

# THE FAILURE OF BARGAIN POLITICS AND TUNISIA'S CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

ANALYSIS



LARBI SADIKI

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# THE FAILURE OF BARGAIN POLITICS AND TUNISIA'S CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

**Abstract:** Under a cloud of uncertainty, Tunisians have been awaiting the formation of a third government since the fall 2019 elections. This article discusses the failure of both political parties and politicians at bargain politics or enacting values and practices of dialogue and negotiation that enable policymaking. Snapshots of major politicians Rached Ghannouchi, Kaiss Saied, Abir Moussi, and Nabil Karoui illustrate some stumbling blocks of the country's democratization. Disharmony within and between political parties weakens parties and destabilizes the balancing act between the 'three presidencies' in a pilloried political system. The political elites' neglect of the dire and deteriorating socio-economic situation, exacerbated by the COVID-pandemic, has been part of the country's democratic faltering. Unemployment, access to water, public service infrastructure, harqah migration, soaring public debt, empty coffers, and a contracting economy call for immediate and creative policy solutions. Yet policymaking remains on the back-burner. Amidst this political impasse, hints of creeping presidentialism raise questions about the 'parliamentary' in its semi-parliamentary system. Indications that the President and nominated Premier seek to push aside political parties smack of a disregard for electoral legitimacy. However, political parties themselves have been active architects of their own vulnerability. Political elites' constant pursuit of political posts have taken precedence over voters' pressing needs. The subsistence markers of dignity (karamah) are central, not secondary, to Tunisia's democratization. Continuous protest activity and pronounced voter apathy confirm that the political class has veered off-track. Tunisia needs more and better policymaking, not politicking.

***What is driving the country's nascent democracy today into a sharp crisis is too much politics without policy—policy that addresses threats to Tunisia's stability and democratic consolidation***

## **Introduction**

While Tunisia's new political elites have, more or less, ditched authoritarianism, they have yet to master the art of possibility. This article seeks to analyze Tunisia's current political paralysis, namely, how political parties are struggling to break free of ideological divides to consolidate democratization. Consolidation is never smooth even when aided by major gains in terms of free and fair elections, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and a democratic constitution. However, what is driving the country's nascent democracy today into a sharp crisis is too much politics without policy—policy that addresses threats to Tunisia's stability and democratic consolidation. Factors such as incessant wrangling in parliament owing to quarrelling within and between weak political parties, corruption, and an inattention to economic development and social justice in the south and interior that are rocked by continuous protests are weakening a transition to democracy. Absence of policy and clear programmes to assure the socio-economic regeneration are the *sine qua non* of sustainable democratization. Continued political discord<sup>1</sup> and failure to find urgent solutions to economic under-performance could breed the kind of ills that scupper fledgling democracies: unemployment, violence, extremism, apathy, illegal migration, and a widening gap between the haves and the have nots that reverberate across the MENA region and nearby Europe.

The article presents short political profiles of key figures (Rached Ghannouchi, Kais Saied, Nabil Karoui, and Abir Moussi) to dissect the pitfalls of democratization in Tunisia. Second, it identifies factors that obstruct bargain politics in the country— structural inequalities, party fragmentation and polarization, and personalization of politics— that detracts from the development of civic values and practices that complement the institution-building of democratization. Finally, the article identifies urgent issues screaming for attention such as poverty, regional inequality, and skyrocketing public debt all exacerbated by COVID-19 uncertainty. Left unattended, these problems will continue to destabilize Tunisia's democratization path. They are challenges that loom large for Hichem Mechichi

who seeks to form a new government as the country's populist president seems bent on counter-balancing parliament and the country's political parties. Tunisia's longstanding domestic problems are compounded by continuing war and widening interventionism in neighboring Libya, shifting regional re-alignments and conflict, European neighbors pressuring Tunisia to block "illegal" migration, and US attempts to exert greater influence in the small North African country while Russia flexes its military and diplomatic muscle in Libya and Syria. Tunisia's political elites must get their act together to revive and rescue citizen's interest and faith in the democratic process and the 'goods' it can deliver.

### **Uncertainty amidst the Search for dwindling 'commons'?**

Yet again a time of uncertainty has arrived in Tunisia. Hichem Mechichi, the Interior Minister tasked by President Kais Saied with forming a new government, has announced that he will form a non-partisan, more or less technocratic, government. All eyes are on the aspirant

Prime Minister to see who will make the cut to his government, the third such line-up in seven months. Unsurprisingly, the Tunisian public does not seem to be enthusiastic about the state of affairs in the country. According to Emrod Consulting's 'political barometer'<sup>2</sup> poll in July 2020, 70% of those surveyed see the economic situation as worsening, 37% are pessimistic about the country's future, and only 59% are optimistic, down from 78% the month before. In August 2020, 79.6% of Tunisians considered the country to be going in the wrong direction.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, parliamentary mayhem appears to have caught up with Ennahda. For the first time Abir Moussi's Free Destour Party topped the list of party respondents who said they would vote in the next legislative elections at 29% in a mid-July Sigma Conseil survey<sup>4</sup> ahead of Ennahda, second at 24.1%. Only a month later, the Free Destour was up to 35.8%, pushing Ennahda down to 21.9%, according to Sigma Conseil.<sup>5</sup> Moussi herself comes in second behind current President Saied in the July poll with 10% of respondents declaring they would vote for her as President.

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It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from these polls. The results must be taken with a grain of salt, especially since 62.4% of respondents in the latest Sigma Conseil survey said they were still undecided. Some politicians and parties eye them with suspicion. It is likely that only the next elections will stabilize the shifting balance of power between parties. However, with Mechichi's plans to form a party-less government, early legislative elections seem to be an increasingly likely scenario. In this light, the polls' numbers are indicative of the electorate's general dissatisfaction with reigning parties that have failed to resolve deepening problems of socio-economic exclusion, regional inequality, high unemployment, and mounting debt<sup>6</sup> to international lenders in the wake of COVID-19. Moussi and her party are on the rise. Ennahda has yet to regain its bearings after Rached Ghannouchi, a senior leader and the Speaker of Parliament, narrowly escaped a no-confidence vote in the legislature on 30 July. Everyone is still reeling with raging debates on social media about the implications of the failed no-confidence vote: was it a 'victory' for the revolution and a blow to external meddling? Was it a 'betrayal' by Qalb Tounes in favor of the Islamists? Was it a deal between unlikely revolutionary and counter-revolutionary allies gone awry? Was it only the first attempt to bring down Ghannouchi? All this comes on the heels of the Head of Government Elyes Fekfekh's resignation nearly three weeks ago and the unraveling of the ruling coalition comprised of Ennahda, Al-Tayyar al-Dimuqrati, Harakat al-Sha'b, Tahya Tounes, and a number of independents.

Tunisia's biggest test for its fledgling democracy is bargain politics. That is the values and practices of negotiation and dialogue by political elites for the creation of shared spaces with the goal of governing smoothly and ensuring continuity in the country's institutions, bureaucracy, and the provision of 'goods' (political and material) to the public. The end of politics, after all—especially democratic politics—is to solve people's problems: in this case, Tunisia's interrelated problems of poverty, unemployment, regional inequality, youth *harqah* (migration to Europe via 'death boats'), doctors and professors without jobs, dilapidated infrastructure, and limited access to quality

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healthcare. Problems have plagued the first government after the fall 2019 elections, formed by Habib Al-Joumli, into this year's parliamentary term that went into recess just before the Eid al-Adha holiday. A political pendulum in Tunisia oscillates between consensus and discord. Parliament appears cocooned in its own squabbles, oblivious to the everyday struggles and plight of Tunisians aspiring to a life of dignity, the revolutionary call for *karamah* (dignity), beyond empty slogans. What are the things that underpin bargain politics in the country? What are the issues that are 'stuck' in public life? We seem to be witnessing a corrosion or a trepidation in the democratization process. It may not reach the level of reversibility, but there is some stumbling. Why is this observation significant? Once the Arab Spring's birthplace, Tunisia was hailed as the leading democratic 'lab' in the Arab world.

### Key Political Profiles

Profiles of key political actors in the country betray its political challenges and opportunities. Through looking at specific figures in Tunisia's politics, we begin to form an impression of a democratic experiment without a democratic anchor. This is despite all politicians, parties, and coalitions being

bound by the 2014 democratic constitution that should have set the rules of the democratic game. We observe insistent demands for changing the Electoral Law<sup>7</sup> and various constitutional measures (e.g. particularly in Saied's presidential campaign) on the one hand and vacillation about the hybrid political system itself (e.g. Moussi's talk even before the 2019 campaign in favor of a presidential system)<sup>8</sup> on the other.

### *Rached Ghannouchi*

The debut of Ghannouchi, the head of Ennahda being Tunisia's largest and arguably most organized political party with a relatively stable base, in electoral politics has been rocky, to say the least. Ennahda's vote share had already declined considerably in the legislative elections, earning it only 54 seats. Its candidate for the Presidency, Abdelfattah Morou, failed to advance to the second round of voting. Nonetheless, Ghannouchi managed, through negotiation or wrangling, to earn himself the position of Speaker of Parliament, in addition to the 6 Ennahda ministers in government dismissed by Fakhfakh on his way out of Kasbah.

The failed no-confidence vote<sup>9</sup> where 97 ballots were cast in a raucous parliamentary

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session *against* Ghannouchi was the culmination of a controversial six months. How Ghannouchi ran parliamentary sessions, how often he was present, whom he named as his Chief of Staff (who has since resigned), and how many functions he delegated to him, his foreign policy positions (e.g. on Libya), and international connections (e.g. with Turkey's Erdogan) have all drawn endless controversy as he has attempted to expand the political role of the Speaker of Parliament. The challenge to his leadership of parliament has been fiercest from Abir Moussi, but even coalition allies (e.g. Harakat al-Sha'b and Al-Tayyar al-Dimuqrati) have joined the fray of anti-Ghannouchi voices.

Yet casting blame outward, on 'Arab countries' made anxious by Tunisia's democracy<sup>10</sup> is not just a misdiagnosis of the no-confidence vote and the country's political impasses. Through such comments, Ghannouchi seems to divert attention and escape responsibility for his and his party's shortcomings, not just for this parliamentary term but for previous years, either in the Troika or the 'consensus' government with Beji Caid Essebsi.<sup>11</sup> The Islamist party's main problem, like that of other political parties, is not the meddling of external powers but its own failure to *govern*: namely, through policymaking that improves the lives of Tunisians. Objections to Ghannouchi concern not only his leadership of Parliament but are also internal to Ennahda. Voices inside the party calling for his resignation have grown louder over the past year. High-level resignations have made headlines. The long-delayed and long-awaited 11<sup>th</sup> party Congress should decide the matter of the handover of power. These times call for a kind of Erbakan-Erdogan 'turn.'

#### *Kais Saied*

The President has been one of the biggest surprises and, for many, disappointments of Tunisian politics over the past nine or ten months. A newcomer to the political scene, not known during the Ben Ali era for clear expressions of opposition or for dissidence, Saied was propelled to the position of Head of State on the mantra of *al-sha'b yureed* (the people want). During his non-campaign campaign, he revived revolutionary talk of dignity, freedom, equality, justice, and unmet youth demands

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promising to reform the political system towards more direct democracy. The populist discourse worked, at least temporarily, with more than 70% of voters choosing him over media magnate Nabil Karoui.

Since assuming office, however, Saied has shown little initiative and weak leadership, with no clear agenda of where to take the country, even in foreign affairs which are his prime responsibility. It is not a far stretch to say that Saied was unprepared for the powers granted to him by the Constitution, particularly Article 89, whereby the President names the 'most capable' personality to form a government in case parliament does not agree. The absence of a clear parliamentary majority since the October 2019 elections and the subsequent inability for the party with the most votes, Ennahda, to form a government led by its nominee Habib Al-Joumli have revealed that even in this semi-parliamentary system the President does in fact wield extensive power. He has been named for the second time what has been called *Hukumat al-Ra'is* (the President's government). Fakhfakh, then, was his mistake, despite Saied being known for at the very least, not being corrupt. This mistake was blessed by a parliament who voted in a Fakhfakh who was not properly vetted. The National Anti-Corruption Authority has asked that the former Head of Government have his assets and money frozen and also recommending a travel ban<sup>12</sup> whilst he is being investigated for alleged improper financial conduct.

Saied has not invested effort or assumed a leadership role to interject in parliamentary discord despite being in theory well-positioned to do so as a non-partisan president. He seems to have made a pastime out of paying visits to security forces and the military who dutifully salute this commander-in-chief. In Paris, Saied's blunders in denying that Tunisia was ever 'occupied' by the French made headlines. Recently, he has taken up the issue of illegal migration.<sup>13</sup> This was after Italy's Interior Minister visited Tunisia and expressed concern over the matter. Italy's Foreign Minister announced putting his country's assistance on hold, suggesting that the North African country has not fulfilled its part to prevent migration to Italy: "Tunisia must increase patrols, especially in the area of Sfax,"<sup>14</sup> he instructed President Saied, who duly obliged and visited Sfax.<sup>15</sup> The President seems to take his cues too easily from European counterparts. A mere two weeks later, Italy's Foreign and Interior Ministers, accompanied by an EU entourage, arrived in Tunis, again upping the ante and demanding 'an extra effort by the Tunisian government.' In publicly released statements, Saied insisted that the 'cooperation' between the two countries must focus on the 'root causes' of irregular migration. However, Italy's pledge of 11 million euros in aid is geared at more policing (patrols and radar) further entrenching the security approach to Tunisia's migration (non)policy.<sup>16</sup> No root causes addressed here.

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#### *Nabil Karoui*

The soft-spoken media mogul-turned politician and head of the Qalb Tounes party has lain relatively low since he lost the 2019 election after being jailed on corruption charges. Ousama Khelifi, head of the party's parliamentary bloc, has been more visible on the airwaves, always strident in his critique of the ruling government. As crises come to a head, however, Karoui re-emerges: now is such a moment. Despite coming in second in the parliamentary elections, Karoui's party was not invited to be part of Fakhfakh's government, or *excluded* as Qalb Tounes likes to say, on the grounds that it was not part of the 'revolutionary' coterie of the political spectrum.

Yet Qalb Tounes has been invaluable to Ennahda in parliament, voting with it on more than one occasion. Ennahda itself repeatedly called for an 'expansion' of the ministerial lineup to form a unity government to include this opposition party. Before Mechichi's declaration of his technocratic approach, Karoui was clearly eyeing the new government for his party. He sounded confident<sup>17</sup> after meeting with Mechichi, insisting that the majoritarianism of democracy should be reflected in the new PM's ministerial choices. Yet, Qalb Tounes itself is shrinking, losing 11 of its 38 parliamentary seats since February as MPs have resigned, some vocal in their criticism of what they see literally as *Karoui's party*.

#### *Abir Moussi*

If there is one rising star in Tunisian politics, it is Abir Moussi. This former *Tajammu'i* Ben Ali party official has shrewdly reinvented herself as a neo-Bourguibist in the years since her boss's ouster in 2011. Many view her ascendancy in Tunisia as a marker of counter-revolutionary forces entering the political fray. Her Free Destour Party secured 16 parliamentary seats in the parliamentary election: not too shabby for an old-new force. With her outsize personality, political fluency and eloquence, constant presence on social media, and an eye for legal and statistical details, she is probably Tunisia's only female politician with clear prospects to make it all the way to the Presidency.

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Controversially, Moussi appears to be building her career on opposing Ennahda, or what she calls *el-khwanjiyah* (a derogatory form of *Ikhwan*, or the Muslim Brotherhood). Her animosity towards Rached Ghannouchi seems as personal as it is sharp, evident in the heated exchanges in parliament. She capitalizes on almost any occasion to express her dissent, including sit-ins in Bardo, from Ennahda's Jamila Ksiksi's comments<sup>18</sup> to the entry of a guest on a terrorist suspect list into the legislature. Her disruptions of Parliament have taken their toll on legislative activity, as in her party's sit-in that led to yet another delay of the session to debate and vote on Constitutional Court nominees.

Despite the failure of the no-confidence vote against Ghannouchi, it can be considered a win for Moussi, who had been calling for such a petition since almost the beginning of this parliamentary session. Moussi's caustic attacks on Ghannouchi and Ennahda seem to have given the green light to other politicians, even former allies, to do the same (e.g. Al-Tayyar's Samia Abbou and others). Constant 'petitioning' is not the kind of politics Tunisia needs. A rising position in the polls indicates

that Moussi has a growing following. She has carved out a space for herself in Tunisian politics. Political co-existence and tolerance, from and towards Moussi and the Free Destour Party, is a necessity not an option. Moussi should not forget that she is there in politics today because Ennahda voted against laws excluding the old guard<sup>19</sup> in 2014. As a former Ben Ali supporter, Moussi should show a bit of modesty with as much tolerance as is accorded to her by ideological foes. All parties must recognize and build on it to work collectively for the public interest, the ultimate benchmark of good democratic politics.

### **Stalled Bargain Politics**

The Tunisian political scene has not reached a state of bargain politics, the state of delivering political and distributional goods particularly to the country's impoverished. First, in the institutions of the state, there is a lack of clarity in terms of delineating authority in the three-headed 'pilloried' system divided among the President, the Head of Government, and the Head of Parliament. Who is it who leads? Each of the three 'presidents,' only male so far, comes to office with his agenda with great variation in skills, experiences, and vision.



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They perpetually face off against each other, stepping on each other’s toes despite public statements of the contrary: Should or can the President be involved in local politics? Should or can the President of Parliament express positions on foreign policy? Should or can the Head of Government use his COVID-19 decree powers to declare policies on taxes or the judiciary?

By appointing Hichem Mechichi to form a second *Hukumat al-rai’s* (president’s government), it as though Kaiss Saied is doing his own political balance through his interpretation of the constitution, specifically Article 89. This has two negative effects: first, it disfigures the political system which is semi-parliamentary (and not presidential). When political parties have no majority, the balance of power shifts towards the president. Saied has been invoking the maximum constitutional leeway to take charge and tip the system in his favor in what has now become a precedent of *Hukumat al-rai’s* (president’s government). It is as though the President has some kind of vendetta against political parties. Second, these new balances he has created come at the expense of political parties, almost downsizing them. For whatever reason, Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly kept a loophole in the 2014 constitution that allowed the President to bypass electoral legitimacy—legally and democratically. Saied has chosen this option twice so far. In his anti-partisan strategy for forming a government, Mechichi seems to be on the same page as Saied. The potential Head of Government was part of Saied’s inner clique of advisors that include former University of Sousse law colleagues. Nadia Akacha, Saied’s Chief of Staff, who has become unpopular,<sup>20</sup> is rumored to be pulling strings behind the scenes in appointing ministers. An important question then remains: if the President, surrounded by unelected advisors, is going to appoint the Head of Government who forms the government, why are there parliamentary elections in the first place? This is an issue that will undoubtedly cause further polemics in the body politic.

Furthermore, polarization and personalization of politics are very much part of the problem. Polarization is one reason why bargain politics is less than optimal. Parties are undermining themselves and undermining the government as ideological complexes

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color and condition political behavior. Moussi, for instance, wants to be part of this new democracy while excluding Islamists. On the other hand, Ennahda seems to lack the 'soft power' to expand their shrinking base or their reach and influence across and within political parties and institutions. This politicization of ideological differences has seeped into the functioning of important tools of Tunisian democracy. In the past, existing commissions, such as the HAICA or the Truth and Dignity Commission, became a tool for Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, or the UGTT (Tunisian General Labor Union). The country's parties and its institutions lack the political professionalization that facilitates the necessary work of bureaucracy to do, more or less neutrally, its job.

The tools and institutions of democracy in Tunisia have not been sufficiently professionalized and concomitantly de-ideologized to service more than just one party, one voice, one ideology. This is dangerous: what epitomizes authoritarianism is uni-vocality. Ben Ali's reign emptied the institutions of the state from legitimacy and political

clout in a process of 'electoralization' and 'parliamentarization.'<sup>21</sup> A one-party state, while not on the cards, in the foreseeable future, can arise from a combination of civic apathy and the ambitious drive of politicians seeking to eliminate their opponents at all costs.

Saied stands to benefit from the polarization of the legislative branch of the state to assert his executive authority over squabbling parliamentary deputies too divided to bring him to book. His constitutional authority to choose the Prime Minister and the cabinet can open the door to greater interference by Saied and his staffers in the direction of a presidential system. However, this potential eventuality has led to some calls for constitutional amendments in Tunisia's semi-parliamentary structure.

Endless discussions of *Hukumat kafa'at* (a meritocracy or technocratic government) versus *Hukumah siyassiyah* (partisan government, preferred by Ennahda, Qalb Tounes, Etilaf al-Karamah, and al-Tayyar al-Dimqurati among other political players) have taken a new turn. Mechichi has opted for the former: a non-partisan

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government generating intense criticism by most parties. This move, however, has been welcomed by Moussi's Free Destour Party who agreed to participate in consultations with the nominated Head of Government only after reassurances that no party (i.e. including Ennahda) would be granted ministries in the new lineup. Youssef Chahed's Tahya Tounes too has pledged to support Mechchi's government. It is true that the debate over partisan versus technocratic governments came across as signaling bargaining by parties just to entrench their positions within the government. Even a small bureau like the Diwan of the President of Parliament, run by Ghannouchi's Chief of Staff Habib al-Khider (who has since resigned) courts controversy.

Relatedly, a number of parties seem to be just built around personalities, depending on individuals. Without political professionalism, people live and die by a political patron. When he or she takes a hit, so do the fortunes of the party: Najib Chabbi, Hama Al-Hamami, Youssef Chahed, Nabil Karoui himself to an extent, with his parliamentary bloc dwindling. Then, of course, there is Ennahda itself with the contentious issue of Ghannouchi's leadership. How democratic will it be for this founding father of Tunisia's leading Islamist party to circumvent or amend its bylaws to extend its tenure? The Free Destour Party, too, looks like a one-person show fashioned around Moussi's charisma, although some other members have begun to emerge in the media. This is in spite of the parties' oft-repeated mantra that decisions are made strictly via their 'institutions.'

The third problem has come to the fore especially in the parliamentary sessions of the past five months. There is a deficiency in enacting the civic and democratic values that grease the wheels of democratic institutions by all stripes of political elites. Tunisia's democratic political culture leaves much to be desired. Following basic parliamentary protocol, a minimum level of civility in written and spoken communication, a willingness to hurl personal insults at political rivals, a descent into verbal or even physical aggression, have been on full display from the Free Destour Party to independents to Harakat al-Sha'b to Ennahda to Ettaf al-Karama.

Personal animosities are translated into political conflict not just substantively. Politicians have not only transcended the ideological acrimony of the 1980s. Their actual demeanor, tenor, and language reflects the bitterness of these sterile battles that distract from the business of government itself. Political communication is ridden with problems, not just in Parliament, but also over social media and its often toxic discourse or more traditional media (radio and television) that seems to feed into polarization or take one side (for or against a party) over the other, a tool or almost mouthpiece for political parties and politicians (Nessma TV, Zeitouna TV, etc.). Parliament seems to have built a bubble around itself as voters turn away in distaste from an institution a world away from everyday problems of unsafe water supplies, employment, spatialized inequality, regional underdevelopment, the hemorrhaging of youth via death-boats across the Mediterranean, etc.

### **The Anatomy of Political Paralysis**

Tunisia's political system is fragmented and wracked with internal strife. Remnants of the Nidaa Tounes and its base are always up for grabs, between Karoui, Moussi, Tahyaa Tounes, etc. It is almost as though there will be a lottery in the next election, a redistribution of the seats. Perhaps Moussi's party will surpass Karoui's. Civil society and big

non-governmental organizations (the UGTT and the rest of the Nobel 'Quartet' for instance) have played a significant political role, complete with their own constituents and sectoral interests. These 'informal' political actors have contributed to the 'civic parallelism' of Tunisia's new democracy, dominated by neither state nor society.<sup>22</sup> Yet, they have not been drawn into the policymaking process. Instead, things are at a standstill. Protestors demand clean water, closing off roads for instance in the South of the country, including the town of Chebika.<sup>23</sup> Oil and gas production halted in the south (*al dakh la*, no pumping, not just *al rakh la* or relent-not, the Kamour slogan) with phosphate production disrupted in Gafsa.

Consecutive administrations have not been able to strike a bargain with these marginalized people demanding employment and a share of natural resource wealth. Or, they have reneged upon agreements, as in Chahed's 2017 Kamour agreement. Bargain politics does not reach these sectors, these populations, nor these demands in Tunisia. One starts to wonder about the utility of a democratic system that cannot bring in key players, whether it be the UGTT and UTICA (Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts), protesting youth or the Kamour movement<sup>24</sup> who add value and can contribute to policy.



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### **Urgent Issues: Politics without Policy**

Several urgent issues scream for political attention in Tunisia. Some of the most pressing are 'multiple marginalization,'<sup>25</sup> regional inequality, and poverty; modest (contracting, especially during COVID-19) economic performance; youth unemployment; constant deepening international debt; corruption; and political inexperience. The constant jockeying for power, even after election season, weakens the lifespan of governments that can deliver tangible goods. What is happening in Tunisia is that 'bargain politics' appears to extend only to the wheeling and dealing of naming ministerial posts. The distributive dimension remains neglected. Disagreements are not about contrasting ideological agendas on how to stem the *harqah* phenomenon, ongoing protests (798 recorded in July 2020 alone),<sup>26</sup> or economic uncertainty for small businesses and workers during the pandemic. Neither is it about the international debt keeping the country hostage to the IMF and its coterie as the country tries to postpone its debt payments,<sup>27</sup> nor the water shortages afflicting the northwest and southern regions. Instead, conflict is personalized between politicians and parties. Tunisians lose, even when one party or the other 'wins.'

Tunisia's political and bureaucratic class can tap into existing blueprints (e.g. UNDP)<sup>28</sup> instead of reinventing the wheel for matters of development, especially with international goodwill toward the country. Multi-national corporations seem to be given carte-blanche with the message being: just come and invest at any cost. Better terms should be negotiated and enforced so that foreign investment generates employment, and governorates (e.g. Tataouine or Gafsa) enjoy some of the much-needed natural resource profits. Some of these urgent issues are not in need of ministries but of well-functioning commissions.

In fact, the commissions named in the 2014 Constitution are not yet up-and-running, including the Commission for Sustainable Development and Rights of Future Generations<sup>29</sup> (Article 129). This past July alone over 4,000 Tunisians made the perilous *harqah*<sup>30</sup> journey across the Mediterranean according to the head of the FTDES, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. The fate of countless of these desperate

## *The constant jockeying for power, even after election season, weakens the lifespan of governments that can deliver tangible goods*

migrants remains unknown as Italy grows restless and seeks more 'cooperation' from Tunisia. New taskforces or commissions that combine different kinds of expertise (economics, youth education and training, psychological and mental health of youth, transborder advocacy) can better focus on specific policy problems such as *al-hijrah ghayr nidhamiyyah* ('irregular' migration), not because Italy grows restless, but because Tunisian politicians, experts, and civil society activists all rise to the responsibility of protecting and cultivating its human capital.

The political class cannot with any sort of democratic or civic conscience continue to sit back and watch their youth literally fling themselves into the sea. Politicians need to wake up to the fact that distribution is not just *electoral* distribution. Should Mechichi prove unsuccessful in forming a new government, the country will go back to the polls sooner than the slated 2024. A climate of perpetual electoral brinkmanship will take root. A 'democratic learning loop' is needed between state and society, between political parties and civil society. Bargain politics should feed into the creation of the soft power of persuasion to infiltrate policymaking, distribution, and getting on with the business of government. Back-and-forth

swinging on issues eats away at the governing process: whether the issue is Libya, Arab regional politics, Kamour, or any other topic.

Bargain politics has not yet matured to deal with these urgent issues. Structural (poverty and marginalization) and institutional (party weaknesses that reinforces fragmentation) factors converge with problems at the level of policy. This has been Tunisia's Achilles' heel. Initiation, implementation, and review of policy to reach a balance between political inputs (people's demands) and outputs (policy) leaves much to be desired. Parties seem to deal with their constituencies' interests as though these were *national*-level demands. This is far from the trust and responsibility awarded to elected representatives, voted into office to advance the state of the country to find solutions to poverty and devise solutions for unemployment and pathways out of foreign debt.

### **A Way Forward?**

What are the 'commons' that can become the glue of the political process? Politicians cannot govern if people do politics as if they were embroiled in a zero-sum game. The demands of governance do not allow for this winner-takes-all mindset. These commons are the values of inclusiveness,

***Neither the UAE, Turkey, nor ISIS will undermine Tunisia's security. Instead, it will be undermined by marginalization, poverty, political inertia, and people who make a mockery of political and parliamentary procedures***

freedom and fairness in participation, and toleration of difference. Politics, after all, is about managing and navigating difference. Politicians must bear in mind that they are in office for public service. It is not good enough to have a 'sexy' constitution guaranteeing rights to water, healthcare, and employment when politicians cannot deliver. The *sine qua non* of office is to deliver goods. Parliament is not just *tashreef* (an honor) but also *taklif* (a responsibility).

Tunisia's political class also needs to move away from escalated rhetoric. This unwarranted fearmongering includes lines such as: Tunisia is at the brink of civil war, is threatened from within, or is victim to regional conspiracies. Whether from political party leaders or the president himself, this discourse is far from helpful and smacks of populism. Security in Tunisia is threatened at the domestic level: its human security. Neither the UAE, Turkey, nor ISIS will undermine Tunisia's security. Instead, it will be undermined by marginalization, poverty, political inertia, and people who make a mockery of political and parliamentary procedures.

Still, Tunisia's democracy remains impressive. A crisis of democratization is relatively a 'good problem.' The political system's weak points are also its strengths: people can parley and disagree across the spectrum of political positions and ideologies. The problem lies with delivering the goods, and this is where government and its bargain politics have failed since 2011. Tunisia always seems, whether at the level of government or political parties, to launch big ideas: decentralization, consensus politics, Islamic democracy, regional development, and so on, since the days of Bourguiba. It is the execution that is lacking. An ideal 'lab' of democracy is not just about the generation of good ideas but their implementation. Politics is not just talk (theory) but also action (practice). Bridging this gap is important not just for Tunisia but for the spread of democratic norms and practices in the Arab world.

What the country needs is not regional *politicking* (Qatar versus the UAE or Turkey versus Egypt), but the *policymaking* that comes out of skillful, representative, rule-governed, and substantive politics. If there is one thing the next government needs to do, it is to focus on problems of marginalization and inequality. To do that, all political actors need to enact a modicum of shared civic and democratic values of pluralism, tolerance, compromise, and mutual respect that will serve as the foundation for power-sharing. Surely it is easier said than done, but Ennahda needs to learn to live and work with Abir Moussi and the Free Destour Party—and she with them. Ennahda ought to sharpen its political skills in the art of creating shared spaces to overcome the ideological divides and sclerosis that derail policymaking.

The current paralysis has stood in the way of such policymaking. Inter-party contention has contributed to this standstill, arguably easing the way for Saied's executive overreach. This has prompted fears of

creeping presidentialism. In practice, the fragility of parties and the absence of a majority party means the balance of power favors the president. The parties have their hands tied: either go with the suggestion of a national unity government or a government of technocrats. Both are suggestive of expunging a government of party-ism. In effect, Tunisia would end up with a state ruled by a president and his staffers. Are Tunisians kissing parliamentary democracy goodbye? The million-dollar question is whether the embattled political parties play along with the President. The answer will likely fall along ideological lines—and whatever wheeling and dealing takes place away from the public gaze. The worst case scenario may be the costliest way out of the impasse: going back to the polls in new elections. Voter fatigue and disaffection make this scenario unsavory for the electorate. If this eventuates, the one thing that is certain in Tunisia is more uncertainty.



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larbi Sadiki is a Professor of Arab Democratization at Qatar University and the author of *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (Columbia University Press, 2004) and *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Most recently, he is an Editor of *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics: Interdisciplinary Inscriptions* (2020). He is also a Lead Principal Investigator in the four-year QNRF-funded project titled «Transitions of Islam and Democracy: Engendering <Democratic Learning> and Civic Identities.» Research Interests: Democratization, Democracy and Islamism, Arab Spring, New Politics and Protest, and Arab politics in general

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Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)