

After A Long Election Season, is Tunisia Back on the Revolutionary Path or is it Entering a Period of Uncertainty?

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Abstract: Tunisia experienced a long electoral season that began in late August and ended in mid-October 2019. The elections not only resulted in the revamp of state institutions, but also shook the country and sent it into a completely different stage. This paper aims to touch on the prospects of the experience of the Tunisian democratic transition through a discussion of several elements, the most important of which are; the new parliament map, the most important messages of the electoral process, challenges moving forward, and different possible outcomes. The paper concludes that Tunisia is now in a situation open to all possibilities of success and failure, but success could prevail despite all difficulties.

The Parliament Map: Components and Potential Challenges

The General Scene

Some of the influential forces of the previous parliament are absent today, especially Nida' Tunis (Call for Tunisia) and the Popular Front, while major electoral blocs (Conservatives vs. Modernist) were able to preserve their weight and balance. The current seats of the Ennahda together with the Dignity Coalition, the Mercy Party and some independents are roughly equal to the number of Ennahda seats in the 2011 elections, while the seats of the Heart of Tunisia Party, the Free Destourian (constitutional) Party, the Tahya Tunisia (long live Tunisia) Party, the Project Party, the Alternative Party and the Nida' Tunis taken together are relatively equal to the number of seats won by the Nida' Tunis in the 2014 elections.

The electoral outcome of the Popular Front and the Path Party is likely to indicate the end of the road for a left which has not been able to cope with major developments in the country. These outcomes would have been harsher if an electoral law that imposes a high threshold were to be adopted, which is where the country is expected to head. It

seems that the traditional elector of the left has directed his/her vote to the Democratic Current or the People's Movement.

From this point of view, this has been a kind of redeployment within each political family in Tunisia, indicating a sub-mobility within a broader and more comprehensive movement that requires independent analysis.

More importantly, there is no longer an "electoral safety zone" that could be preserved by this or that party. No party can claim to be the only legitimate representative of the conservative or modernist class, nor even to be the senior in each of these families. Thus, it may be necessary to ask a fundamental question: Does the concept of a political family still have the explanatory power of what is happening on the ground?

In terms of numbers and influence, the parliament can be considered a mosaic of seven forces (Ennahda, the Heart of Tunisia Party, the Democratic Current, the Coalition of Dignity, the Free Destourian Party, the People's Movement, Tahya Tunisia Party) and several others.

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The Details of The Scene

Ennahda Movement (52 out of 217 parliamentary seats)

It is the only party remaining from the pre-2011 system and it is the party with the least losses among the post-revolutionary parties, thanks to its main power resources, as it is a political expression of a social reality, supported by experiences of common struggle, intellectual grounds, organizational capacity, and a kinetic culture which is the closest to the culture of group collaboration rather than the stipulations of parties, and its ability to adapt.

However, these characteristics are currently subject to the test of governance. Ennahda is now in front of an identity challenge whether to be a political party with a particular footprint or to be an ordinary political party. Moreover, for eight years now, the electoral base of the Ennahda has been on a steady decline.

And it is no wonder in a democratic situation that the electoral base of parties shrink. The electorate is naturally demanding and eager for change and their criterion is the fulfillment of promises and the maintaining of a certain image. The impression in politics is the truth. That's why democracies' electoral base is exposed to expansions and contractions just like an accordion, but Ennahda's challenge in recent years goes beyond judging its performance and its achieved results. It affects the image or the identity of the movement. The biggest obstacle for Ennahda since the revolution, similarly to all other resistance movements, has been the transition from the space of resistance and protest to the space of construction; how to balance between the policy of integration and the duty of change, how to balance between the state and the revolution, how to adapt its revolution to the state and governance, how to preserve its character, principles and loyalty to its electoral base with all the constraints of being in a country that does not have much in terms of margins of action and in a tense regional context and a frightened international context exacerbated by the Islamist reference?

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The shrinking of the electoral base reflects its judgement after voting for Ennahda in the aftermath of the revolution for it to undertake changes in the state, only to result in the party surrendering to the influence of the state, and losing its zeal for change along with its relationship with its grassroots. This is alarming, not to mention the possibility of a crisis happening inside the movement itself, especially considering the gap between Ennahda's popular base and its leadership.

The outcome of the elections in this context is booby-trapped, but it is another chance for Ennahda to rectify its situation, reposition itself appropriately, and improve its performance even when having limited margins for manoeuvre. It is an opportunity to pay attention to the poor conditions of the country and its people and to resume thinking in a different way.

2. Heart of Tunisia Party (38 seats)

It is a new political display among others that Tunisia has witnessed especially after the 2014 elections. This party lacks the needed elements for internal coexistence while its elements of stability and continuity are strongly tied to the financial presence of its founder. Therefore, after the defeat of Nabil al-Qarawi in the presidential elections and the prospect of the endless prosecutions that he might face now, his bloc will be bleeding and most of its members will seek

new positioning among the Tahya Tunis Party, the Constitutional Party, or among the independents. Tahya Tunis is the preferred destination, especially since Youssef Chahed is seeking to strengthen his position in the negotiations over the formation of the new government.

3. The Democratic Current (22 seats)

It is an entity that has been investing for years in its image initially as a youth party and has since benefited from the mistakes of the former president Moncef Marzouki, Ennahda's hesitation, the stalemate of the Popular Front, and the reasonable results it was able to gain during the municipal elections in May 2018. However, because of its stance on the Equality of Inheritance draft law, it lost part of its conservative base and, in turn, gained part of an electoral base that favors principles and rejects concessions for electoral interests. It has also benefited from the electoral law.

However, it is divided by disparities between one side that is pushing for participation in the new government while another is seeking to differentiate itself from Ennahda which is part of the "system", in preparation for a possible snap election. Its leaders made various proposals, such as choosing the opposition or requiring the ministries of interior, justice, and administrative reform. These proposals may be part of a negotiation

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strategy that demands the maximum to get the least, or to hold Ennahda responsible for them not joining the government, or to be part of the guarantees provided for success in the anti-corruption file that the party regards as its commercial origin, point of excellence, and the core of its existence.

Therefore, the stance of the Democratic Current will depend on the outcome of this internal conflict and the way Ennahda will deal with it. It will also depend on the different parties in the coalition: the different affiliations, the personality of the prime minister, and the names within the government structure.

4. The Dignity Coalition (21 seats)

It is a new coalition formed prior to the elections and has not solidified itself yet. It is divided internally by disparities over its foundational terms, its management and institutionalization. Moreover, some of its members may constitute an embarrassment for the governmental coalition because of previous stances opposing the media, the Labor Union, and some influential international actors.

5. The Free Destourian Party (17 seats)

It is a rally that gathers all extremist remnants of the former Destourian Party that existed before the revolution. Its presence and prevalence depended on its opposition to Ennahda and its electoral campaign benefited from the suspicions related to the Heart of Tunisia Party and its leader's ability to attract voters. This party refuses to be present in a government-led or co-opted by Ennahda. Actually, the refusal of partnering with the Free Destourian Party comes not only from Ennahda, but from all parties that potentially will join the government coalition.

6. The People's Movement (16 seats)

It is an Arab Nationalist Nasserist-oriented Movement which has benefited substantially from the electoral law. Its position regarding the alliance with Ennahda is blurry due to the historical conflicts between Islamists and Arab nationalists and because of the assassination of one of its former leaders and founders, Mohammed Brahmi, during the Troika government. Thus, the possibility of a collation with Ennahda will be affected by the movement's handling of this case as well as the affiliation and personality of the prime minister and the assigned portfolios.

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7. Tahya Tunisia (14 seats)

It is the party of the Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, which was formed last March. Chahed's results in the presidential elections were shocking to the party's leadership who benefited from state resources and worked to keep the media in its favor. The party's results in the parliamentary elections were expected after its defeat in the presidential elections.

The party will be counting on attracting some members of the Heart of Tunisia Party and may resort to building itself on new foundations in preparation for a snap elections or normal benefits. The party will most likely seek to eliminate the corrupt faces of the old system and to attract the liberal democratic center (Mehdi Jomaa, Afek Tounes (Tunisia's prospects)) and the social center (the Republican Party, the Democratic Forum).

8. The rest of the parliamentary scene (37 seats)

a. Party Lists (26 seats): Some of them have an opposing attitude towards Ennahda or any alliance with it. Some others could converge and perhaps even come to terms with Tahya Tunisia, and others could support a government headed by Ennahda.

b. Independent lists (11 seats): They have diverse stances, personalities, and political alliances. However, some of them may support a government headed by Ennahda.

Lessons and messages of the Election Process

A Turning Point

It is clear that the 2019 elections marked an important turning point in the modern history of Tunisia. It is actually a sort of revolt done by groups and districts, a recall of the initiative, and an assertion that the Tunisian revolution was not a lie or a closed parenthesis. Actually, the Tunisian compass has not diverted since autumn 2010 from its values nor objectives, which are freedom, dignity, justice, and good governance and all the elections that took place after the revolution were for the purpose of searching for the political levers of these hopes and demands. And on every occasion, the electoral body sends warning messages to the entire ruling elite including parties, organizations, and media, their rulers and opponents, by protesting in the streets, by boycotting the electoral process, or by seeking alternatives from outside the ruling and opposition parties as was the case in the municipal elections on May 6, 2018.

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The regime of the tyrannical state exhausted its purposes in December 2010, exhausting all attempts at peaceful reform through social protest and political resistance. That's why people resorted to taking the fights to the streets and started the revolution. After the revolution, street protests never stopped, especially by youth and disadvantaged groups, as a way to deliver warnings to the new regime. These warnings were also delivered through the boycotting of the political and electoral process. Unfortunately, the ruling regime did not have the intelligence or willingness to listen or change. Thus, it wasn't until fall of 2019 that ballot boxes replaced the street protests of December 2010, so perhaps it is the last chance for elections to prove their worth and credibility.

What is striking is the change that happened in the meaning of the "system" in the Tunisian context: before the May 2018 elections, the system referred to the forces and the network of financial, administrative, and political interests associated with the pre-January 2011 context. It seems that today it means the entire ruling elite, in its partisan, civic, media, academic and cultural terms, whether in power or the opposition, those who became more influential before the revolution or were influential afterwards, and thus now we have an old system divided vertically and horizontally.

Breakup or redistribution

But do the election results mean that this system – before-wards and afterwards - has collapsed or shaken?

We must be cautious of issuing categorical judgments. The compass of the voters has been clear in all three stages of the last presidential and parliamentary elections, and we can determine the reasoning behind that by retrieving the expectations that have not yet gotten enough attention and were not taken as reference for anyone's work. Observers won't find difficulties in dismantling the image of Qais Said, which symbolizes rebellion, unconventionality, and all forms of revolution

The revolution in its first round in the winter of 2011 was a revolution against social “abase”, and now it is a revolution against moral and symbolic “abase”

against financial and media domestication, as well as a revolution on the usual hierarchical paths in political construction. Politics here - for Qais Said - are built from the bottom up in a participatory and horizontal manner. It is a revolution on the symbolic “abase” and it symbolizes Palestine and the issues of emancipation, which brings the values back to politics. The revolution in its first round in the winter of 2011 was a revolution against social “abase”, and now it is a revolution against moral and symbolic “abase”.

In contrast, the image of Nabil al-Qarawi seems more difficult to be analyzed. The superficial explanation links it to the treatment of poverty and hunger, and it favors, consciously or unconsciously, voters and districts insultingly. No one would ever envision that millions of voters (more than a quarter of the electorate) would vote for a thief or a Mafioso. The picture is more complicated than it seems. Nabil al-Qarawi has filled, what people believed to be the vacuum left by the state and pointed to the absence of social merit in the discourse and the concerns of politicians which are occupied by battles far from the immediate issues of citizens.

However, the two candidates have a common denominator. Both - in the imagination of the people - come from outside the ruling system, symbolizing some dimension of social being and some dimensions of the revolution, and from this angle the passage of al-Qarawi and

Said to the second round of the presidential elections is a defeat for the system and the victory of Said after he was able to mobilize more than a million additional voters who did not participate in the parliamentary elections - a pledge of allegiance and a vicious defeat for the system. But the system is deeper than its political surface, is not subject to electoral redistribution and it takes a long time to change course. It will organize its resistance as usual and will seek a new political redeployment.

The general mood today is similar to that of March 2011, and it re-raises the question of state re-building. However, this time with the presence of a president without a party or institutional leverage, that is without much power, and with a leading party without a clear parliamentary majority brought by the voters in search for stability and as an adjustment of the radical message delivered by the voters during the first round of the election. The elections in Tunisia were caught between the continuation of the uprising in the face of the regime, producing a highly divided parliament without a backbone, and the balancing of the punishment to produce a stable parliament to make the country governable.

The parliamentary elections is the favoring of the second possibility, where the approach of punishment continued, and parties and parliamentarian blocs (Nidaa and the Popular Front) declined and others fell dramatically

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(the Alternative Party and the Prospects Party); but with a map that could theoretically produce a stable government. The larger mandate of Ennahda continued as if it were a possible sign of safety.

Ennahda and The Formula of Integration and Change

The paradox of Ennahda lies in it being the largest resistance party that stepped forward after the revolution to fill the leadership vacuum, and became a ruling party after it was a resistance movement. Throughout this journey, Ennahda had to undergo a profound review of its culture of activism, and the kind of relationship it has with the state and society without losing its identity associated with the struggle. It had to also conduct a major normalization process without abandoning its distinctive attribute as an agent of change as dictated by its historical mission and the nature of the post-revolutionary phase.

In these elections, the people decided that Ennahda is no longer - in the imagination of the electorate – an agent of change. Rather, Ennahda was assimilated by the state institutions and it practically prioritized the motives for inclusion over the duty to change. This critique is justified.

There have been extensive discussions at the core of Ennahda in the last four years regarding the management of the political relations with the governing partner and the Presidency of the Republic, the social and cultural positioning, and all the related legislative initiatives, as well as the internal relations and the management of various issues such as the openness policy, community outreach, youth and others. However, the overpowering constituent entrenched the image of the party of “the system”, and the movement that used to consider the youth to be at the core of its development established a hybrid culture to some of them. The culture of resistance and arduousness, and the concept of impartiality were contested by the culture of “statesmen” and the eagerness to hold positions even at the expense of morality and ethics. While university students and the unemployed amassed a culture of struggle, Ennahda had within itself a conflict between this culture and the culture of opportunism. The movement started to lose its main features in favour of titles which are right in themselves but misleading in their content and wrong in their implementation, and subject mostly to considerations of organizational struggles (specialization, Tunisia-tion and normalization with the state).

The youth of Ennahda youth had a problem of role model and example. The image of the role model has shifted from the “resistor” model to a pragmatic model of “statesman”, in all of its superiority and attitude of show off. The more the youth plunged into internal organizational

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struggles and ascent to power, the more they were alienated from the youth in universities and in the streets. These young people resemble Ennahda, but don't resemble their age group anymore.

Unfortunately, parties often repeat the experiences of one another. The youth back in the 1960s and 1970s also had a similar experience with the largest party at the time. When politics is limited to the state as a target and the party as the only mechanism for ascent amid terrible conceptual chaos, Ennahda turned from depending on the society as a basis and the state as the legal and institutional expression, to total dependence on the state as in the deeply criticized French Jacobin model in its Bourguiba version. Rebels often repeat the experiences of those they revolted against. The situation of young people in other parties and in major organizations is no better than that of Ennahda. But, it is the young people coming from the margins who have made the difference. It is wrong to think that the uprising is generational only, and that is clear because it is featured now by Kais Said. Rather, the uprising is cross-generational and cross-political schools against a certain pattern of ethics and relationships.

Fortunately, the people gave Ennahda another chance to redress. The people showed that they were open and at the same time faithful

to their roots and history and that the state/god and elite/god binaries were over. The people also declared that the desire for recognition and acceptance was harmful and that superiority and stereotyping are not democratic values but tolerance, coexistence, dialogue, and bottom-up state building are. The dictatorship of elitist minorities hidden within the institutions or working on the sidelines has come to an end and the people have rearranged national priorities towards society and social values. So, can Ennahda conduct deep reform within itself and take appropriate measures? Can the victorious parties take advantage of the opportunity? And are the defeated parties able to redress?

Not everyone will have much time and space for maneuver.

A incidental outcome or a New Wave?

At the beginning of the revolution, it was the spontaneous street protests that raised the ceiling and embarrassed the political and civilian elites flooded with tactical mentality until the revolution entered the institutions after March 2011 followed by the October elections of the same year. The spontaneous protests were tamed in favor of institutions, which started to be battlefields not constrained by parties' power balances within these institutions. President Marzouki was the closest to the spontaneity of street

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protests because of his personality and vision, but he was constrained by the balance of power during the Troika that brought him to presidency in the first place. As for the champion of the post-2014 elections, the former deceased President Beji Kaid Essebsi mastered the practices of political maneuvering that do not recognize the street and may even not respect it. Facing this tactical and maneuvering mentality, the second partner got dragged into the same space, which despite it realizing gains for the country, it resulted in the loss of vitality and competitiveness of the political process as a whole and killed the dynamics of the street.

After the 2019 elections, politicians won't be able to get the people out of the streets. Now, people in the street have the support of the president who derives his strength from them, challenging what others consider as a point of weakness: not having a supporting parliamentary block. The president will depend on the street to pressure the parliament and parties and thus it is not in his political interests nor part of his vision for the streets to be silent. People will not be patient for too long, they will keep the parties in check and push them to abandon their old maneuvers.

From this point of view, the president can act as a catalyst to accelerate the formation of the government, by devising organizational initiatives that put a halt to the aspirations of those who want snap elections and push the party system to revamp, especially the classic parties in case they want to survive.

Voters' Aspirations and Challenges in the Next Stage

The episode happening in Tunisia belongs to the type of “major transformation followed by uncontrolled aspirations” which make radical change a necessity and an urgency. As for the “people want” which was the slogan of the early days of the revolution, it is also the slogan of the elected president Qais Said. Thus, the people want a deep and quick change; people want employment, the elimination of corruption, an impact on public affairs, and to fill the gap between social classes and cities. The people continue to call for all of these measures because till now these demands are yet to be fulfilled, because they are among Qais Said's “radical rupture” program, and also because Ennahda itself has now to make more promises after it failed to satisfy the public in the first round of the presidential elections. Actually, the realization of these aspirations has many obstacles; some of which are institutional, some linked to the economic and social constraints, and some linked to the expected political climate.

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a. Institutional Difficulties:

The president does not have wide terms of reference, nor significant parliamentary support, and may not have the ambitions to have these in the first place. His political vision focuses on the people and a bottom-up strategy of state building. He would deal with the parliament, which is currently occupied by a conservative mentality, through mass mobilization. This mechanism has its limitations as there is a thin line between constructive pressure and chaos. What is needed is a convergence between the two, if there is a will to avoid an open institutional crisis. The parliament is suffering from numerical fragmentation, aggressive tendencies, contradictions between some of its influential components and whatsmore, its progressive party does not have the majority it needs to form the government, and there is not much chance of establishing a stable coalition to form a strong government. The potential parties to the coalition would be diverse which makes it difficult to agree on the program, allocate positions, and then ensure stability. Not to mention the local councils which are already having a hard time and might suffer in result of some of the presidential initiatives.

b. Economic Challenges

The economic challenges facing the new government are difficult: the deterioration of the currency value, the increasing trade deficit, the high level of internal and external debt, and the high inflation index where the wage mass is 19.03 billion dinars out of a budget of 47.227 billion dinars, in addition to the public debt which is estimated to at 11.678 billion dinars. The amount allocated for development is only 6.9 billion dinars. As for indebtedness, public debt is expecting a peak in 2020 at around 89% of the GDP before it starts to decline only if reforms are quickly initiated. Negotiations with the IMF next spring will not be easy without political stability and indications of a breakthrough in reforms.

The great irony is that the budget draft was prepared by a departing government, a draft that is written in accordance to accountability balances without giving consideration to reform, i.e., a budget formulated with a pre-election mentality. The parliament will have no choice but to adopt it to meet the constitutional deadlines, but will look for alternatives and wait until the preparation of a new one in accordance with the political programs of the new ruling coalition parties.

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c. Social Challenges

It is difficult to keep the social indicators in check: the general unemployment rate has reached 15.3%, (i.e. 635 thousand unemployed), the unemployment rate among youth reached 34%, the unemployment rate among those with diplomas is 28%, and the unemployment rate varies significantly between males and females.

In light of all of this, how can the imbalance of fiscal indicators be controlled and balanced? Actually, the initiation of reforms in major systems (collection, support, social funds and public sector) begins with a social truce. This truce is related to governmental power, the parties that form the government or support it, and the relationship with the UGTT.

It is most likely that the international powers will continue to support the Tunisian experience despite their skeptical attitude towards the President of the Republic and their dissatisfaction with the discourse of some of the parliamentary blocs, which may give a distinct position to Ennahda as a force of settlement and adjustment.

The regional context will only put pressure on Tunisia in case the reforms are stumbled and minimal achievements are delayed. As a result, social congestion would escalate and the situation could easily be manipulated by some regional entities.

The situation in the neighboring countries is expected to stabilize while its impact on the country stays as it is now. It will not get worse but it will not provide any new opportunities either due to the continued closure of Libyan markets and the Algerian markets due to political uncertainty.

In summary, the high ceiling of expectations requires clarity, willingness, and openness and most importantly a favorable atmosphere and institutional strength. However, the current institutional situation characterized by the fragility of the parliament, the weakness of the government, and the unconventionality of the President may not provide quick solutions that respond to high expectations.

Possible scenarios

The dilemma is to respond to people's demands for development and the fight against corruption, taking into consideration the following factors:

- The high ceiling of expectations and promises that requires immediate action and quick and prominent signals that things are changing.

- A leading party in the parliament demanded to rule but with less than a quarter of the seats. Thus, its members accuse it of hesitation, its supporters accuse it of escaping responsibility while blaming others, and its natural allies compete with it and plan to squeeze the party into the corner.

- A president of a strong personality and a unconventional vision. He is relying on street mobilization and has the ability to do so for a long time. He refuses to be subdued by the parliament and its balance of power, although a number of parliamentary blocs may take his side just to tease Ennahda.

- Heavy burdens related to public finances, major reforms requiring political support and social pacification with the help of a trade union with a particular vision for reform.

Given these facts, what are the possible scenarios?

There are two considerations when classifying scenarios:

- The ability of state institutions to work in a harmonious and efficient manner to avoid any institutional crises is not impossible. Knowing who the President of the Republic is,

this remains largely linked to the personalities of the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

- The ability of the government to achieve and restore confidence and hope. This can only be achieved through a strong government capable of establishing a cooperative relationship with major organizations.

a. Positive scenario:

Ennahda's success in forming government in the first month of their mandate to the widest possible attribution from the parliament, and through a program of governance that is responsive to the demands of the people, and by the selection of both a prime minister and a speaker of the parliament that are of strong and flexible personalities able to fill their positions and interact with the other two positions.

Conditions of success of this option:

- Flexible and responsible interaction between the Democratic Movement, the People's Movement, Tahya Tunisia, the Heart of Tunisia Party, the small parliamentary blocs, and the independent deputies.
- An encouraging and a compelling role of the President of the Republic, understanding from the Labor Union in particular and the Organization of Customs, and flexibility in negotiations from Ennahda's part that could combine commitment to the voters' message on governance and a complete view of the government system.

Formulas of this Option:

- The speaker of the parliament from Ennahda and an independent figure to head the government.

- Ennahda heads the government and the speaker of the parliament from another party.
- Ennahda's abandonment of the two positions is a distortion of the will of the voters and will not be accepted from within the movement. Thus, the process will not succeed. Nor would it be possible for Ennahda to head the two presidencies.

b. Acceptable Scenario:

Ennahda to refrain from the formation of government after its failure to do so. The president appoints a figure from outside Ennahda which chooses to either participate or remain in the opposition.

Conditions of success of this option:

- Name and quality of the proposed person.
- Ennahda's flexible interaction through either participation or non-objection.

c. Negative Scenario:

Failure of Ennahda to form a government and failure of the person in charge to do so too, directing the country to a snap election enabling the Chahed government to continue its work in managing the country's affairs and gaining the people's acceptance, despite grumblings and protests.

Going back to the ballot box will occur after the current President signs the amendment of the electoral law which was passed by the parliament last July and was rejected by the former deceased president Beji Kaid Essebsi. As holding elections under the current law will not produce qualitatively different results; these elections will not, if they happen, take place before the beginning of the next summer.

d. Adverse Scenario

This occurs if the previous scenario leads to an intensification of the social protests and the popular refusal to proceed to the ballot boxes. As a result, the Tunisian process enters a phase of uncertainty.

Thus, the first or second scenario are more likely to occur, because no one will bear the cost of leading the country into the unknown, especially that everyone is aware of the risks posed by snap elections.

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