



The 2020 Tunisian Government and Covid-19: The Hardest of Onsets?

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INTRODUCTION

Tunisia has recently managed to form a government, following months of discord between the country's different political stakeholders. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is presenting the newly formed government with unprecedented challenges, exacerbating entrenched geographical and socio-economic inequalities.

On the 26th February 2020, the Tunisian parliament approved the composition of a new government, more than four months after the country's legislative and presidential elections.¹

The process was hard and lengthy, having failed once before when the previously designated figure to form a government, Habib Jemli, failed to secure the parliament's confidence vote.² Jemli was selected by Ennahdha, the Islamist party that won the latest legislative elections, following the procedure dictated by the 2014 constitution³.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Post-2011 Tunisia's difficulties to form governments could prominently be explained by its complex electoral system
- The Tunisian government has mobilized great financial resources to alleviate the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 yet many Tunisians remain excluded from the aids' scope
- Social dissatisfaction, already very much present in the country pre-COVID, is growing as the lockdown is maintained

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/02/27/la-tunisie-se-dote-enfin-d-un-gouvernement-plus-de-quatre-mois-apres-les-legislatives_6031025_3212.html

² <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/879680/politique/tunisie-a-lombre->

[dennahdha-habib-jemli-a-echoue-a-obtenir-la-confiance-des-deputes/](https://www.legislation.tn/sites/default/files/news/constitution-b-a-t.pdf)
³ <http://www.legislation.tn/sites/default/files/news/constitution-b-a-t.pdf>

⁴Consequently, if the victorious party of the election fails to form a government, it is up to the President of the Republic, in consultation with parties represented in the parliament, to designate a new head of government.

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The 20th January 2020, Kais Saied designated Elyes Fakhfekh to form a government. Fakhfekh is a former minister of tourism, then finance, in the troika government, and a presidential candidate having obtained only 0.34% in the October 2019 elections.⁸ It should be noted the designation of Fakhfekh in itself was controversial as he was not amongst the first names suggested by the victorious political parties. Notably, figures like Fadhel Abdelkefi, Hakim Ben Hammouda or Ridha Ben Mosbah gathered a larger political consensus.⁹ Yet, it is believed the socio-democratic line of Fakhfekh as well as his relative remoteness of the political scene were major factors in President Saied's designation.

A Complex Post-2011 Electoral System

The main cause of the country's difficulties to constitute a viable government is the electoral system itself. Post-2011, Tunisia wanted to avoid a return to the hegemony, and authoritarian risk, of a presidential system. It thus formed a hybrid semi-parliamentarian system, itself the product of complex negotiations between political parties from different ends of the ideological spectrum. Hence, the current electoral

system does not permit the emergence of a strong parliamentary majority.¹⁰ Additionally, the post-2014 political scene lacks strong, stable political parties. With the fall of Nidaa Tounes, the former major secular party, the continual weakening of Ennahdha, and the dispersion and internal frictions in the majority of political entities, the 2019 legislative elections resulted in a crumbled parliament¹¹. To measure the extent of this phenomenon, the two victorious political parties, Ennahdha and Kaleb Tounes, united could not gather the 109 votes necessary for the government's confidence vote.¹²

Parallely, the only political figure holding a large popular legitimacy is president Kais Saied, with over three million votes¹³, more than any other democratically elected president in the country's history. However, Saied does not have a political party and lacks constitutional prerogatives, as the president's role is mainly linked to defense and foreign affairs. Hence, although he partially managed to impose Fakhfekh as a Head of Government, Saied lacks the tools as to hold leverage within the current political scene.

As a result, it took months to form a government that could have a chance to pass the parliamentary vote. Negotiations had to take place with every single partition represented, and parties-imposed vetoes on others. Most notably, Kaleb Tounes, the newly emerged party whose leader Nabil Karoui was Kais Saied's opponent in the second round of presidential elections, was excluded from the negotiations by Elyes Fakhfekh. Kaleb Tounes arrived second in the legislative elections and is not represented in the current government, although parties that gathered less votes are.¹⁴

The Ramifications of the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 sanitary crisis utterly disrupted any prospective the newly formed Tunisian government had for its mandate. The suspension of all but vital

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/879680/politique/tunisie-a-lombre-dennahdha-habib-jemli-a-echoue-a-obtenir-la-confiance-des-deputes/>

⁶ <http://www.legislation.tn/sites/default/files/news/constitution-b-a-t.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/884217/politique/designation-delyes-fakhfekh-a-la-tete-du-gouvernement-le-pari-risque-de-kais-saied/>

⁹ <http://www.webdo.tn/2020/01/19/les-trois-candidats-a-la-kasbah-recus-par-kais-saied/>

¹⁰ Gobe, É., 2016. Système électoral et révolution : la voie tunisienne. *Pouvoirs*, 156(1), p.71.

¹¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/10/10/legislatives-en-tunisie-le-parti-d-inspiration-islamiste-ennahdha-en-tete-mais-loin-de-la-majorite_6014883_3210.html

¹² https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/10/10/legislatives-en-tunisie-le-parti-d-inspiration-islamiste-ennahdha-en-tete-mais-loin-de-la-majorite_6014883_3210.html

¹³ <https://www.espacemanager.com/plus-de-3-millions-delecteurs-ont-vote-kais-saied.html>

¹⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/02/20/en-tunisie-bras-de-fer-au-sommet-autour-de-la-formation-d-un-gouvernement_6030218_3212.html

economic activities as well as the prohibition of intra-governorate travelling, exacerbated already-entrenched socio-economic inequalities in the country. Although a minority of Tunisians could turn to teleworking, the significant portion of day workers were suddenly exposed to extreme precarity.¹⁵

Initially, announced measures were of 96 million euros for workers in technical unemployment, 48 million euros for the most precarious social classes, and the postponement of bank credits' reimbursement for employees earning less than 1000 dinars (319 euros).¹⁶ Later on, a total of 800 million euros were mobilized to attempt reducing the impact of the crisis.¹⁷ However, these measures do not concerned the millions of Tunisians relying on the informal sector, estimated at more than half of the country's economy.¹⁸

In parallel, the European Union (EU) pledged an immediate support of 250 million euros to help the country fight COVID-19 and its socioeconomic consequences.¹⁹ The EU will also reinforce its contribution to Tunisia's health sector by tripling its donations, from 20 million euros for thirteen governorates to 60 million euros for all twenty-four.²⁰ Although the current sanitary crisis seems to have suspended political frictions, the expected socio-economic crisis in preparation will likely worsen them.

For the moment, the parliament has been cooperative with the executive power, having delegated the prerogative of decree-laws to Fakhfekh's government for a maximum of two months, in accordance with article 70 of the constitution.²¹ Head of Government Fakhfekh announced on Sunday 19th April the extension of the total lockdown until May 3rd.²²

Starting from then, the government announced a gradual deconfinement process will take place, and economic activities will resume progressively.²³ However, this optimistic take depends on the

propagation's evolution and, as for the rest of the world, no return to normal is happening any time soon. Although Tunisia has been operating a higher number of tests than its neighbors²⁴, they remain insufficient as to measure the reality of the propagation in the country. Most notably, Nissaf Ben Alaya, head of the national observatory for new and emerging diseases (ONMNE), has warned the past days' positive results cannot indicate the curve is flattening.²⁵

In all cases, Tunisia's challenges will most likely increase when the crisis is tamed. It is still unsure how the population will respond in case of a protracted lockdown. Some protests have already occurred in the country's most precarious neighborhoods, notably due to the inequality of staple foods' distribution and the speculation on basic commodities²⁶.

Other protesters called for the government to allow them to resume work.²⁷ These protests are indicative of the deep fracture the country has been witnessing since years, exacerbated by the post-2011 economic crisis. Most notably, geographic inequalities between coastal towns and interior governorates are at the forefront of the current crisis. In addition to food supplied being more available in the former, intensive care units are disproportionately distributed across the territory.²⁸

The newly formed Tunisian government is undoubtedly facing one of the hardest challenges of its mandate, having to balance a growing pandemic with increasing socio-economic dissatisfaction. The COVID-19 crisis should, more than ever, push authorities to review the country's economic and development model, that has been in a stalemate for decades.

¹⁵ https://orientxxi.info/magazine/tunisie-qui-paie-le-prix-du-coronavirus,3784?fbclid=IwAR31mzdZuaBt-_7_kPRLe_vDxzFiD_dhyVAc96d2d6Ovi7H3vZhZ11BP2QY

¹⁶ https://orientxxi.info/magazine/tunisie-qui-paie-le-prix-du-coronavirus,3784?fbclid=IwAR31mzdZuaBt-_7_kPRLe_vDxzFiD_dhyVAc96d2d6Ovi7H3vZhZ11BP2QY

¹⁷ <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200322-tunisie-mesures-soutien-economie-covid-coronavirus>

¹⁸ https://orientxxi.info/magazine/tunisie-qui-paie-le-prix-du-coronavirus,3784?fbclid=IwAR31mzdZuaBt-_7_kPRLe_vDxzFiD_dhyVAc96d2d6Ovi7H3vZhZ11BP2QY

¹⁹ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/tunisia/76678/union-europ%C3%A9enne-appuie-les-efforts-de-la-tunisie-pour-lutter-contre-le-covid-19_en

²⁰ <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1212397/coronavirus-lue-fait-un-don-de-250-millions-deuros-a-la-tunisie.html>

²¹ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/921941/politique/coronavirus-en-tunisie->

<lassemblee-accorde-de-nouvelles-prerogatives-au-chef-du-gouvernement/>

²² <https://www.realites.com.tn/2020/04/elyes-fakhfakh-apres-le-deconfinement-partiel-de-nouveaux-cas-seront-probablement-enregistres/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ <https://www.financialafrik.com/2020/04/18/la-tunisie-le-maroc-et-lalgerie-reconduisent-le-confinement/>

²⁵ <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2020/04/20/nissaf-ben-alaya-les-cas-confirmes-de-covid-19-ont-diminue-car-les-derniers-tests-ont-essentielle-ment-vise-les-soignants/>

²⁶ https://orientxxi.info/magazine/tunisie-qui-paie-le-prix-du-coronavirus,3784?fbclid=IwAR31mzdZuaBt-_7_kPRLe_vDxzFiD_dhyVAc96d2d6Ovi7H3vZhZ11BP2QY

²⁷ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/01/en-tunisie-le-confinement-prolonge-de-quinze-jours-malgre-des-manifestations_6035176_3212.html

²⁸ <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2020/03/23/tunisie-covid-19-statistiques-predictions/>

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT:

- Start negotiating a moratorium regarding the external debt repayment with foreign partners and initiate an audit on current and future projects. Financing made available due to the suspension of debt payments should be reallocated to health and social sectors, in order to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on low-income and vulnerable groups.
- Initiate reform measures to the benefit of the agricultural sector as to ensure food self-sufficiency, notably through remediating distribution networks, limit exports and rationalizing basic commodities.
- Support the social security system through expanding the contribution base to the informal sector's workers

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