outlook examines the key economic and political issues at stake. In doing so, it argues that the ongoing stand-off at the highest levels of government between the President and the Prime Minister hinders prospects of reform that are necessary to provide solutions to the country's most pressing issues.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

This year Tunisia marked the tenth anniversary of its revolution in which the authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was toppled. However, instead of celebrations, people took to the streets to protest; demanding jobs, social justice and an end to corruption, notably echoing the same set of grievances that existed a decade ago.

Even though the country has long been hailed as the sole success story of the Arab uprisings and has indeed had some major achievements, such as enacting a constitution in 2014, holding democratic elections, and bringing different parties together through consensus politics, it nonetheless remains in a delicate position as new problems continue to add to the already-existing woes.

Looking at the latest crisis, this policy outlook examines the key economic and political issues at stake. In doing so, it argues that the ongoing stand-off at the highest levels of government between the President and the Prime Minister hinders prospects of reform that are necessary to provide solutions to the country's most pressing issues.

Tenth anniversary of the revolution marked by protests

The unrest initially erupted in the town of Siliana, 80 miles away from Tunis, after a video began circulating on social media showing a police officer harassing a shepherd. It then quickly spread to other cities, building on the anger that was already brewing among Tunisians due to high unemployment and social inequality. Whereas the daytime demonstrations were largely peaceful, violent clashes with security forces took place during the night. The army was deployed in several spots to calm the situation and to protect public institutions from acts of vandalism.

The security response was not limited to this. The national police were also on the streets to crack down on the protestors. The use of excessive force by the officers have amplified the simmering tensions. Among these were firing tear gas at a close range which led to the death of a protestor Haykal Rachdi who was hit in the head by a canister, dragging demonstrators on the roads, arresting more than 1,600, including hundreds of minors, and reports of beatings under detention. Even though police harassment and brutality were one of the key factors that sparked the revolution, over the past decade, almost no reforms were done to address these problems.

Reactions towards the demonstrations from Tunisian leaders were mixed. Visiting a district of Tunis, Mnihla, where violent clashes took place, President Saied expressed his support to the protestors, and vaguely accused some parties of exploiting people's grievances. On the other hand, during a televised speech Prime Minister Mechichi ensured Tunisians that he understands their legitimate demands, but he also praised the security forces' professionalism in dealing with the situation, thereby raised concerns.

Political parties were also divided in their approach and took a stance in line with their positions towards the government. While the emphasis of both Ennahda and the Heart of Tunisia have been centred around vandalism and violence, others such as the People's Movement and the Democratic Current Party have expressed their support for peaceful protests and have criticized the government.



Police officers block the road as people stage a demonstration demanding the release of 632 detainees arrested in protests held last week against the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic lockdown, in Tunis, Tunisia on January 26, 2021. (Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

Even though scattered and regional demonstrations are a norm rather than an exception in the country, this time the circumstances are particularly alarming due to two intermingled crises. On the one hand, the already moribund economic situation is getting worse by day due to the repercussions of the coronavirus outbreak. On the other, efforts to solve these problems seem to have been almost completely side-lined as the country's politicians are busy jockeying for power at the expense of citizens.

The economy remains the top priority

The bleak economic outlook has been at the epicentre of the permeating frustration that drove Tunisians back to the streets as they continue to reel under a financially precarious situation. According to Prime Minister Mechichi, Tunisia is currently going through an unprecedented crisis due mainly to the neglect of enacting sweeping financial reforms that have been required for years. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic only add to the existing woes, which have already cost the country around $2.9 billion in economic losses as of November last year.

Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows that in 2020 GDP contracted by 8.2 per cent, a historic downturn, and the fiscal deficit has reached 11.5 per cent of GDP because of an increase in government spending in a bid to alleviate the negative socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. These developments combined together have resulted in a sharp rise in the public debt, which now accounts for approximately 87 per cent of GDP.

As a result, for the year 2020 more than 16 per cent of the population are out of work. The youth unemployment rate stands notoriously high at around 35.7 per cent, 30.1 per cent of which are university graduates. Given this grim picture, it is not surprising to know that the economy stands out as the top priority for Tunisians'. A recent poll indicates that 72 per cent of Tunisians view the economic situation of their country "very bad" and believe that the state is "doing little or nothing" to address their grievances.

Evaluating these circumstances and the economic measures taken by the government during the pandemic period Riccardo Fabiani, North Africa project director at International Crisis Group, states that "Tunisia's room for fiscal manoeuvre was inevitably limited, due to the already high levels of debt. The government tried to bring some financial support to the hardest-hit social and economic groups, but its ability to cushion the impact of the crisis was always going to be lower than what these actors needed".

In fact, according to budget forecasts the country requires $7.2 billion of which $5 billion have to be derived from international loans. With this the total debt repayments for this year stands at around $6 billion. Even though it is certain that Tunisia cannot afford to navigate through the current economic crisis without relying on external aid, these loan schemes are certain to push the country further in the debt cycle.

As a solution, the IMF has called the country to retrench its bloated wage bill and limit energy subsidies to cut down on its soaring budget deficit. However, Fabiani argues that "to be effective, these measures need to be part of both a wider reform programme and an inclusive dialogue mechanism in Tunisia. Previous attempts by the international financial institutions to impose politically difficult economic reforms on Tunisia have failed because of their top-down nature and lack of buy-in, as political parties and social groups undermined their implementation".

In an interview, finance minister Ali Kooli stated that he is willing to take a series of difficult steps to rescue the ailing economy before engaging in talks with the IMF. Part of these reform plans includes selling shares in some state-owned companies in order to invest the revenues derived from the privitisation into some other firms which will be restructured. These companies are yet to be announced.

However, as Fabiani points out the discord between different influential actors remains an issue. For example, it is known that UGTT, Tunisia's main labour union, firmly stands against the privatisation of state companies, even though the union is willing to discuss the prospects of downsizing the workforce. The situation is further complicated due to a deeply fractured parliament and the ongoing political bickering between the President, Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament.

Can President Kais Saied still be considered an 'outsider'?

President Saied's refusal to swear in Prime Minister Mechichi's government reshuffle represents the latest episode in the saga of a power struggle in the parliament. Mechichi's new line-up had changes in 11 ministerial portfolios out of 25 and won a confidence vote with an absolute majority receiving the support of Ennahda, Heart of Tunisia, the Dignity Coalition and the National Bloc. However, despite this, the President has rejected to allow some of the ministers to take their oaths on the basis of allegations of corruption and conflict of interest, thereby creating a constitutional crisis.

Prior to this current conflict, when Mechichi was first designated as the head of the government by Kais Saied last



Tunisian President Kais Saied (R) gives the letter of appointment to Tunisian Interior Minister Hisham El-Mechishi (L) to form the country's government at the Carthage Palace in Tunis, Tunisia on July 26, 2020. (Tunisian Presidency / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

July following the resignation of Elyas Fakhfakh, he was labelled as Saied's choice due to not being among the proposed candidates by any of the political parties. In fact, his technocratic nonpartisan cabinet which left out all representatives from the existing factions was also regarded as a clear testimony that Mechichi was reflecting Saied's will by forming a "president's government".

While initially, his choice was subject to criticisms among political parties, particularly Ennahda, demanding the government formation to be in tandem with the election results and the composition of the parliament, the existing circumstances played into the favour of Mechichi to win the approval of legislators for his cabinet with a comfortable majority on voting day.

One of the factors behind this support was the prospect of early elections should the government fall. The parties who backed Mechichi's government were wary of the fact that they had a high potential to lose their current number of seats in the face of an increasingly frustrated electorate.

The other, and the arguably more crucial reason, behind this was the emergence of disputes between Saied and Mechichi. With Kais Saied abandoning his chosen premier and asking political parties to refrain from backing Mechichi, the Prime Minister-designate had almost no choice but to rely on the support of Ennahda, Heart of Tunisia, Dignity Coalition and others not only to win the confidence vote but also to continue to carry out his mandate. This situation was also a chance for some of the political actors, especially for Parliamentary Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, to gain the upper hand in the ongoing political wrangling with the President. Thus, contrary to Saied's initial gambit, his fallout with Mechichi gave birth to an unexpected alliance, which turned out to be politically costly for the President.

In the following months, this reboot in power relations between the political actors resulted in the removal of Saied's close allies from their ministerial posts. First, the Culture Minister who was endorsed by the President was dismissed upon his refusal to implement Prime Minister Mechichi's directives to ban festivals as part of the measures taken to prevent the Covid-19 from spreading. Second, the Minister of the Interior, known for his close proximity to Saied, was sacked after his attempts to change several high-ranking

security officials without informing the Prime Minister.

Within this context, the cabinet reshuffle was the final move by Mechichi to clear the scene from the remaining Saied loyalists. In order words, it was an explicit confirmation that the premier had no intention to act within the remits of the president's political vision or policies. In return, President Saied's refusal to swear in the new ministers despite parliamentary approval was an act of retaliation and an effort to assert his authority.

The Presidency in Tunisia is a highly symbolic post with a limited mandate. According to the constitution, which was enacted in 2014 after the revolution, only foreign policy, defence and national security fall within its remit. However, Kais Saied's situation is unconventional in the sense that he has significant support granting him a popular legitimacy.

During the presidential elections, being an outsider with no political affiliation or background, Saied was chosen by a landslide victory, gaining more than 70 per cent of the vote, surpassing the total amount received by all of the political parties combined in the parliament. While Saied's win was interpreted as a rebuke to the political class, it also raised hopes that as a clean figure he could remedy Tunisia's woes.

This situation has produced a predicament. Youssef Cherif, Deputy Director of Columbia Global Centers, explains it by saying "his two biggest problems is that first he doesn't have a political party, a machine, to apply his ideas on the ground, and second no strong team to advise him and work with him (several resignations occurred in the Presidential cabinet since his inauguration)". He further states that "add to that his disagreements with political groups in the country and lack of local and international backing (among institutionalised groups) and you have the current situation where he is kind of alone".

However, despite the constitutional and structural limitations Saied faces, since taking office there were numerous instances in which he has tried to assert his political will by relying on his immense popularity. His role in the formation of the government of Elyas Fakhfakh, using his special executive and legislative powers granted to the President in Article 80 of the constitution in the case of an imminent danger during the pandemic such as introducing lockdowns, or his active stance in crafting foreign policy towards Libya, can all be counted as examples to this. Some of these initiatives, which stretch beyond his mandate, account for the reason that he has been at odds with the parliament.

His decision not to swear in the cabinet has been the final blow in this regard and has left the country in a stalemate since the end of January. In the absence of a constitutional court that can resolve this dilemma of whether this is merely a ceremonial procedure or requires an actual executive authorisation, the impasse is likely to continue. Due to the disagreements in the parliament on whom to appoint to the court, its creation has been constantly delayed since 2014. Most recently, a bill was issued by the parliament to set up the constitutional court, however it was rejected by President Saied by calling it an attempt to "settle scores".

Within this chaos, whether Tunisians still back the President remains an open question. Sharan Grewal, assistant professor at the William and Mary College and a non-resident fellow at Brookings, states that some polls indicate that Kais Saied is hurt by the crisis. He explains the situation by saying "part of his appeal as a candidate was that he had a clean reputation, was independent of political parties, and thus seemed to be above partisan bickering. And yet today Tunisians increasingly view him as part and parcel of the system, acting just like any other politician".

Indeed, Saied came to power reviving hopes that he could actually make substantial changes to the endemic problems facing the country, however, a year later it seems that he has contributed more to the crisis rather than providing solutions and building consensus.

Looking at the current stand-off, the easiest way out would be political negotiations, which would lead to an alteration in Prime Minister Mechichi's cabinet line-up. In this regard, there have already been calls from the labour unions to establish a national dialogue to solve the crisis. However, according to some reports one of the conditions President Saied put forth to start a reconciliation process is the resignation of the Prime Minister. That being said, Mechichi has already stated that he will not resign. Thus, it seems that neither of them is willing to back down from their respective positions, diminishing hopes for a consensus to emerge.

Elaborating on the conflict, Grewal argues that "regardless of who ends up 'winning' this particular dispute, the loser is clear: the political system. The bickering between the president, prime minister, and parliament over their respective powers has hurt not just their popularity, but trust in the system generally". He further states that "today we see not just the usual calls for shifting to a presidential system, but now also calls from the other side for shifting to a parliamentary one. Few today defend the existing arrangement, which makes it unlikely that it will stand the test of time".

In fact, under the current political system Tunisia has changed almost government every year, with voting in three cabinets over the course of the last 12 months following the 2019 elections. Thus, with weak coalition governments composed of parties with divergent interests, it becomes almost impossible to develop strategies and implement much-needed reforms to address ongoing problems, hence fuelling the frustration and despair among Tunisians.

Ennahda and the Free Destourian Party: Two players to watch

In the midst of this chaos, there are also those who benefit from the ongoing crises. Grewal explains the situation by saying "as the system becomes delegitimised, the clear beneficiaries are Abir Moussi and other anti-system candidates. The political infighting and lack of focus on policy feed directly in their argument that democracy is chaotic and ineffective, and that Tunisians would be better off with a return to old ways".

Abir Moussi, the leader of the Free Destourian Party (PDL) and an ex-official of Ben Ali's party, is known for her praise of the former regime and anti-revolutionary stance, denying the legitimacy of the revolution as a "plot" carried out by foreign countries. Even though she failed in her presidential bid and her party currently holds only 17 parliamentary seats out of 217, she is one of the most significant players on the political scene. She makes headlines almost on a daily basis either through initiating protests, sit-ins and motions in parliament or giving provocative speeches attacking her opponents, particularly Ennahda.

Speaking about the party's strategy, Cherif states that "the PDL is adopting a populist discourse that portrays everything that has happened since the revolution as evil, amplifies conspiracy theories and demonizes the other". However, he argues that this narrative is not the primary reason behind why the party is increasingly gaining ground but "the more the other politicians sink in their quixotic battles, and the more economic and social crises fuel the anger of Tunisian citizens, the more popular the PDL becomes".

According to a recent poll, when citizens were asked whom they would vote for if the elections were to held tomorrow, more than 40 per cent named the PDL. This shows that Moussi has managed to expand her supporters from Ben Ali cronies and those with nostalgia for the old regime, to a significant number of those who feel that the revolution has failed to deliver a better life and, therefore, resent the existing political establishment.

On the other hand, despite its declining popularity Ennahda still remains the strongest single political force in the country. However, the party is currently grappling with a number of challenges on different fronts.

Internally, the dispute over who will lead the party stands out as the most crucial problem and it remains to be solved due to the continuous postponement of the party's 11th Congress. Last September, 100 influential members representing different currents within the party including names like Abdellatif Mekki, Samir Dilou, Mohammed Ben Salem and Habib Ellouz signed a letter and urged Ghannouchi to refrain from breaching the party bylaws, which limit the leadership tenure to two consecutive terms. However, in his response, Ghannouchi not only dismissed the calls but also accused the signatories of initiating a coup against him.

The party is divided on how to proceed. Ghannouchi supporters argue that with tensions on the rise in the country, he should remain as the party leader to maintain stability. Others hold to the principle of respect for internal regulations not only for the sake of maintaining party unity but also to avoid personalisation of rule, and to avert the erosion of Ennahda's popularity through rejuvenating its leadership.

The split in the party raises other concerns as well. Since several senior members have resigned over the past year in protest of the management of the party, whether any of these leading figures will be able to attract Ennahda's constituency and thus cause a further decline in its voting rates remains an open question.

Externally, Ennahda seems to be trapped in a parliament that does not have much room to manoeuvre. First of all, despite having the highest number of seats and being part of the ruling coalition, the party does not wield a proportional influence when it comes to actual governance and policymaking. Secondly, it relies on two other political parties, which are in opposition, namely Heart of Tunisia and the Dignity Coalition rather than its coalition partners for support on matters such as Ghannouchi's election as the parliamentary speaker.

Besides its entangled position in the parliament, the standoff between the president and the party is another point of concern for Ennahda. Even though the party gave support to Kais Saied in the presidential runoff, since the elections tensions have been simmering as both political heavyweights want to play pivotal roles in crafting the country's policies.

In this regard, Libya has stood out as the focal point of the public conflict. Following Ghannouchi's phone call to the head of the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Libya extending his congratulations over a military victory, the President sternly warned the parliamentary speaker. Saied stated that "the Tunisian state is one and it has one president, both at home and abroad" underlining that foreign policy falls within his remit.

Since then, the President and the party have been publicly at odds with each other on almost everything. The party's support to Prime Minister Mechichi in the ongoing row and its organising of recent mass demonstrations, showcasing its strength and popularity while calling for "dialogue and national unity" to solve the crisis, can be all be seen as part of this politicking.



President of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi (C) speaks at rally attended by supporters of the movement to demand the end of the political crisis in the country as the cabinet revision issue between President of Tunisia, Kais Saied and Prime Minister of Tunisia, Hichem Mechichi continues in Tunis, Tunisia, on February 27, 2021. (Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

Elaborating on the party's current situation, Cherif states that "Ennahda's base is solid, and in the Tunisian political spectrum it's the most durable base. Other parties opposing it gain strength but then quickly evaporate. The march it organised showed how popular and structured it remains; no other political force in the country can do the same".

However, he also points out that "Ennahda's grassroots are largely adults; fewer and fewer young Tunisians are seduced by its message. Ennahda remains strong but cannot move forward or increase its power. It's in a status quo situation and, as years go by, it loses strength".

He further reiterates that "the youth who went out demonstrating -before Ennahda's big rally- were young, disillusioned Tunisians who are representative of the Tunisian youth and who are not attracted by any political current. In fact, Ennahda is stronger than its opponents, but it doesn't mean that it is strong".

In other words, if Ennahda cannot find a way to remedy its dilemmas, despite having a solid constituency and find a way to appeal to the youth it risks losing further ground as parties such as the PDL stand to benefit from the current crisis. Thus, its strength does not guarantee that it will continue to remain as a key player, and it could certainly be challenged if a viable alternative arises.

Conclusion

The crisis deepens each passing day in Tunisia in the absence of necessary reforms to solve the country's socio-economic problems while political wrangling at the highest levels of government continues to waste the country's precious time. However, as it currently stands, an attempt to reach a consensus to break the deadlock seems to be out of sight with the President, Prime Minister and other political parties situated in opposing camps, firmly maintaining their positions and trying to pressure the other. As the political equation remains intact, it is the ordinary citizens who are paying the price of this ongoing sabre rattling among the political elite. This deadlock guarantees that people's core demands will continue to remain unaddressed, exacerbating the sense of despair and apathy among the population and hampering the prospects of progress in Tunisia's fragile transition.