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Tunisia's Democratic Transition: From Contention to Consensus?

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As Tunisia's Islamists reaffirm their cohesiveness, the country's contentious politics have worn out many voters and dulled their interest in democratic participation, making abstention the most likely winner of this year's elections.

Last week, 39,000 members of Tunisia's leading Islamist faction, Ennahda, took part in an internal referendum to decide whether to postpone their next national congress, where a new party executive board is typically chosen. More than 70 percent of the members agreed to maintain the party's cohesiveness in order to focus on winning the next round of legislative elections rather than risk exposing internal divisions. In contrast, the various parties in the secular opposition remain disorganized and divided by their ambitions -- months after helping to pressure the Ennahda-led governing coalition out of office and agreeing to a transitional roadmap, they are unable to unite, whether against their Islamist adversary or around a common political project. More important, Islamists and secularists alike face an uphill battle in convincing increasingly skeptical Tunisian voters that they are serious about addressing the country's social, economic, and security concerns instead of squabbling with each other.

FROM CRISIS TO DIALOGUE

In July 2013, left-wing parliamentarian Mohamed Brahmi was assassinated, sparking Tunisia's most severe political crisis since the 2011 ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Holding the Islamist-led government morally responsible for the murder -- which came not long after another high-profile political assassination in February -- nearly a third of the Constituent Assembly went on strike. Alongside thousands of protestors inspired by the uprising against Egypt's Islamist president Muhammad Morsi, opposition legislators organized a sit-in to demand the assembly's dissolution, camping in front of the parliament building for almost three months.

The sit-in not only halted adoption of the country's new constitution, it also aggravated tensions between the secular bloc's National Salvation Front (NSF) and the ruling troika composed of Ennahda and its two non-Islamist allies, Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic Party (CPR). Viewed by the troika's supporters as would-be putschists who rejected the democratic transition, opposition supporters refused any kind of dialogue with the government. In response, pro-Islamist civilians cracked down on the protestors in the early days of the sit-in, and police forces beat a center-left parliamentarian.

Ultimately, the quest for a peaceful solution prevailed, but not entirely because of the supposed maturity of Tunisia's political parties, who were locked in defiance. Pushed into a corner by four major civil society actors -- the General Labor Union (UGTT), the Union of Industry, Commerce, and Crafts (UTICA, an employers association), the Tunisian Bar Association, and the League for Human Rights -- the troika and the not-so-loyal opposition were compelled to engage in a National Dialogue. International partner states and organizations further facilitated the dialogue by freezing their financial efforts in support of Tunisia's sluggish and erratic democratic transition. Through arduous negotiations presided over by the civil society quartet, the parties finally agreed on a roadmap leading to the adoption of a consensual constitution and the designation of a neutral caretaker cabinet in January. Led by Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, the cabinet has since been tasked with preparing presidential and legislative elections before year's end.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE TROIKA?

By refusing to surrender power to an unelected government and insisting that the constituent assembly remain as is, the troika made the right call. Whether it did so in pursuit of its own interests or the national interest does not matter -- its stubborn perseverance opened the door to the National Dialogue and thus to the preservation of Tunisian democracy.

Yet the dialogue's outcome is somewhat detrimental to the Islamists because the roadmap largely reflects the secular opposition's demands. Approving a mildly secular constitution and relinquishing power to a technocratic government whose main task is to reverse Ennahda's appointments and policies has not been well received by the party's grassroots supporters, who have been criticizing their leadership's "lenient" posture for a while. As the dialogue concluded, this extremely diverse party -- despite appearances -- seemed to lose a bit of the cohesiveness instilled by cofounder Rachid Ghannouchi. Indeed, the hard task of fostering consensus through concessions cast light on Ennahda's divisions and spurred a number of defections.

Even so, Ennahda has consolidated its position on the Tunisian political scene by exhibiting flexibility as well as a firm commitment to democracy. This commitment was demonstrated once again during last week's internal referendum. Yet the party's democratic credentials may not be sufficient to guarantee another outright victory at the ballot box.

Ennahda's internal consultative body will decide whether it puts forward a candidate in the coming presidential election. According to London-based party spokesperson Yusra Ghannouchi, there is strong sentiment in favor of abstaining, though "all options are open." In line with Ennahda's efforts to appear as a proponent of power-sharing, consensus-building, and balance, this position can also be explained by the Islamists' awareness that they cannot win 50 percent of the vote in a national election. Ennahda is

therefore likely to back a non-Islamist candidate, unless former prime minister Hamadi Jebali -- who recently handed in his resignation as the party's secretary-general -- decides to run. Jebali gained the trust of some secularists after engaging in a self-critique following the assassination of left-wing leader Chokri Belaid, so he may be the only Ennahda figure who has what it takes to bridge the gap between his party and non-Islamist voters. After submitting his resignation, he declared that he might run as an independent with the support of "certain political parties."

As for the legislative elections, which will determine the next governing coalition, both Ennahda and the secular parties face the impossibility of winning a majority in parliament. Forced to enter a coalition if they want to set foot in a ministry again, Ennahda's leaders do not seem disturbed by this prospect. After realistically assessing the fragmented balance of power, they have likely refocused on winning the largest minority and the privilege of picking the next prime minister.

Meanwhile, Ennahda's two troika partners are attempting to regain their lost popularity. Ettakatol became an empty shell of itself once supporters began to view it as unassertive and subjugated by Ennahda. The center-left party will struggle to survive in the opposition unless it reconnects with its former troika allies. As for President Moncef Marzouki's CPR, it is regaining some momentum in the south and other parts of the country by pursuing a resource-nationalist campaign. Amid protests over oil wealth distribution in the southern Tataouine province, the CPR, along with various unions and NGOs, has invoked the new constitution's provisions on national sovereignty over natural resources to request a review of the oil and gas exploration permits awarded since Tunisia's independence.

FIFTY SHADES OF SECULARISM

Despite meeting the opposition's demands, the National Dialogue roadmap was not exactly the victory secular parties have claimed. In reality, the negotiations revealed the opposition's state of disunity, which may be detrimental in the coming elections. The National Salvation Front, which could have been a platform for a common electoral strategy, did not survive the dialogue -- it fractured quickly when the time came to choose the head of the transitional cabinet.

Today, each of the so-called "centrist" parties demands the voters' undivided attention, yet the nuances that differentiate them are imperceptible to the average Tunisian. And the Popular Front -- a former extreme-left NSF faction -- has marginalized itself by espousing hardline socialist views, pursuing a fiercely anti-Ennahda agenda, and refusing to join forces with former figures from the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), the party that ruled during the Ben Ali era. Its readily distinguishable identity will certainly translate into some parliamentary seats, but its uncompromising views will likely entail perpetual isolation regardless of who wins.

Among the secular parties, only Nidaa Tounes appears capable of challenging Ennahda. Led by eighty-seven-year-old former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, the party seems to be losing its diversity. Once an eclectic formation of nationalists, left-wing politicians, and old-guard socialists, it has recently seen the rise of senior RCD figures, causing some leftist members to resign. Essebsi's party increasingly represents the ancient order as opposed to the now-less-appealing revolutionary ardor. Going forward, it will be able to count on the RCD's economic leverage and its own regional networks of militants,

comparable in scale only with those of Ennahda.

If the secularists eventually manage to overcome their differences and form a wide pre-electoral alliance, they could gather a majority large enough to govern without Ennahda's help. But if they fail to unite before the ballot, some of them will have to coalesce around Ennahda, which is likely to achieve one of the largest blocs in parliament -- if not the largest once again. The latter scenario is certainly on the minds of several secular parties, including Nidaa Tounes, which has already opened discussions with the Islamist hegemon.

AND THE WINNER WILL BE...

In Tunisia, the sigh of relief that welcomed Jomaa's technocratic cabinet reflected not so much the popular hostility toward Ennahda, but rather exasperation with the contentious politics of a divided society. The ideological boundary between two mutually exclusive identities has cast a shadow on the socioeconomic grievances of an impoverished population.

Thus far, Jomaa has promised to tackle Tunisia's economic difficulties, especially the record-high budget deficit resulting from a 50 percent increase in the government's payroll and a nearly 300 percent hike in subsidies inherited from the previous administration. The prime minister's recent visit to Washington translated into a much-needed loan guarantee for \$500 million, but that will not be sufficient to bridge the funding gap -- a true solution will require austerity measures and structural reforms that have yet to be announced. Nevertheless, raising U.S.-Tunisian relations to the level of a "strategic partnership" focused on education, security, and economic cooperation is important. Among other benefits, it can help rectify the sentiment among many Tunisians that Western support has not matched their country's symbolic and strategic importance, which has been downplayed. Thanks to the resilience exhibited by Tunisian society, the potential of this partnership remains salvageable and deserves greater attention in comparison with other Arab countries that have less enviable democratic credentials. Increased U.S. support is an encouraging signal as Tunisia attempts to get back on the right track by shifting its political focus from ideology to actual reform.

Indeed, the secularist versus Islamist -- even Muslim versus "infidel" -- fault line that defined the 2011 elections is gradually being replaced by social, economic, and security-related concerns as the primary political issues. In particular, any politician who fails to offer concrete solutions for Tunisia's economic difficulties will be sanctioned at the ballot box. Islamists will not be able to win over the population with religious discourse, and the secularists will once again be rejected if they have nothing more to propose than an anti-Islamist agenda. In fact, for many voters whose interest in democratic participation has been worn out by fractious politics, the damage is already done, leaving abstention as the biggest winner in the next elections.

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