

Tunisia's New Government Coalition: Meltdown Prevented?

Elif Zaim



(Tunisian Presidency / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

On 27 February, after a political stalemate of more than four months, the Tunisian parliament approved the new coalition government. This policy outlook examines the period marked by political wrangling after the elections. It then explores the main problems that the new government needs to address, ranging from economy to corruption. Finally, it evaluates the possibilities of contention and cooperation among the coalition members.

Introduction

On 27 February, the Tunisian parliament approved Prime Minister-designate Elyas Fakhfakh's new coalition government by a vote of 129 to 77, ending a four-month political stalemate. The vote was held following intense negotiations with Ennahda, the party with the highest number of seats in the parliament. Ennahda initially announced that it would [oppose](#) the proposed government due to the exclusion of some political parties. This stance was particularly directed towards Nabil Karoui's Heart of Tunisia. Ennahda [stated](#) that the cabinet would not be able to gain the vote of confidence without their support due to the failure of the first government line up. However, it later [reversed course](#) following Fakhfakh's minor revisions in the cabinet.

Fakhfakh has already [stressed](#) that his cabinet will only include members of parties, which he considers in line with the objectives of the Tunisian Revolution, leaving out both Heart of Tunisia and the Free Constitutional Party.

Within this framework, the new government has [32 members](#) from a wide range of political parties including Ennahda, Tahya Tounes, the People's Movement, the Democratic Current, Tunisian Alternative as well as independents. In this new cabinet, Ennahda has been allocated six portfolios.

Constitutionally, this was parliament's second and last chance to appoint a government. Ahead of the critical vote, the President [stated](#) that he would dissolve the parliament and call for new elections if the new cabinet failed to win the confidence vote. However, with the approval of the new coalition government, Tunisia has avoided early elections.

This policy outlook examines the period marked by political wrangling after the elections. It then proceeds with a discussion on the main problems that the new government needs to address, ranging from economy to corruption. Finally, it evaluates the possibilities of contention and cooperation among coalition members.

Low Turnout and Unexpected Results

On 6 October 2019, Tunisians went to the polls to vote in the parliamentary elections. The race for the 217-member assembly took place after the first round of the presidential election, which had been held three weeks earlier. In comparison to the presidential contest, which had a turnout of 49 per cent, the interest in the legislative election was rather [low](#) with a 41 per cent voter turnout.

The election generated a highly [fragmented](#) parliament, as none of the political parties or blocs managed to secure more than 20 per cent of the vote. Ennahda became the



Tunisian President Kais Saied shakes hands with Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh (L) during the swearing in ceremony for the new cabinet in Tunis, Tunisia on February 27, 2020. (Tunisian Presidency / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

leading party, winning 52 seats with 19.5 per cent of the vote. However, the newly founded Heart of Tunisia came second with 38 seats, falling only about 2 per cent behind Ennahda in the popular vote. The following five parties, Democratic Current, Dignity Coalition, Free Destourian Party, People's Movement and Tahya Tounes each gained between 14 and 22 seats.

The results revealed an overall disappointment with the major political parties and their policies; a frustration that echoed the presidential election. In this regard, despite the existence of many [political heavyweights](#), it was political outsiders- law professor [Kais Saied](#) and media magnate [Nabil Karoui](#), who won the first round of the presidential race.

In the runoff, which was held during the week following the parliamentary elections, Saied became the new president of the country with a landslide [victory](#), winning more than 70 per cent of the popular vote. There were many [reasons](#) for Saied's success. However, it can be argued that people's trust in him as a clean figure, who neither held any political office before nor been a part of any political party, was the primary reason that brought him to the presidency.

With Saied's popularity being evident, one of Ennahda's election strategies was to declare [support](#) for him and to appeal to his constituency. Another [feature](#) that stood out during the campaign was the party's re-emphasis on securing the goals of the revolution, as there had been an apparent [disillusionment](#) among its voter base regarding its ability to initiate reforms on key issues such as the economy, corruption and transitional justice.

Stressing Ennahda's role in this regard, during the run-up to the elections the party leader, Rached Ghannouchi, [stated](#)

that 'The only revolutionary force now is Ennahdha, which faces off with a counter-revolutionary rival Qalb Tounes [Heart of Tunisia], which represents the old regime. Both forces are in the lead with no one else in between'.

Heart of Tunisia's campaign was based upon addressing economic grievances. In this sense, the party has benefitted from its leader Nabil Karoui's charitable activities, which he publicised on his private Nessma TV. He created an image of himself as a champion of the poor. Even though Karoui was [arrested](#) in August on charges of money laundering and tax evasion and released days before the runoff, the parliamentary election results have shown that his party's appeal has not been affected.

Attempts to Form a Government

After the election results were officially confirmed, Ennahdha was tasked by President Saïed with forming a government. Under the provision of Tunisia's 2014 constitution, the party with the most seats is required to take on this responsibility.

The party nominated Habib Jemli, an independent, who was Secretary of State at the agriculture ministry between 2011 and 2014, during a period of Ennahdha led governments. After having been appointed as the designated prime minister by the President, Jemli [pledged](#) to choose his cabinet members based on 'their competence and integrity, regardless of their political affiliation'.

While Ennahdha has been the strongest political party in the parliament, it has still needed the support of others to ensure a majority. With this appointment, a series of negotiations have kicked off.

The only party that has agreed to be a part of the coalition government led by Ennahdha was the conservative Dignity Coalition with its 21 seats. The Democratic Current, which has 22 seats, has offered to back the coalition on the [condition](#) of holding the interior and justice ministries.

On the other hand, secularist Tahya Tounes and the leftist People's Movement, having 14 and 16 seats respectively, have both declared that they will stay in opposition. Moreover, Abir Moussi, a former ally of Ben Ali, firmly [stated](#) that her Free Constitutional Party will not be part of any coalition government that includes Ennahdha.

In the meantime, Ennahdha ruled out working with Heart of Tunisia over corruption allegations involving some of its leaders and claiming that the party was representing the old guard. Similarly, Karoui's party also stated that they would not collaborate with Ennahdha.

Following months political bargaining, on 10 January Jemli's list of 43 technocratic ministers was put to a parliamentary vote. When votes were counted, only 72 parliamentarians voted in favour of Jemli's government, falling to garner the required minimum of 109 votes. This was the first time since the 2011 revolution that the parliament did not give a vote of confidence for a cabinet.

In this regard, even though Jemli presented his cabinet as being composed of independents and technocrats, most of the parties [opposed](#) his choices. Some parties put forth the accusation that the list of ministers was composed of Ennahdha allies, and questions were raised as to their competence. Even Ennahdha had reservations about the candidates, claiming that the list was not reflective of their mandate.

The failure to win the vote of confidence left President Saïed to designate a new prime minister. Saïed chose an outsider, Elyas Fakhfakh, the leader of Ettakatol Party, which currently holds no seats in the parliament.

The decision was widely [criticised](#). Many consider Fakhfakh to be the architect of the painful loan agreements that were signed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2013. At that time, he served as the finance minister in the Ennahdha led Troika government following the revolution. However, it has been [argued](#) that the President's appointment is based on Fakhfakh's honest reputation and his pro-revolution and anti-corruption stance.

Challenges Ahead

The new government faces a mammoth task ahead. The country is still struggling to overcome a set of daunting challenges, almost a decade after the uprising.

The economy remains the core problem in this regard. The [unemployment rate](#) is around 15 per cent, which is barely lower than the figure of 18 per cent during the year of the revolution, showing that not much has improved. On the other hand, according to the most recent data, the [inflation rate](#) has dropped to 5.8 per cent, down from 6.7 per cent before the elections. The country's [foreign public debt](#) continues to rise and currently stands at around 80 per cent of GDP.

The coronavirus pandemic is also likely to negatively impact the economy. The tourism sector which makes up about 8-15 per cent of the country's GDP, stands to take the hardest hit. In this regard, Prime Minister Fakhfakh has [stated](#) that the government anticipates a growth rate of only 1 per cent in this year's budget due to the crisis caused by the pandemic. The new government also [announced](#) the allocation of \$850 million as part of the measures to reduce the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic.

That being said, the country plans to relaunch negotiations for a new loan deal with the IMF. A previous agreement was signed with the IMF in December 2016 for a \$2.8 billion loan program. This agreement required the government to adopt a series of [austerity measures](#) such as stopping recruitment and freezing wages in the public sector and imposing price and tax increases, which resulted in [protests](#) across the country. While the present IMF deal ends in April, Tunisia is already in [need](#) of a \$3 billion injection to keep up with its expenditures.

[Corruption](#) stands as another key issue that the government must tackle. In this regard, ongoing corruption must be eradicated, and crimes committed before the revolution also must be addressed.

This goal, however, is difficult to achieve, especially after the enactment of a much-criticised [reconciliation law](#) put in place by the previous coalition. The law gave immunity to the civil servants under the Ben Ali regime who were allegedly involved in corruption but gained no personal benefit.

It is important to note that an extensive [report](#) compiled by the country's Truth and Dignity Commission has not yet been addressed by the government. The commission was established in 2013 to investigate both the corruption-related charges and human rights violations committed after independence.

Finally, security is another top priority that requires the government's attention. Tunisia has been the target of several terror attacks since the revolution. Most [recently](#), two suicide bombers blew themselves near the United States Embassy in Tunis, killing a policeman and injuring several others. The recurring incidents demonstrate the fragility of the security situation in the country, which not only endangers people's lives but also threatens the Tunisian economy.

Cooperation or Contention

Despite months of political wrangling, with changing alliances and continuous negotiations, the last vote of confidence has shown that most of parties are not eager to go to snap elections, reflecting their ambivalence regarding their popularity with voters.

Even though new parties have emerged on the political scene, such as Heart of Tunisia and the Free Constitutional Party, none of the established parties managed to increase their share of the vote. Tunisians have been largely disappointed with the existing class of politicians. According to analyst Mariem Masmoudi "While many noteworthy political steps have been made to cement the democratic tran-

sition, corruption, unemployment, and economic stagnation remain at the forefront of people's minds. Being free is all well and good until basic necessities make life difficult, and it's at that point and beyond that people's patience began to wear thin and change was (rightly) demanded."

In this regard, secularist parties were among the losers. For example, Nidaa Tounes, which was the winning party in the previous elections with 86 seats, has had their seat count reduced to 3 as a result of intra-party disputes and allying with Ennahda in the previous coalition government. It can be argued that their votes have been split between Heart of Tunisia and the Free Constitutional Party.

Despite having the highest number of seats in parliament, Ennahda has also experienced a gradual decline in its popularity. While the party had 89 seats in 2011, and 69 seats in 2014, in the most recent election it secured only 52 seats. That being said, while the Tunisian political scene has seen several parties almost wiped out from one election to the other, Ennahda still remains as a key player. However, according to Youssef Cherif, Deputy Director of Columbia Global Centers, "The party isn't able to gain new constituencies, and as time goes by, it will lose its precedence, especially if a serious competitor emerges."

Sarah Yerkes, a fellow in Carnegie's Middle East Program, argues that the party has already lost seats to its competitors: "One sign of the public's loss of confidence in Ennahda is the success of Dignity Coalition, with 21 seats – the fourth largest party. They were able to tap into the frustration of many Nahdawis that the party was shifting too much towards the centre and was no longer a true Islamist party, something the party itself acknowledges. While this may help Ennahda attract more centrist voters, it has also alienated much of their base, who is now seeking an alternative."

According to Yerkes, "This election was really a rejection of the status quo and traditional politics."

Moreover, since the revolution, coalition governments have been a prominent feature of Tunisian politics. Therefore, areas of contention or cooperation among different political parties making up the government have been a part of the debate. The situation now is no different. As the cabinet is composed of various parties, there are divergent opinions as to whether the coalition can succeed in providing solutions to the problems that the country faces.

Sharan Grewal, a research fellow at Brookings Institution, [argues](#) that "Fakhfakh's coalition will be more ideologically coherent than the 2015 Ennahda-Nidaa Tounes alliance, in the sense that these parties will be primarily pro-revolution and anti-corruption. That said, there is little agreement on the major economic reforms - Tahya Tounes and Achaab publicly disagreed on whether to permit the privatisation of state-owned enterprises."



People attend an unemployment protest as they gather to mark the 8th anniversary of the revolution at Bouazizi Square in Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia on December 17, 2018. (Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

However, some experts think that the cabinet will struggle to make joint decisions not only with regards to the economy, but also with regards to corruption. According to Yerkes, "The coalition is incredibly fragmented with the largest party, Ennahda, only have around a quarter of the seats. The other parties in the coalition represent a wide range of interests, so it is unlikely they will be able to agree on some of the riskier measures needed to tackle the economic challenges such as streamlining the bureaucracy and public service reform writ large. On corruption, they will also likely face dissent amongst the various parties and interests in the government. Ennahda and Tahya Tounes, for example, are not likely to agree on the correct path towards addressing corruption."

Cherif also affirms the possibilities of contention: "The government itself has different ideological tendencies inside it, that go from leftist pan-Arabism to liberal Westernism. Agreeing on issues such as the relationships with the EU or future grants from the IMF, for instance, will be difficult. It will prove difficult for the coalition to act normally." In this case, the government may avoid taking any bold actions, preferring to focus on issues upon which the coalition partners can agree. Therefore, we may expect to see another four years in which the government will seek palliative solutions without addressing the actual core problems, leading to an increased sense of frustration among an already frustrated electorate.

Aside from the endemic challenges, the most urgent task that the new government faces now is how to deal with the coronavirus crisis. In this regard, Masmoudi points out the possible effects of the coronavirus on the new government: "What I think is interesting now is to see how this global pandemic will affect the relationships between the ministers, the PM, the coalition parties, and of course the presidency. This can either be a time where cooperative measures in pursuit of a common goal are cemented or where deep conflicts over resource allocation, for instance, can preclude the government from making necessary strides long after the pandemic is over."

Thus, it can be argued that any decision taken during this crucial period in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus and minimize its socioeconomic impacts will leave a lasting mark on the future of the coalition.

On the other hand, it is important to point that not only is the coalition ideologically diverse, but so is the opposition. Despite the recent [resignations](#) of 11 parliamentarians over dissatisfaction with governance and management within the party, Heart of Tunisia remains the largest opposition party with 27 seats. It is followed by the conservative Dignity Coalition with 21 seats and Free Constitutional Party with 17 seats.

Max Gallien, a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, [states](#) that "The unity of the government is not the only interesting question; it will also be interesting to watch how oppositional actors are able to position themselves vis-a-vis the government and try to gain traction as a genuine programmatic alternative, something that many parties in the past have struggled with."

That being said, unlike in the previous term with the national unity government, when almost 80 per cent of the parliament was composed of Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda members in a [grand consensus](#), this time, an actual opposition exists in the parliament. Even though the current opposition parties may have different outlooks and policies, they may provide a check and balance mechanism on the ruling coalition. This, in turn, could persuade coalition members to set aside their differences.

On the other hand, we may also see coalition members aligning with parties in the opposition over certain proposals. Most recently, Ennahda presented an [amendment](#) to the electoral law, which would introduce a 5 per cent threshold for the parliamentary elections. While many parties are wary of a bill that might affect them negatively in the upcoming elections, Ennahda is expected to approach parties in the opposition such as Heart of Tunisia and the Dignity Coalition in an effort to pass the law. If the law is passed, this would mean fewer parties would be represented in the parliament, and this may lead to stronger coalition governments.

Covid-19 has thrown a spanner in the works for the new government. It remains to be seen whether the coalition will deal with this pandemic and its socioeconomic effects successfully. This most recent challenge joins a long queue of entrenched predicaments. Analysts agree upon one thing, though. If there are no significant improvements in the challenges presented above, we will continue to see the decline of the established political parties and the emergence of new players.