



Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia

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What's new? The legislative and presidential elections in late 2019 have reshaped Tunisia's political landscape. A new political class supporting the cause of national sovereignty has emerged in the country's parliament and presidency. Four months passed before the Assembly approved a new government on 27 February 2020.

Why does it matter? Tunisia has lost valuable time. The focus on national sovereignty among the new political forces threatens to stir up increasing populism, political tensions and social polarisation. This will make it harder for the country to tackle its economic and security problems.

What should be done? To avert this populist surge, the new political class should help set up inclusive dialogue mechanisms using consensus to establish a long-term national strategic orientation, particularly regarding ways of increasing the country's economic sovereignty.

I. Overview

Tunisians went to the polls in September and October 2019, and the results have shaken up the country's political scene. The new political figures and parties that emerged in recent years as a result of certain popular expectations are now playing a leading role in Tunisian politics. This new political class has sustained a populist surge that has fuelled political tensions, polarised society and reduced the country's ability to meet economic and security challenges. To contain this surge, politicians should support the creation of dialogue mechanisms that bring together the main political, trade union, administrative and associative actors. Such mechanisms would rely on consensus to define the major long-term national strategic guidelines, notably those aiming to strengthen Tunisia's economic sovereignty.

Tunisia has already lost time. It took almost four months for a parliamentary coalition to form a new government. On 10 January, the Assembly presided over by Rached Ghannouchi, head of An-Nahda, a moderate Islamist party, rejected Habib Jemli's cabinet put forward by the same party. In line with the constitutional provisions for such a situation, the country's new president, Kaïs Saïed, appointed a new head of government, Elyes Fakhfakh. The latter is a member of Ettakatol, a social democratic party that was part of the government and parliamentary coalition (a troika comprising the political parties of An-Nahda, Ettakatol and Congrès pour la

république) set up during the years following the ouster of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (2011-2014) and led by An-Nahda. Fakhfakh set up a new ministerial team, which was approved by the Assembly on 27 February 2020 with 129 votes in favour and 77 against.

The new government should not ignore the mounting pressure from supporters and activists seeking social and political change (in particular those who voted for President Saïed, who won the election's second round with almost 73 per cent of the vote). Nor should it seek to temporarily mollify their hopes through populist measures (notably by imprisoning the "corrupt" or engaging in anti-Western rhetoric).

Together with the presidency of the Republic and the parliament, it should help provide spaces for dialogue that would bring together a maximum number of actors from different political, social and professional backgrounds, in order to reach a compromise on the country's major long-term national strategic orientation. This would make it possible to mitigate ideological conflicts and reduce the populist surge that could weaken the country's ability to deal with either an external shock caused by a worsening security context at the regional level or the deterioration of its macro-economic stability.

These guidelines could, for instance, deal with improving the quality of front-line public services (health care, social assistance, education and transport). They could propose the most effective tools for encouraging public action in the economic sphere (emergency socio-economic legislation) and gradually dismantling the clientelist networks that weaken the chain of command within institutions and undermine trust between them and large sections of the population. The latter could be achieved through tax and customs reforms and the integration of part of the informal trade network into the formal economy. Moreover, the creation of a financial intelligence agency would lead to more coherent decisions on domestic economic affairs, particularly with regard to strategic planning, opening up to new markets, and the use of international aid.

As one of Tunisia's key partners, the EU should help consolidate the country's stability by supporting these guidelines, their drafting and implementation, and by persuading international creditors, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to accept the program. The EU must also take advantage of the country's new political configuration to focus on areas it already supports, such as public administration reform, anti-trust legislation and the development of outlying regions as this would be less likely to be perceived as foreign interference by those pushing for national sovereignty.

II. Defending National Sovereignty: A New Leitmotif

The defence of Tunisia's sovereignty, which played such a decisive role in the rise of new political players and parties during the 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections, has been a growing popular sentiment since 2013. In the past six years, as the initial excitement of the Arab uprisings dwindled across the region, the governing troika provided weak economic and social returns and jihadist violence grew, the idea that an enfeebled state undermines the country's sovereignty gained traction. This idea then morphed into a form of nostalgia for the old regime (1956-2011), pit-

ting Islamists against anti-Islamists. The latter accused the former of “selling the country to their Gulf allies” (meaning Qatar) because – so the argument goes – they believe not in Tunisia but in the *umma* (the transnational community of Islam), and of purposefully weakening the state to better penetrate and destroy it.¹

In the same period, the demand for a stronger state gained popularity among underprivileged youth, as the appeal of Salafi-jihadism declined.² The secular political party Nida Tounes tried and failed to satisfy this demand by joining forces with the Islamist party An-Nahda at the end of 2014. Soon, though, underprivileged youth were signalling they hoped that the Islamic State (ISIS) would, as one of them said, “set them free”.³ One year later, they, too, were talking in terms of rehabilitating the old regime, expressing the feeling that the country needed a strongman such as the president ousted in 2011, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.⁴

In 2017, the discourse prevalent among both the working and wealthier classes converged on the idea that the state and its public services (health, education, transport) were falling apart and that Tunisians were not ready for democracy (especially parliamentary democracy). The new political order had produced only ubiquitous cronyism, corruption and social deprivation that was benefiting venal and opportunistic politicians.⁵

Today, several political leaders, including from Nida Tounes, as well as senior government officials, claim that both the 2014 constitution and an electoral system that translates votes into seats in the most proportional way possible are fragmenting the political scene.⁶ They contend that these two elements also are largely responsible for the spread of corruption in a country marked by a general crisis of authority.⁷ And they say that the only way to save the country is once again to centralise power and resources in the hands of an all-powerful executive with a coherent ideology.⁸

In addition, from the second half of 2016 onward, in the face of an economic slump and falling living standards and of increased pressure from the IMF and the EU, sev-

¹ Crisis Group interview, Nida Tounes activist, Tunis, August 2013. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°37, *The Tunisian Exception: Success and Limits of Consensus*, 5 June 2014.

² Crisis Group interviews, young residents of a working-class district of Tunis, April 2017. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, *Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, 11 January 2018. See also Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°62, *Restoring Public Confidence in Tunisia's Political System*, 2 August 2018.

³ Crisis Group interview, young resident of a working-class district of Tunis, Tunis, September 2015.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, young residents of working-class districts, activists, municipal councillors, Kairouan, Kasserine, Tunis, 2016-2018.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, young residents of working-class districts, activists, municipal councillors, Kairouan, Kasserine, Tunis, 2016-2018.

⁶ This voting system favours small parties, since once the votes used to allocate seats are deducted, the lists with the largest number of votes left over are those that prevail. It has been in effect since 2011. There is no minimum threshold for a list to obtain a seat, which is all the more beneficial for small parties. Crisis Group interviews, political party leaders, senior officials, Tunis, 2017-2019.

⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, op. cit.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, politicians and senior officials, Tunis, 2017. See Crisis Group Report, *Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, op. cit. In July 2019, the funeral of the head of state, Béji Caïd Essebsi, which took place with great pomp and circumstance, aroused sincere emotion among the population, reflecting the depth of feelings about national sovereignty in society. Crisis Group observations, Tunis, 27 July 2019.

eral leading political and trade union groups began denouncing what they termed attacks on the country's economic sovereignty, such as austerity measures advocated by the IMF and the alleged appropriation of Tunisia's resources by foreign companies.⁹ Such rhetoric notably has come from certain members of the Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir, those close to the former troika, An-Nahda grassroots activists, centre-left and extreme left activists, Arab nationalists and Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) officials.¹⁰

Finally, during the second half of 2018, the national and especially international press widely publicised debates surrounding gender equality in matters of inheritance, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the abolition of the death penalty. These are three central issues identified in the report of the government Commission on Individual Freedoms and Equality (Colibe) published that June.¹¹

Foreign media interventions in support of these proposals notably generated a counter-movement seeking to reaffirm Tunisian sovereignty in relation to national identity. Many Tunisians, especially those receptive to the ideas of opposition forces (people nostalgic for the old regime and left-wing and Islamist "revolutionaries" from the 2011 uprising), have denounced government measures promoting gender equality in matters of inheritance, seeing these as an attempt by the political class – in concert with the West, notably France and the EU – to alter Tunisians' lifestyle, and in particular to destroy the family unit, the last space of social solidarity from which to confront increasingly difficult living conditions.¹²

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kairouan, Kasserine, Médenine, Tunis, Sfax, 2017-2018. See Hortense Lac, "Liste noire du blanchiment d'argent : quel impact pour la Tunisie ?", Inkyfada, 21 February 2018. See also "La Tunisie de nouveau blacklistée, la duplicité de l'Union européenne", Global Net, 7 February 2018; "Les négociations autour de l'ALECA, un crime contre la Tunisie", Popular Front press release, 31 May 2018.

¹⁰ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°198, *Decentralisation in Tunisia: Consolidating Democracy without Weakening the State*, 26 March 2019; and Wafa Samoud, "L'IVD fait des révélations sur l'exploitation abusive des richesses de la Tunisie par la France, l'Ambassade de France en Tunisie dément", *Huffington Post Maghreb*, 16 March 2018. See also Benoit Delmas, "Tunisie : une grève générale anti-FMI", *Le Point*, 22 November 2018; Crisis Group North Africa Report N°137, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, 13 February 2013; and Hizb ut-Tahrir, press release concerning Tunisia's natural resources, 20 May 2015.

¹¹ Essebsi had set up this commission composed of nine experts in August 2017. In August 2018, he decided to address the issue of gender equality in matters of inheritance – the commission report's most sensitive point. He drafted a bill, which the council of ministers approved that November, but which parliament abandoned soon thereafter. Essebsi was responding to requests from the EU, whose parliament adopted a resolution on 14 September 2016 inviting Tunisia to promote gender balance in the context of public action, in particular by "reforming the personal status code in order to abolish discriminatory laws against women such as those related to inheritance and marriage rights". See European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2016 on EU relations with Tunisia (2015/2273(INI)). See also "Tunisia: Ennahda Rejects Inheritance Equality", Human Rights Watch, 6 September 2018.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kairouan, Kasserine, Médenine, Tunis, Sfax, 2017-2018. See also, "58% des femmes sont défavorables à l'égalité dans l'héritage selon un sondage", *Réalités*, 19 July 2018.

III. Kaïs Saïed: Defending the Sovereignty of the “People” and the Nation

As the leading representative of this new wave of “sovereignist” politicians, Saïed has echoed these concerns. His approach paid off: he led after the first round of the presidential election, held on 15 September 2019, with around 18 per cent of the vote; he was then elected after the second round on 13 October with nearly 73 per cent, or more than 2.7 million ballots cast in his name, in a contest with a 57 per cent participation rate.

His election took place amid political turmoil.¹³ Many young Tunisians welcomed his victory with a sense of relief. Citizen campaigns sprang up to clean up streets and launch a boycott of food products that had been targeted by speculators.¹⁴ Young people spontaneously painted murals featuring Saïed on city walls across the country. The political atmosphere shifted noticeably from resignation to hope.¹⁵

As a constitutional expert, Saïed first became a media figure after Ben Ali’s ouster. He was present during the popular Kasbah sit-ins in January and February 2011.¹⁶ He repeatedly took a stand to defend the transitional justice process.¹⁷ His speeches focused on respect for regional equity through legal mechanisms and redistributing central powers to regional and local levels.¹⁸

His ideological tendencies have remained ambiguous, however. His associates are mainly members of the Islamic left (inspired by Iranian thinkers of the 1979 revolution) and separately former far-left leaders who founded a think-tank in 2011, the Front des forces de la Tunisie libre.¹⁹ Saïed and his supporters believe that the populace as a whole must once again become a central political actor. This idea is clearly formulated in his campaign slogan, “the people want”, heard during the Kasbah and Kasbah II sit-ins of January-February 2011. For many, his stern and legalistic demean-

¹³ See Crisis Group Commentary, “La Tunisie se rend aux urnes dans un climat délétère”, 12 September 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group observations, Tunis, October 2019. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis, supporters of Kaïs Saïed, Tunis, October 2019.

¹⁵ See “Impressionnant : des Tunisiens célèbrant la victoire de Kaïs Saïed”, *Réalités*, 13 October 2019. Crisis Group observations, Tunis, October 2019. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis, supporters of Kaïs Saïed, Tunis, October 2019.

¹⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°106, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia’s Way*, 28 April 2011.

¹⁷ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, *Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption*, 3 May 2016.

¹⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Tunisia’s Way*, op. cit. See also Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°124, *Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges*, 6 June 2012. See Kaïs Saïed’s speeches available on YouTube. A poster that hangs in Saïed’s office and appears in some of his political documents shows Tunisia adorned with the scales of Themis, representing justice.

¹⁹ The best-known of the far-left leaders is Ridha Mekki, nicknamed “Ridha Lenin”. In the late 1970s, Mekki was one of the main theorists of the Democratic Patriots’ Party (Watad, of Marxist-Leninist heritage). Today, these leaders have formed the Mouvement pour une nouvelle construction, a group that supports Saïed. Crisis Group interviews, leader of the Front des forces de la Tunisie libre, Watad activist, former activist of the Al Jumhuri party, Tunis, September 2019; and Crisis Group interviews, former leader of the Democratic Current, sociologists close to the former 15/21 group (progressive Islamists active in the early 1980s), An-Nahda activists, journalists, Tunis, September-November 2019.

our, his precise diction in classical Arabic and personal frugality all reflect the rational and impersonal legal nature of institutions, which political parties had seemingly erased through their involvement in governance.²⁰

Saïed's strict respect for legal frameworks seems to respond to popular demand to see application of the principle of equality before the law. Attaining such equality would mean restoring public authority and improving its ethical standards, having a strictly neutral judiciary, and dismantling networks built on corruption and cronyism.²¹ He defends the idea of restoring strong public services in the fields of education, health and transport, citing Tunisia's service provision in the 1960s as an example.²²

Saïed is critical of the 2014 constitution and the mixed parliamentary system it set up. He contends that the constitution and proportional voting system have perverted the popular will to the benefit of a cartel of political parties. He denounces partisan organisations and suggests building a new institutional and political architecture based on local democracy and the ability to remove elected officials.²³ Saïed's "followers", as they like to be known, abstained from voting in the 6 October 2019 legislative elections – which saw a turnout of barely 40 per cent – because he put forward neither a political party nor an independent list.

He also campaigned on the theme of promoting a degree of economic independence. In particular, he emphasised fighting elite corruption and redistributing political power to the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, two measures that would allow the country to better resist pressure from abroad, especially in terms of economic policy.²⁴

In addition, his appearance, judged to be upstanding and austere, harks back to the image of a frugal Tunisia that can "do without external funds and that nobody can buy", as a sociologist noted.²⁵ Saïed's integrity seems to reflect this view: a simple lifestyle, a residence in a working-class neighbourhood, an inexpensive car, a campaign consisting of visits to cafés in the country's interior, and refusal to let the state reimburse him for first-round campaign expenses, which reportedly amounted to less than 4,000 dinars (about \$1,400).²⁶

Saïed's supporters also denounce the alleged plunder of natural resources, stressing how important these are to the struggle for economic independence. Many of his supporters, including young Tunisians who feel they deserve better social conditions (unemployed graduates, for example), claim that Tunisia is rich in natural resources. They contend that the priority should be to eradicate corruption by restoring the state's authority, and that an anti-corruption drive will help the country gain true independence from the great powers. All that would then remain to be done is to freely

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis, supporters of Kaïs Saïed, September-October 2019.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis, September-October 2019.

²² See the televised debate between Kaïs Saïed and Nabil Karoui, 11 October 2019.

²³ See Kaïs Saïed, "For a new constituent phase", campaign leaflet, 2019. See interviews with Kaïs Saïed, *Al-Chari' al-Maghrabi*, 11 June 2019 and 18 September 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, student supporters of Kaïs Saïed, university professors of history and political science, Tunis, Sfax, September 2019.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tunisian sociologist, Tunis, October 2019.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, member of Kaïs Saïed's electoral team, September 2019.

redistribute wealth to foster prosperity. Such views of Tunisia's problems imply that the West stands in the way of solutions.²⁷

Kaïs Saïed's rhetoric also defends a vision of sovereignty linked to national identity. In his view, Tunisia's identity as an Arab Muslim country is threatened by foreign intervention, including within the private sphere.²⁸ On several occasions, Saïed has spoken about criminalising any attempt to normalise diplomatic relations with Israel.²⁹ As for the three polarising issues raised in the Colibe report: Saïed opposes abolishing the death penalty; he is against gender equality in matters of inheritance; and he holds mixed views about decriminalising homosexuality.³⁰

IV. New Sovereignist Forces in a Fragmented Parliament

The parliament elected on 6 October 2019 is more fragmented than its predecessor elected in 2014.³¹ The two parties that won the most votes, An-Nahda (54 seats out of 217) and Qalb Tounes (38 seats), were unable to form a majority coalition alone, contrary to the 2014 governing coalition of Nida Tounes (86 seats) and An-Nahda (69 seats).

While the 2014 coalition formed reduced the polarisation between Islamists and anti-Islamists, it proved incapable of meeting the socio-economic and institutional challenges of the post-2011 democratic transition. Its failure led to popular demands for more sweeping change, which found expression through the language of a sup-

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, student supporters of Kaïs Saïed, university professors of history and political science, Tunis, Sfax, September 2019.

²⁸ Céline Lussato, "Ai-je l'air d'un salafiste ?" : Kaïs Saïed, favori de la présidentielle tunisienne, s'explique", *L'Obs*, 20 September 2019.

²⁹ See the televised debate between Kaïs Saïed and Nabil Karoui, 11 October 2019. See also Kaïs Saïed's speech, video, YouTube, 13 October 2019.

³⁰ On the issue of gender equality in inheritance, he stated that as long as grandsons were legally responsible for their grandparents, it was not justified that granddaughters should have an equal inheritance. While he did not oppose the decriminalisation of homosexuality, arguing that "everyone has freedom in their private life", he argued that freedom in the private sphere was different from freedom in the public sphere. Finally, he defended the death penalty by explaining to a foreign journalist that this choice was "that of a nation" and not of "conservatism". See Lussato, "Ai-je l'air d'un salafiste ?", op. cit.

³¹ The Assembly currently consists of seven main parliamentary groups: An-Nahda (54 seats), the Democratic Bloc (Democratic Current and People's Movement, 41 seats), Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia, 38 seats), the Dignity Coalition (eighteen seats), the Free Destourian Party (seventeen seats), the National Reform (Machrou Tounes, Nida Tounes, Al Badil and Afek Tounes, fifteen seats) and Tahya Tounes (fourteen seats). Created in June 2019, Qalb Tounes is a liberal and secular party that sprang from Nida Tounes. It is led by Nabil Karoui, who gained many supporters among the poorest communities thanks to a political campaign full of charitable displays that began in 2016. Machrou Tounes (Project Tunisia) is an anti-Islamist, liberal and secular party, which also emerged from Nida Tounes. It was founded in March 2016 by Mohsen Marzouk, former secretary-general of Nida Tounes. Afek Tounes (Horizons of Tunisia) is a liberal and secular party that has been present in parliament since 2011. Its president, Yassine Brahim, served as minister of development, investment and international cooperation in 2015-2016. Created in January 2019, Tahya Tounes (Long Live Tunisia) is the party of Youssef Chahed, a former Nida Tounes activist, who served as prime minister after August 2016. See section IV of this report for a description of the other parties.

posedly violated national sovereignty. Thus, Nida Tounes and An-Nahda fell victim to a protest vote (the former lost almost all its deputies, winning no more than three seats), while the so-called sovereignist forces benefited electorally from the demands for change, securing nearly half of the new Assembly.

One sovereignist section (the Democratic Current and People's Movement) is represented in the cabinet of Elyes Fakhfakh alongside An-Nahda and independent parties, some of which are politically close to the president and the prime minister; another part is in the opposition (Dignity Coalition and Free Destourian Party). Like Saïed, most stand behind the demands expressed during the 2010-2011 uprising (such as fighting corruption, tackling youth unemployment and reducing inequality in regional development). But they are also inclined to outbid each other on questions such as the need for a stronger state, to fight corruption and defend national sovereignty.

One of these new sovereignist forces is the Democratic Current, which has grown from three seats in 2014 to 22 seats in 2019 and holds three ministries in the Fakhfakh government. Created in 2013, it is headed by Mohamed Abbou, minister of public service.³² This party was the first to embrace the popular themes of combating corruption and restoring a strong state in the name of the values expressed during the 2010-2011 uprising. Since 2017, it has been reconciling a respect for liberal values (notably on the questions of democracy, human rights and equality) with the fight for the return of a "strong and just state" and the strict use of the law against "the corrupt".³³

Another such force is the People's Movement, which grew from three to fifteen deputies and holds two ministries in the Fakhfakh government. This Arab nationalist movement used to be a member of the Popular Front (a coalition of far-left and Arab nationalist figures that became a political party in July 2019) and was led from 2011 to 2013 by Mohamed Brahmi, a parliamentarian assassinated in July 2013.³⁴ The party is focused on the defence of economic sovereignty, cultivates anti-Western rhetoric and strongly opposes normalising relations with Israel.³⁵ A section of this party considers An-Nahda to be its main political and ideological enemy.³⁶ In January 2020, an independent member of parliament with close ties to this party described dual nationals as "mongrels" who were undermining Tunisia's sovereignty by monopolising political decision-making processes.³⁷

³² Mohamed Abbou was a lawyer who opposed Ben Ali in the 2000s. In 2011-2012, he headed the Congress for the Republic (CPR), the party of the former head of state, Moncef Marzouki.

³³ Samia Abbou, one of its leaders and a member of the previous parliament, denounced numerous cases of corruption during plenary sessions. Crisis Group interviews, Democratic Current leaders, Tunis, November-December 2019. See also Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, 10 May 2017.

³⁴ In December 2014, Boubaker el Hakim, a Franco-Tunisian ISIS jihadist, claimed responsibility for Brahmi's assassination. See "Un parisien revendique les assassinats de Chokri Belaïd et de Mohamed Brahmi", video, YouTube, 18 December 2014.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, trade union leaders, former popular movement activists, Tunis, October-November 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, trade union leaders, former popular movement activists, Tunis, October-November 2019.

³⁷ See "Après avoir qualifié les binationaux de 'bâtards', Safi Saïed leur présente de plates excuses", *Kapitalis*, 14 January 2020.

The Dignity Coalition is present in the Assembly with 21 seats. Formed in February 2019, it is made up of independent lists, led by former Islamic revolutionaries, members of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR), remnants of the Congress for the Republic (CPR, now reduced to a few activists) and two small Islamist parties.³⁸ Its spokesperson, Seifeddine Makhlouf (also one of the primary lawyers of Tunisian Salafi-jihadists), emerged into the spotlight with his repeated attacks upon France and its ambassador, accusing them of plundering Tunisia's natural resources and wanting to change the Tunisian way of life.³⁹ He also regularly accuses the UGTT's executive office of corruption.⁴⁰ He favours the full face veil (*niqab*) for women, opposes any form of feminism and combines machismo, anti-colonialism, anti-corruption, conservatism and the fight against the established economic elite.⁴¹

Finally, the Free Destourian Party (PDL) openly follows in the footsteps of the former regime and is led by Abir Moussi (formerly the assistant secretary-general responsible for women within Ben Ali's dissolved party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally, or RCD). It made its first appearance in parliament with seventeen deputies.⁴² Its president favours a strong presidential system, regularly attacks the 2014 constitution and advocates a ban on An-Nahda, which she describes in terms ("terrorists" or "traitors") similar to those the ousted regime's propagandists used in the 1990s.⁴³ Since the new parliament began its work in December 2019, she has been engaged in a "theatrical duel" with An-Nahda and its president Rached Ghannouchi, contributing to a renewed polarisation of the political scene around the question of Islamism.⁴⁴

V. The Risks of the New Political Configuration

Several risks arise from the fragmentation of the political scene, its confusion and the mutual distrust between the constituent parties. This situation explains why it was so difficult to form a new government after the October 2019 legislative elections. Political alliances came together and fell apart very quickly, sometimes at the

³⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, supporters of the Dignity Coalition, Tunis, June-October 2019. See Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie-France : le désamour", *Jeune Afrique*, 5 December 2019.

⁴⁰ See "L'UGTT porte plainte contre Seifeddine Makhlouf", *La Presse de Tunisie*, 6 November 2019.

⁴¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, An-Nahda and CPR supporters, Tunis, June-October 2019. See Salsabil Chellali, "Tunisie : l'image de Kaïs Saïed détournée pour prétendre de fausses alliances politiques", Agence France Presse, 3 October 2019.

⁴² Hamed Karoui, a former prime minister under Ben Ali, created this party in September 2013 under the name Destourian Movement. The party took on its present name in August 2016.

⁴³ She has notably stated that the 2010-2011 revolution was a plot forged by Europeans, Americans and Zionists. Benoit Delmas, "Tunisie : Abir Moussi dans les pas du maréchal Sissi", *Le Point*, 11 September 2019.

⁴⁴ After being jostled in the corridors of parliament in mid-January 2020 by pro-revolutionaries from 2010-2011 who had gained access to parliamentary premises, she also claimed that political violence was growing in Tunisia and that a political assassination was likely to occur before long. "Abir Moussi prévient contre un assassinat politique et appelle le ministère public à intervenir", *Kapitalis*, 16 January 2020. See also Benoit Delmas, "Tunisie : ambiance délétère à l'Assemblée", *Le Point*, 27 December 2019.

last minute, just as parliament is set to vote on a new government. The volatile nature of these alliances was due to several factors: a lack of mutual trust, which heightened tensions between political parties and weakened negotiations; the split between Islamists and anti-Islamists, which was widened by fresh regional tensions, especially in Libya; and the ideological and political bidding that most medium-sized parties engaged in, demanding more ministerial and ministers of state positions in exchange for their support on the day of the vote.⁴⁵

The ongoing dangers are manifold. Elyes Fakhfakh's government may have no choice but to manage a deteriorating economic situation from day to day.⁴⁶ It will likely face multiple conflicts between independent ministers, some of whom are politically closer to the president or prime minister than others; ministers from An-Nahda; and ministers from sovereignist groups (Democratic Current and People's Movement). The opposition (which also includes the sovereignist Dignity Coalition and Free Destourian Party) will likely seek to gain political advantage by denouncing alleged attacks on national sovereignty, accusing political figures of corruption and spouting virulent pro-Islamist or anti-Islamist rhetoric.⁴⁷ Tunisian society could find itself polarised once more, much like it was in the second half of 2013.⁴⁸

Moreover, failure on the government's part to ensure socio-economic progress could lead to a no-confidence vote in parliament, thereby isolating Saïed, who lacks his own political party. Within the framework of the present constitution, his ability to satisfy the electorate largely depends on the positive impact of the government's policies. "If they are not conclusive, the head of state will pay the price, and we will quickly go from dream to nightmare", notes a leader of the Democratic Current.⁴⁹ The hostility felt toward Saïed may be proportional to the hope he sparked, which could push some of his supporters toward violent forms of protest.

Tunisia has also lost time, and "in view of the economic challenges it faces, time is of the greatest essence for the country", notes a European diplomat.⁵⁰ As it awaited its new political leaders, the state bureaucracy was operating in slow motion. In addition, the absence of a new government for almost four months made it impossible to hold quarterly reviews with the IMF as part of the 2016-2020 plan. The IMF

⁴⁵ Control of the Interior and Justice Ministries is at stake in these partisan struggles. As a trade unionist commented, "several politicians fear that they will be accused of corruption or tax evasion if they do not have strong support within these departments". Crisis Group interview, trade unionist, Tunis, December 2019. Crisis Group interviews, political leaders, journalists, associative activists, political analysts, Tunis, September 2019-January 2020.

⁴⁶ Macro-economic indicators continue to deteriorate, despite an increase in foreign exchange reserves: weak growth (around 1 per cent); a high ratio of wage bills to GDP (over 50 per cent); an external debt of over 100 per cent of GDP; more than 20 per cent of the budget devoted to debt repayment in 2020; a growing external deficit; and a decline in added value in industry since 2017, linked in particular to falling exports and the trade deficit. See the economic indicators of the National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Industry and SMEs.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, political analysts, Tunis, January 2020. The popularity of the Dignity Coalition and the Free Destourian Party is growing. According to a poll by Sigma Conseil, the Free Destourian Party would be voters' top choice in the event of early legislative elections. Sigma Conseil survey, 25 January 2020.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Briefing, *The Tunisian Exception: Success and Limits of Consensus*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Democratic Current leader, Tunis, November 2019.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Tunis, January 2020.

was unable to transfer the loan's last instalments totalling \$1.2 billion. The country risks having to renegotiate a new loan and carry out a certain number of painful reforms beforehand, ranging from a freeze of public energy subsidies to a deep restructuring of public companies.⁵¹

Several economists and senior officials claim that without this loan Tunisia will be unable to balance its annual budget.⁵² Pending new credit, Tunisia could be forced to borrow on the international financial market at very high interest rates, which would permanently deepen its deficit.⁵³ This would cause a further depreciation of the national currency, a wage freeze, public-sector layoffs and a decline in purchasing power, a situation that, in turn, could lead to an increase in crime and social tensions.

Thus, the populist surge together with budgetary austerity could encourage the authorities to appease the hostility of certain sections of the population through high-profile actions, repression and exclusion. For example, a new selective anti-corruption drive could fuel political tensions, discourage investors and increase capital flight. Similarly, anti-Western rhetoric and media manoeuvring aimed, for example, at the EU and IMF delegations could turn the country in on itself, jeopardising its ability to service its external debt, without improving its economic performance.

VI. A Pragmatic Defence of National Sovereignty

Defending Tunisia's sovereignty in the context of a populist surge could polarise the political scene, destabilise institutions and foment distrust of financial donors.

Nevertheless, in the vital area of the economy, this defence can and must be pragmatic and inclusive, generating a win-win situation for Tunisia's main political, trade union, administrative and associative actors, its partner countries and international bodies and organisations.

To this end, with the support of the presidency of the Republic and parliament, Elyes Fakhfakh's government should help create broad dialogue mechanisms that bring together a range of actors: representatives of political parties, whether or not they are in parliament, within the government or in the opposition; elected officials (deputies and mayors); the directors of central administrations; representatives of regional and local administrations; representatives of professional bodies; trade union organisations, in particular the UGTT and the employers' syndicate, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Crafts; and major associations.

These mechanisms would aim to produce consensus on a major long-term national strategic orientation. They could help channel the populist surge by steering some of the ideological controversies raised by political groups toward constructive choices.

These strategic national guidelines would aim, for example, to improve the quality of front-line public services, including health care, social assistance, public transport and education. They would attempt to lift barriers to public action in the economic

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, economists, senior officials, Tunis, December 2019-February 2020.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, economists, senior officials, Tunis, December 2019-February 2020.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, economists, senior officials, Tunis, December 2019-February 2020.

sphere, such as emergency socio-economic legislation making it possible to circumvent red tape in income-generating sectors such as energy.⁵⁴

These guidelines could also outline an inter-ministerial program to fight corruption by tackling the root causes of the multiplication of clientelist networks, which further obstructs decision-making and makes growing segments of the population distrust public institutions. Possible reforms could cover tax and customs, public administration and public companies, or even the integration of part of the informal trade network into the formal economy. It would, however, be judicious for authorities to avoid launching another “war on corruption”, which would necessarily be selective, as noted by Crisis Group in 2017. Such an initiative would be damaging to the country’s economy.⁵⁵

As some experts recommend, these guidelines could also provide for the creation of an economic intelligence agency combining public and private operators to harmonise national economic decisions: strategic forecasting, opening up to new markets and more efficient use of international aid.⁵⁶

For its part, the EU could support these guidelines, from their drafting to their implementation, and play a mediating role so that international donors – in particular the IMF – follow suit. It could also adapt its financial assistance by focusing on areas it already supports to some degree, but which so-called sovereignist political forces are less inclined to associate with foreign interference, as was the case with the promotion of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement or the support for gender equality in matters of inheritance.⁵⁷ Public administration reform, anti-trust enforcement and development aid for peripheral regions are notable examples.⁵⁸

VII. Conclusion

It is imperative to stop the populist surge from turning into a permanent feature of Tunisia’s political landscape. Such a surge would diminish the country’s ability to face economic challenges and react quickly to the deterioration of the national economy or an external shock. Thus, it is important to work toward increasing Tunisia’s economic sovereignty, responding to popular expectations while safeguarding the country’s integration into the European Economic Area. To this end, dialogue mechanisms must be set up to bring together Tunisia’s main political, trade union, administrative and associative actors to define a long-term national strategic orientation.

Tunis/Brussels, 4 March 2020

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, economists, economic intelligence expert, former deputies, Tunis, January 2020. See also “Tunisie : la loi d’urgence économique de nouveau d’actualité pour relancer l’investissement”, *Kapitalis*, 25 December 2019.

⁵⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, economists, businessmen, Tunis, 2019. See also “Mohamed Balghouthi, Expert Intelligence Economique, Consultant, Enseignant, Conférencier”, *Express FM*, 13 December 2019.

⁵⁷ See “Les négociations autour de l’ALECA, un crime contre la Tunisie”, *Popular Front* press release, 31 May 2018.

⁵⁸ See the Crisis Group EU Watch List 2020, 29 January 2020.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Charles Koch Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Korea Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, UniKorea Foundation, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

March 2020

Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

Israel/Palestine

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Middle East Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°187, 21 June 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Evading the Gathering Storm, Middle East Briefing N°70, 29 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, Middle East Report N°207, 11 October 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS, Middle East Report N°208, 18 November 2019.

Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, Middle East Report N°209, 25 November 2019 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

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Stopping the War for Tripoli, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°69, 23 May 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen, Middle East Briefing N°52, 13 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace, Middle East Briefing N°54, 11 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

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The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Briefing N°65, 6 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine, Middle East Report N°193, 21 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen, Middle East Report N°203, 18 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment, Middle East Report N°205, 1 August 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape, Middle East Briefing N°71, 30 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact, Middle East Report N°206, 19 September 2019 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Four: A Requiem? Crisis Group Middle East Report N°210, 16 January 2020 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).



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