



*Nidaa Tounes: Youssef Chahed sides with the Islamists of Ennahda:*

On the 24th of September, Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes' founder and current Tunisian President, announced on television that disagreements with Ennahda pushed him to interrupt the coalition with the self-defined "Muslim democrat" party. The President and his allies, including his aspiring son Hafedh who acts as Nidaa Tounes' executive director, have increasingly been alarmed by the fulgurant rise of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, also from the same party. Once a protégé of Essebsi, Chahed has turned into a political force of his own, gaining independence and power, which particularly caused the ire of Hafedh Essebsi who suspended him from the party in mid-September. In parliament, this internal crisis has led to a reshuffling of cards with some Nidaa Tounes MPs joining the newly created pro-Chahed National Coalition bloc, which now holds a majority in parliament with Ennahda. In other words, this now means that the Prime Minister has decided to side with the Islamists against his own party, purportedly for the sake of political stability, or as some would rather see, as a desperate attempt to maintain power.

Zeineb Ben Yahmed, an analyst from Carnegie Endowment, told Castlereagh Associates that the current split is an attempt by Nidaa Tounes to regain its anti-Islamist and popular credentials after years of being associated with Ennahda and austerity measures. By creating the Commission for Equality and Individual Liberties (COLIBE) and supporting its liberal legislative proposals, it is highly likely that Essebsi is seeking to bolster his image as a progressive politician ahead of the elections to appeal to secular voters, some who have become disenchanted following his alliance with the Islamists of Ennahda. Additionally, the attacks made by Hafedh Essebsi against Chahed's economic platform are also likely to help his father and party, to appear as a movement opposing the status-quo, rather than one actively taking part in it. Nearly six months before political campaigning ahead of the December 2019 General Elections, the recent moves by Essebsi are likely to give Nidaa Tounes a political identity that the party has been lacking and will probably lead to a reshuffling of political alliances in the country.

*Painful economic reforms likely to trail due to approaching elections:*

Whilst Ennahda's continued support of political stability is likely to maintain Chahed as Prime Minister until the next elections, the current political reshuffling has raised policy continuity risks as the Prime Minister's position becomes less tenable ahead of elections due to the unpopular effects of his policies. Since 2016, Chahed has followed, to the letter, reforms proposed by the International



Monetary Fund which seek to tackle Tunisia's chronic economic problems, especially its oversized and inefficient public sector. Although the reforms are achieving a modest economic recovery as growth is expected to reach 2.3% in 2018, 2.8% in 2019 and 3.4% in 2020, the country still suffers from macroeconomic imbalances, especially in relation to inflation and high unemployment. Consumer Index Prices are expected to increase by 8.1% in 2018 and 7.5% in 2019, which is extremely high considering that inflation was only around 3.7% in 2016 and is mainly explained by the Dinar's strong devaluation. The government has also failed to decrease unemployment and poverty rates as the percentage of unemployed people has hovered around 15% for quite a while, whilst the percentage of people living with less than \$3.2/day in 2011 purchasing power parity lingers around 8.7% of the population. Due to the IMF's loan of nearly \$3 billion, the country's debt has reached 70.4% of Gross Domestic Product in 2018 compared to 54.8% in 2015. This means that the government is likely to continue cutting down on public expenses.

Put it mildly, the Prime Minister's tasks are arduous, and his critiques are plenty. In addition to his rivalry with the Essebsi camp, Chahed has increasingly become the target of powerful actors within Tunisian civil society. One of these actors is the General Labour Union which fervently opposes the Prime Minister's privatisation plans, accusing him of selling profitable state companies to tackle the deficit, instead of making them more efficient. As a result, general strikes are to be held on the 24th of October and the 22nd of November, reminding us that discontent is generalised and that the country experienced a wave of protests in January of this year. In other words, Tunisians are widely unsupportive of austerity measures as they have not brought significant change to their livelihoods. This means that the more time approaches general elections, the more opposition the Prime Minister face, and the less able he might be to continue his set of painful but necessary reforms for the economy.

#### *Political change and persistent economic discontent: a recipe for polarisation?*

According to many commentators, the coalition between secularists and Ennahda has prevented Tunisia from undergoing the same process of polarisation that other countries experienced after the Arab Spring. Extolling political stability over reforms that would satisfy the demands of revolutionaries, consensual politics has had the effect that major political parties like Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes have lost their appeal to their traditional base as they have diluted their identity for the sake of co-governance. This has meant that according to a survey conducted by Afrobarometer, 81% of Tunisians do "not feel close to any political party". Now that elections are approaching, the harms



of consensual politics are made clearer and parties seek to differentiate themselves, as seen with Nidaa Tounes' pull out from the coalition and its support of the heritage law that directly contradicted Ennahda's Islamic standpoint. This development has already led to internal fissures in Nidaa Tounes that might also take place in Ennahda, a party which has incrementally diluted its Islamic credentials to remain in power, but lost a number of its supporters in the process. These supporters might therefore turn towards smaller parties that are more determined to defend "Islamic values" and counter the relatively progressive agenda pursued by the coalition government.

*Projections:*

Tunisia's political landscape is experiencing a reshuffling of cards a year ahead of the general elections. The projections below aim at understanding the course that Tunisian politics are likely to take in the coming months:

Beji Caid Essebsi will probably continue to stress Nidaa Tounes' image as a progressive and anti-Islamist counter to Ennahda. Yet, as long as the party is viewed as a joint personalistic venture between Essebsi father and son, it is highly unlikely that Nidaa Tounes could experience its previous electoral victories again. The recent resignation of MPs from the party is indicative of the internal crisis within Nidaa Tounes, and this crisis could put enough pressure on the executive director to resign in the future so as to give the party a new direction and democratic culture.

Although still ideologically aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda is likely to continue its normalisation policy whereby it dilutes its Islamist credentials to continue holding power and to develop itself as a durable political party with a long-term vision akin to Turkey's AKP. Yet, Ennahda might soon suffer the same plight as Nidaa Tounes, namely a loss of identity and therefore a loss of its traditional power base.

Estranged from his own party and in a fragile alliance with Ennahda, the ambitious Prime minister will find it difficult to craft a political platform on which to campaign for the presidency. His determination to implement painful economic measures at a time of increasing inflation and stagnant unemployment and poverty, are likely to make him an easy target for other politicians and to turn him into an unpopular figure among Tunisians.