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Social, Economic and Political Dynamics in Tunisia and the Related Short- to Medium-Term Scenarios

by Maryam Ben Salem



ABSTRACT

Tunisia is the only Arab Spring country which has succeeded so far in its democratic transition. Now that all the democratic institutions have been put in place, and after the legislative and presidential elections of 2014, the chances of democratic consolidation remain to be seen. Yet the regime faces serious challenges that cast doubt on its survival capacity. The political dynamics at play after the 2014 elections, which allowed Nidaa Tounes to come to power, cannot be understood without taking into account the conditions surrounding the political transition itself. The National Dialogue, hosted by the Quartet who were recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, is key to understanding the ongoing process of democracy consolidation. Taking into account both contingent and structural factors, this paper analyses how the current context is likely to shape the choices of the presidency of the Republic and of the Essid government, as well as the implications in terms of their legitimacy.

Tunisia | Domestic policy | Political parties | Trade unions | Democracy | Economy | Security



Social, Economic and Political Dynamics in Tunisia and the Related Short- to Medium-Term Scenarios

by Maryam Ben Salem*

Introduction

Tunisia is the only Arab Spring country which has more or less succeeded in its transition. In fact, according to Alfred Stepan, Tunisia has met all the requirements of democratic transition¹ that he and Juan Linz identified in their seminal contribution to the democratisation literature. The first of these requirements is "sufficient agreement" on "procedures to produce an elected government." The second is a government that comes to power as "the direct result of a free and popular vote." The third is this government's *de facto* possession of "the authority to generate new policies," and the fourth is that "the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies *de jure*" (such as military or religious leaders).²

Now that all the democratic institutions have been put in place, and that legislative and presidential elections have been held in October and November 2014 respectively, we need to know the chances of democratic consolidation, in other words if the regime seems to be "likely to endure," as underlined by Guillermo O'Donnell.³ This question is even more crucial as the regime is facing serious crises that cast doubts on its survival capacity. An unfavourable economic outlook and a very unstable security situation have added to highly contested political decisions

¹ Alfred Stepan, "Tunisia's transition and the twin tolerations", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2012), p. 90, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/node/358>.

² Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 4.

³ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1996), p. 37.

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and economic as well as security guidelines/directions, casting the shadows of a potential deep social crisis.

The political dynamics at play after the legislative and presidential elections of 2014, which allowed Nidaa Tounes to come to power, cannot be understood without taking into account the conditions surrounding the political transition process itself. After the assassination of Deputy Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, Tunisia went through a political crisis the outlines of which correspond to the characterisation by Michel Dobry: the loss of autonomy of the political sphere, and its permeability to the requests and “moves” from “external” players.⁴ The strong contestation of the Troika government, both by the street and by the deputies within the National Constituent Assembly (NCA),⁵ was a breaking point in the transition process, signalling loss of electoral legitimacy for the NCA and loss of trust in the political class. This crisis was solved via the National Dialogue (ND), which is hosted by four organisations known as the Quartet – the Tunisian General Labour Union (*Union générale tunisienne du travail*, UGTT), the *Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts* (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat*, UTICA), the *Tunisian Human Rights League* (*Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, LTDH) and the *Tunisian Order of Lawyers* (*Ordre national des avocats de Tunisie*) – and has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Autumn 2015 for its efforts.

Through the agreement signed on the organisation of elections, the ND showed the return of the institutional arena⁶ as the focal point of political decision-making, re-sectoralising the political game. But it was primarily an appropriate framework for identifying the key players, the accumulation and the assessment of the political resources and the setting of the rules of the political arena: the emergence of Nidaa Tounes as a political force and a serious alternative to Ennahdha, the restructuring/reshaping of the role of UGTT and UTICA, the exclusion of the Popular Front (*Front Populaire*)⁷ and so on.

⁴ Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques. La dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP, 1986; Richard Banegas, “Les transitions démocratiques: mobilisations collectives et fluidité politique”, in *Cultures & Conflits*, No. 12 (Winter 1993), p. 105-140, <http://conflits.revues.org/443>.

⁵ Sit-in, called Itissam errahil (sit-in of departure), organised after the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, by dissident deputies of the NCA calling for the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the NCA. They were later joined by thousands of protesters.

⁶ By this, we mean that political institutions and the State regained their legitimacy as a place of political decision. However, the National Dialogue has also given legitimacy to corporate claims of the UGTT and UTICA since it allowed them to appear as organisations working primarily for national interest.

⁷ The Popular Front was part of the National Dialogue, but the gap between its vision and expectations and the resolution of the crisis context that led Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes to ally, maintained the party in an oppositional role.

Through the transformation of the system of interaction between the players to which it led, the National Dialogue is a very relevant framework of interpretation that helps to understand better the ongoing process of democracy consolidation. What has happened within the ND and the consequences are essential to comprehend what is happening today in terms of alliances among political players, their positioning and their strategic orientations.

Taking into account both the specific cyclical factors of that period (economic crisis, security threats) and the effects of the current context of widened tactical interaction, we analyse how they shape and determine the choices and decisions of the presidency of the Republic and of the Essid government, as well as their implications in terms of legitimacy and the discrediting of power.

We argue that, though many factors pose potential threats to the stability of the government, including the economic crisis, the security crisis and disputed political decisions, stability mainly depends on collusive transactions between Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes, UTICA and UGTT.

In this paper we will first highlight the political alliances that were formed after the legislative and presidential elections of 2014, which will allow us to analyse how these alliances consolidate political choices and become a supporting force preventing social and political crisis. Next, we will look at the dynamics between UGTT and UTICA, and their impact on the support – or the lack thereof – of a government that promotes potentially socially infuriating economic choices in a context of severe crisis. Finally, we will examine the security policy of the government with regards to the terrorist threat, which represents its biggest challenge today.

1. Political dynamics

1.1 *The game of political alliances*

The ND contributed significantly to the current configuration of alliance games within the power circle. It constituted an excellent opportunity for the mobilisation of political resources for certain players, which they continue to use, as well as for the legitimisation of their roles and crystallisation of their specific identities. The national dialogue imposed the employers' organisation, the labour union and two political parties – Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha – as the most influential and legitimate players.

The Ennahdha party, which was the majority with the NCA and which governed within a coalition called the Troika for three years,⁸ saw a reduction of its influence.

⁸ Made up of the Ennahdha Movement, the Congress for the Republic (*Congrès pour la République*, CPR) and Ettakatol.

Today it holds 69 seats in the parliament compared with 86 for Nidaa Tounes (out of a total of 217 seats).

Without a parliamentary majority, Nidaa Tounes, which had built its electoral campaign on the promise that it would remove Ennahdha from power, today has to live with the Islamists. The composition of the first government proposed by the head of the government, Habib Essid, which did not include any members of Ennahdha or other allied parties (specifically Afek Tounes), was rejected. In the second proposal (the current government), which obtained a majority of 166 votes during a vote of confidence, Ennahdha has one ministerial position (vocational training and employment) and three secretaries of state. This coalition, often referred to as “unnatural,” is not that surprising if we take into account the fact that it is consistent with the transaction between the two parties in the framework of the ND.

The coalition is presented as a guarantee of political stability because it forces Ennahdha to support the government in case of difficulties or failure. But one of the most remarkable consequences of the alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha is that it has widely contributed to shifting the political polarisation, from that between “antagonising societal projects” which marked the transition period and was one of the main electoral themes during the legislative elections of October 2014, to a polarisation of “liberalism vs socialism” on the one hand and “democrats vs symbols of the old regime” on the other.

The new power balance within the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP), namely the alliance between Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes and Afek Tounes, marginalised even more the parties who were the losers of the ND, either because they refused to take part in it (e.g., the Congress for the Republic), or because they stood out via intransigent positions regarding the negotiations with Ennahdha (e.g., the Popular Front). They find themselves forced to mobilise the only resource available to them, that around which they created their political identity: the call for collective mobilisation, using in turn two nuances of protest, either that of democracy or the defence of the poorest.

Leaving the political arena to the professionals was one of President Beji Caid Essebsi’s showpieces during his electoral campaign, an attempt to exclude outside players and to devalue non-institutional political resources, namely collective action. These had in fact gained legitimacy during the revolutionary moment and during the political crisis of July 2013. The implementation of legitimate institutions should devalue this type of resource in the political arena. As such, the role of UGTT was decisive insofar as the union had often given considerable legitimacy and size to collective mobilisation whenever it was involved (e.g., the uprising of January 2011, the general strike decreed after the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi and the civil society initiative to resolve the political crisis the country was experiencing on 17 September 2013).

UGTT and UTICA, both having gained strength from the negotiations of the ND, kept their positions as influential players in the political arena, positions which have been further reinforced in the context of economic and social crisis. This current delicate situation has created a certain permeability between different arenas. For the main decisions taken by the current government or the presidency of the Republic, the interventions by and reactions of these two institutions are crucial in the game of support of and opposition to government action: UGTT with its potential for mobilisation and negotiation, and UTICA with its lobbying strength. This was the case for example in the movement of governors and the draft law on economic and financial reconciliation, currently a source of disagreement among the political elite.

1.2 Start of a de-legitimacy?

Actions by the government and by the presidency of the Republic are assessed and judged by the opposition against the two registers mentioned above: social justice and democracy. Fears of a return to the dictatorship practices of the Ben Ali era are being felt, especially by the political class and civil society. After the promulgation of the anti-terror law and the declaration of the state of emergency which followed the terror attacks in Sousse, these concerns were reinforced by the nomination of a former RCD⁹ member as governor in the latest governors' reshuffle. This choice, as such, does not necessarily reflect a return of the old regime; neither does it constitute the premises of a break from democracy. Guy Hermet has shown, in the cases of Spain and Portugal, how negotiation between figures of the old regime and the new democrats strengthened the consolidation of democracy in what he calls "the impure effects of connivance."¹⁰ On the other hand, a governor from Ennahdha is now included in the list of governors, as is an activist from UGTT. Although the union denies any relationship or that influence was used in this nomination, and Ennahdha criticises the fact that it was not consulted in the reshuffle, it is possible that these two nominations were the result of a collusive transaction, understood here, as specified by Dobry, as a service rendered in expectation of reciprocity which may not be immediate.¹¹ It is an anticipation of support by UGTT and Ennahdha aimed specifically at reinforcing collusive relationships.

However, such deals damage the democratic credibility and legitimacy of the government. Especially regarding timing, these nominations coincide with the proposed draft law on economic and financial reconciliation,¹² another thorny

⁹ *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (Democratic Constitutional Rally) – formerly the party in power.

¹⁰ Guy Hermet, "La démocratisation à l'amiable, de l'Espagne à la Pologne", in *Commentaire*, Vol. 13, No. 50 (Summer 1990), p. 283.

¹¹ Michel Dobry, "Valeurs, croyances et transactions collusives. Notes pour une réorientation de l'analyse de la légitimation des systèmes démocratiques", in Javier Santiso (ed.), *A la recherche de la démocratie. Mélanges offerts à Guy Hermet*, Paris, Karthala, 2002, p. 103-120.

¹² Bill No. 49 of 16 July 2015: *Projet de loi organique portant mesures exceptionnelles relatives*

issue which again exposes the precarious nature of political stability.

From the point of view of the strategic play of the actors, this draft law proposed by President Beji Caid Essebsi aims to ally to his cause the economic elite who were involved in the dealings of the old regime. Article 2 of the draft law states, "to stay all proceedings, judgments and sentences issued on employees of the State for violations related to financial embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds". Article 7 concerns businessmen,¹³ who could benefit from the amnesty procedures in front of an ad hoc commission made up of representatives of the ministries and a member of the Truth and Dignity authority. The latter is thus removed from the transitional justice process of which it is in charge in virtue of the constitution. The draft law states in fact the cancellation of the Basic Law No. 53 of 24 December 2013 to establish and organise transitional justice.¹⁴ This collusive transaction, as defined by Dobry, between an economic elite which is trying to reposition itself in the economic and political arena, and the new political elite represented by the *nidaists*, is meant to give a new push to the Tunisian economy by allowing the restitution of 5 billion dinars (2.6 billion dollars) and favouring domestic investments, but also foreign ones, thanks to the establishment of "an adequate environment encouraging investment and promoting the national economy" (Article 1 of the draft law). That is, at least officially, the justification. This reactivation of the economy should, as a knock-on effect, contribute to the stability of the regime. As such, it should be noted that many economists have expressed serious doubts about the expected effect of the reconciliation on the economy (in the short and medium term). The Tunisian economist Hédi Sraieb, for example, considers that the predictions regarding economic repercussions might be outdated given the risks taken at the political level for such an amnesty.¹⁵

President Beji Caid Essebsi took advantage of the fact that the balance of powers is not yet operational in the absence of a Constitutional Court to rule on the constitutionality of this draft law. A constitutional motion is possible, however, to grant temporary authority for the control of constitutionality of draft laws¹⁶ to one of the parties qualified to do so, either the president of the Republic, the head of the government or thirty deputies (Organic Law No. 14 of 18 April 2014¹⁷), who have already expressed their rejection of this draft law.

à la réconciliation dans les domaines économique et financier, <http://majles.marsad.tn/2014/fr/docs/55d3497212bdaa20aa5b44f8>. Full text in French: <http://wp.me/p1kxVH-26m>.

¹³ Thirty-nine businessmen are supposed to be the beneficiaries of this amnesty but their names have not yet been made public.

¹⁴ Loi organique relative à l'attribution et l'organisation de la justice transitionnelle, <http://www.legislation-securite.tn/fr/node/32961>.

¹⁵ Hédi Sraieb, "Loi de réconciliation? ...ou loi d'amnistie fiscale et pénale?", in *Leaders*, 1 September 2015, <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/17852>.

¹⁶ Provisional Commission to Review the Constitutionality of Draft Laws (Instance provisoire de contrôle de la constitutionnalité des projets de loi, IPCCPL).

¹⁷ Loi organique relative à la création de l'instance provisoire du contrôle de la constitutionnalité des projets de lois, <http://www.legislation-securite.tn/fr/node/33668>.

The presidency of the Republic, through its spokesperson, is refusing to withdraw this draft law despite the tensions it has generated. The draft law has a good chance of being adopted by the ARP, if we include Ennahdha's support, who without rejecting it fully is asking for amendments to be brought to it.¹⁸ The president can also rely on the vote of the Afek Tounes bloc (8 seats), another party that is a member of the government coalition, and of the Free Patriotic Union (*Union patriotique libre*, UPL) (16 seats).

UTICA in turn supports this draft law, in conjunction with a statement by the representatives of the private sector under the leadership of UTICA, calling for a quick national reconciliation and for a one-year moratorium on strikes.¹⁹

The consequences at the political and social levels indicate the beginning of a delegitimisation of the current government in the short term, understood here as the withdrawal of wide support which could lead to the erosion of belief in the legitimacy of the political authorities. In fact, the opposition to this draft law from a section of the political elite and civil society is based on a fear of the return of fraudulent practices and corruption. What is worthy of attention here is the resource used by the political parties, namely the Popular Front, to contest this draft law: the street. The Popular Front is using the resources it gathered, especially during the national dialogue, and the identity it built, to call once again on the street, the only resource available to it given the current power balance within the ARP. The deputy of the Popular Front, Mr Mongi Rahoui, said on this matter: "Through this draft, the President is threatening the security of the country as he is pushing people to infringe the state of emergency and to demonstrate in the streets against this law which recycles corruption. It should be pulled out in a pacific manner before the street takes it upon itself to do so."²⁰

A protest/demonstration against the law on reconciliation, employing the slogan "I will not forgive" took place on 1 September 2015 in Tunis and was confronted by the police, who used tear gas to disperse the crowds. Multiple demonstrations broke out in the regions, under the direction of the Popular Front. On the other hand, five parties (Jomhuri, Ettakattol, People's Movement, Democratic Current and Democratic Alliance Party) launched a coordination committee which aims to block the adoption of this draft law. The coalition organised a mobilisation on 12 September 2015.

¹⁸ In an interview on the radio station Shems FM, Rached Ghannouchi, chairman of Ennahdha, stated his movement's support for this draft law. See Hajer Ben Hassen, "Ghannouchi soutient entièrement le projet de loi de réconciliation économique", in *Réalités*, 26 August 2015, <http://www.realites.com.tn/2015/08/ghannouchi-soutient-entierement-le-projet-de-loi-de-reconciliation-economique>.

¹⁹ UTICA, *Signature d'une déclaration du secteur privé*, 10 July 2015, http://www.utica.org.tn/Fr/actualites_7_9_D910.

²⁰ "Mongi Rahoui : Le Président menace la sûreté du pays par le projet de loi sur la réconciliation", in *Tuniscope*, 15 July 2015, <http://mai.tuniscope.com/article/74100>.

Thus, the coercive management of social movements by the State may inflame tensions even more and thus reinforce the belief that democracy is threatened by a government which tries to muzzle the opposition. The likelihood of the demonstrations against the draft law on reconciliation leading to a social crisis will largely depend on the degree of support it receives from UGTT. It is not a question of whether or not the union will accept the draft law, but a question of finding out if UGTT will refrain from calling for collective mobilisations as a sign of protest. After a consensual position according to which the draft law should only be amended, UGTT ended up rejecting it yet without calling on the street. Its current position regarding this issue is limited to condemning the repression of social movements. Other than sectoral union concerns, such as the elementary school teachers' strike, UGTT has refrained from any frontal positions on the political level, as was the case under the government of the Troika.

Introducing political measures that ignore the process of transitional justice by calling back people politically or economically linked to the previous regime does not in itself constitute a threat to the democratic consolidation process. As we pointed out earlier, the Spanish transition is a good example in the sense that it was led by King Juan Carlos, designated by Franco himself as his successor, and Prime Minister Adolfo Suarez, an ex-minister of the unique ruling party. The Moncloa agreements, signed by all the Spanish political parties on 25 and 26 October 1977, are clear illustrations of the importance of continuity in any process of transition to democracy. The much criticised economic stabilisation plan of the Moncloa agreements was finally accepted because of the willingness of the political class to reach a consensus and thanks to significant popular support.²¹

In the Tunisian case, on the contrary, the government must deal with calls for clean cuts with the past as well as political fights. Taking into consideration the Tunisian context, characterised during the transition phase by a systematic rejection of the political players of the old regime, the election of a former RCD member as a governor is a much more clumsy decision than the project of economic and financial reconciliation. Indeed, the economic elite can be seen as having had no choice beyond conformism under an authoritarian regime, but the same can hardly be said for the political class. Strangely enough, this election went unnoticed in comparison to the violent reactions sparked by the economic and financial reconciliation. The transitional justice process in the hands of the Truth and Dignity Commission (*Instance Vérité et Dignité*, IVD) is an important issue for Tunisian civil society and, ultimately the question becomes: to what extent does a long-drawn-out transitional justice process, and hence the confirmed exclusion of part of the economic elite, constitute a threat to the performance of the state apparatus? It appears to us that, in this specific case, overcoming the economic

²¹ Edith Jaillardone, "L'Espagne post-franquiste: le consensus et ses équivoques", in *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1979), p. 297, <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.3406/rfsp.1979.418593>.

crisis is an absolute precondition for the legitimacy and authority of the State. For this to happen, the reconciliation must have a decisive economic impact (which is not guaranteed, according to economists) and the government must be convincing about the relevance of this decision. Indeed, Nidaa Tounes MPs have shown themselves divided on the issue and those who are convinced by this option have been unable to defend it, creating the image of a party weakened by its own contradictions.

2. Recession, economic policy and the threat of social crisis

The economic crisis Tunisia has been undergoing in recent years is one of the main difficulties facing the current government. With an unemployment rate of 15 percent that reaches 30 percent for university graduates (39 percent for women and 20.8 percent for men),²² a rate of inflation of 5.3 percent,²³ a growth rate revised down for the second time this year (from 1.7 to 0.7 percent vs the 3 percent initially forecast)²⁴ with negative growth outlook by the end of the year, Tunisia is bound to enter into a period of technical recession. If the economic crisis is a legacy of the Ben Ali regime, it has been deepened by the political instability of the transition phase as well as the existing security threats.

The question now is how the Essid government will manage this situation and to what extent it constitutes a threat to political stability and thus democratic consolidation. This is even more important as most specialists in *consolidology* state that the chances of survival of a democracy depend on its capacity to create development.²⁵

For now, in the absence of a five-year development plan for 2016-20, the government is managing the economic crisis on a day-to-day basis. The programme announced by the head of the government, Habib Essid, during his speech at the ARP as well as the complementary finance law tend towards a greater liberalisation of the Tunisian economy as recommended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The latter recommends for Tunisia a reduction of public spending, considering that the country must “[a]chieve a better composition of public expenditures by increasing growth-supporting investments and social spending, which includes spending for social safety nets, through controlling the wage bill and reducing ill-targeted subsidies. The recent decline in oil prices

²² National Institute of Statistics, *Note sur l'enquête nationale sur l'emploi 1er trimestre 2015*, Bulletin statistique P 0201, July 2015, http://www.ins.nat.tn/communiqués/Note_emploi_T1_2015_ar_fr.pdf.

²³ As of 31 July 2015. See Central Bank of Tunisia, *Main Economic Indicators*, <http://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/indicateurs.jsp>.

²⁴ Central Bank of Tunisia, *The Economic Situation Periodical*, No. 108 (July 2015), p. 7, http://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/documents/Conjoncture_ang.pdf.

²⁵ Stephen Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, “The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions”, in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1997), p. 263-283.

provide an opportunity to complete subsidy reforms.”²⁶ Sectoral reforms seem to be hard to control in this exact context, and their implementation will likely be delayed. In any case, they are late in coming and the general orientation seems to suggest more short-term solutions such as the ones specified in the complementary finance law for 2015.

The difficulty lies primarily in striking the balance that must be found between the reforms which must be made, especially at the level of the subsidies fund,²⁷ on the one hand, and the integration of the social dimension in the economic policies in order not to increase further the public’s ire, on the other.

The reduction of the redistribution capacity of the State is a threat to the legitimacy of democracy (as perceived by the citizens). The liberal economic policies adopted by the government and imposed by its debtors would thus be an obstacle in the consolidation process, despite the fact that economic liberalisation preceded democratic transition. The theory of Adam Przeworski according to which economic liberalisation does not threaten democratic consolidation when it occurs either before the transition or after the consolidation seems important for the Tunisian case.²⁸ In the uprisings of December 2010 and January 2011, which led to the fall of the regime, the main demands were for social justice and socio-political rights. The transition period was also accompanied by a noticeable increase in citizens’ expectations for social justice, improvement of living conditions, employment and reduction of regional disparities. Liberal policies, without a clear vision for the long term, for now, in an unstable economic environment, represent a strong destabilising factor.

The questioning of the legitimacy of the government is already being felt through the explosion of social movements, especially in the public sector. It would be impossible to list the number of strikes and demonstrations which have taken place in recent months in Tunisia. As an example, the number of social actions taking place in May, June and July 2015 were, respectively, 317, 287 and 272.²⁹

²⁶ IMF, *Tunisia Program Note*, updated 3 April 2015, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/country/notes/tunisia.htm>.

²⁷ The subsidies system aims at controlling the prices of commodities, including grain products, and overcoming the price increases. A structural reform implemented on 4 July 2003 aimed at cleaning up the subsidies system, reducing the charges of the subsidies fund, involving the private sector in competitive activities and establishing a systematic control on system circuits (production, processing and marketing). See circular No. 06/2008 and circular No. 10/2008. Ministry of Trade, *Présentation de la caisse Générale de compensation*, http://www.commerce.gov.tn/Fr/presentation-de-la-caisse-generale-de-compensation_11_32.

²⁸ Adam Przeworski, “The Neoliberal Fallacy”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July 1992), p. 45-59; Adam Przeworski et al., *Sustainable Democracy*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

²⁹ Forum tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux (FTDES), *Rapport de l’observatoire social tunisien juillet 2015*, <http://ftdes.net/2015/08/rapport-de-lobservatoire-social-tunisien-juillet-2015>.

For now, these social movements remain sectoral and lack visibility, and the chances of de-sectoralisation are minimal.³⁰ Such is the case, for example, of the strikes carried out by elementary school teachers requesting pay rises. Despite the battle between the ministry in charge and the teachers' union, they remain blocked. Similarly, the social movement "where's the oil?" saw attempts aiming to transcend the energy problem and its corollary (the redistribution of wealth, raised by the discovery of an oil well in a delegation of the Tunisian south) to raise an issue of democratic governance (transparency). This social movement was in fact recovered by political players from the opposition (Popular Current and the Congress for the Republic) and demonstrations were organised all over Tunisia. But it was unable to come to fruition and quickly lost momentum because of the loss of legitimacy by the partisan organisations in the eyes of public opinion. Besides, the government considers social movements dangerous to economic development. On this basis, the chief of government announced that an agreement will soon be concluded between the government, UGTT and UTICA establishing social peace until 2017.³¹ This agreement implies the reduction of social movements in order to encourage foreign and domestic investment.

But this should not distract us from the fact that UTICA and UGTT still have diverging interests, although they were downplayed during the national dialogue in favour of more strategic political issues. Rooted in sectoral topics, UGTT cannot take the chance of appearing to its grassroots constituency as compromised, as elections to renew its bureau are approaching. After the signature of the public sector agreement with the government on 22 September 2015,³² UGTT used the threat of a general strike in the private sector if UTICA refused to start negotiations on salaries with the union. The fierce battle between UGTT and UTICA, each one using its political and economic weight for positioning gains, is in itself a sign of erosion of the collusive transaction, which may lead to a deadlock whose consequences for the economy would be egregious.

3. Terrorism and insecurity: incompetence and authoritarian temptation

Currently one of the main factors for instability is the issue of security. Effectively, 2015 has seen many terrorist attacks claimed by Da'esh: the attack on the Bardo Museum in March 2015, the attack in Sousse in June of the same year, as well as various attacks targeting soldiers and security forces.

³⁰ By "de-sectoralisation" we mean, following Dobry, an "opening of arenas" which removes the sectoral specificities of the issues/questions. They become central to other social groups; other players give them sense, and make them the heart of their own mobilisation.

³¹ "Tunisia: PM announces two-year social truce", in *African Manager*, 14 September 2015, http://africanmanager.com/site_eng/tunisia-pm-announces-two-year-social-truce.

³² Tarek Amara, "Tunisian government, UGTT union sign deal on public sector wage hike", in *Daily Mail Online*, 22 September 2015, <http://dailym.ai/1QWpreY>.

The attacks have taken place in an environment marked by the weakness of the security system. It appears that the implementation of reforms in security matters will remain a difficult task as long as the Ministry of Interior is weakened by the different failed reforms due to the polarisation and partisan competition since the revolution.³³ The dismantlement of the "police of the police" (Inspectorate General of the Police) and the forced retirement of high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Interior "led to the freezing of the activities of many departments reporting to the general department of specialized affairs, an important section on the level of intelligence."³⁴ This situation makes it difficult to control the operations and functioning of the ministry as well as its coordination with the army.

In addition, the absence of a public policy for security may seriously weaken the credibility of the government insofar as the main expectation of those who voted for Nidaa Tounes was the restoration of the prestige of the State and its power.³⁵ Following the Sousse attack in June 2015, Beji Caïd Essebsi declared that he was surprised by this attack and that "the system for protection was supposed to start on 1st July."³⁶ Paradoxically, in contrast to this admission of weakness, in his speech to explain his reasons for declaring a state of emergency the head of state showed firmness by pointing the finger at the social movements.³⁷ Social demands are in fact presented as destabilising forces that prevent the security forces from doing their job and weaken the State. The security threat and the management of power over this issue seem to have further intensified the polarisation of "democrats vs caciques of the old regime." As highlighted in a report by the International Crisis Group, the "security necessity" to pause the development of democracy and human rights is supported by the established elites (Tunis and the Sahel), who are opposed to the anti-power and anti-police speech adopted by the impoverished populations and the emerging elites of the south and the interior.³⁸ The latter is the discourse on which the opposition bases its speech and strategy to delegitimise power.

The repression of social movements can only increase defiance towards the security system and centres of power. The justification of repression via the state of emergency is perceived by the opposition as a way to put pressure on those

³³ International Crisis Group, "Réforme et stratégie sécuritaire en Tunisie", in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 161 (23 July 2015), p. 12, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/161-reform-and-security-strategy-in-tunisia.aspx?alt_lang=fr.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁵ According to a survey of 1,700 young persons carried out by the National Observatory for Youth in September 2014, the restoration of the prestige of the State comes at the top of the list of reasons to orient electoral choices for the 2014 elections (27 percent).

³⁶ Interview of the president of the Republic, given to the radio station Europe 1: *Béji Caïd Essebsi, "surpris" d'un attentat sur une plage*, 30 June 2015, <http://eur1.fr/nABTKNg>.

³⁷ Eileen Byrne, "Tunisia's president declares state of emergency following terrorist attack", in *The Guardian*, 4 July 2015, <http://gu.com/p/4acth/stw>.

³⁸ International Crisis Group, "Réforme et stratégie sécuritaire en Tunisie", *cit.*, p. 16.

who see themselves as the “defenders of democracy” by reducing to a minimum their chances for collective mobilisation and blocking their inclination to occupy the streets to save a democracy threatened by a regime that only wants to revive the old one. The stand-off between the government and the opposition around the banning of organised demonstrations respectively by the Popular Front and the Coordination Committee on 12 September 2015 is a strong illustration of the confrontation between a State which is trying to affirm its authority and an opposition who, via the systematic call on the street, questions, in the name of democracy, the functioning of representative democracy.

When it comes to social policies aiming at reducing the underlying roots of terrorism, the most notable decisions have come from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which after the Sousse attack dictated the closing of 42 mosques, the removal of radical imams and the prohibition of Eid prayer outside the mosques. However, the minister of Religious Affairs, who revoked many imams, found himself thwarted by his own government in his project to fight radical Islam. The dismissal of the imam of Sfax (Sidi Lakhmi mosque)³⁹ was rejected by the head of government following protests from Ennahdha. Indeed, Rached Ghannouchi himself denounced the campaign as a “purge” likely to reinforce terrorism.⁴⁰ The minister of Religious Affairs found himself thus forced to suspend his decision under pressure from the head of government. Maintaining the collusive relations between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha therefore comes at the cost of betrayal of those who voted for this party with the hope to exclude Islamists from power.

Conclusion

The shadow of an intense social and political crisis on a backdrop of economic recession poses a real threat of destabilisation to the current government. The accumulation of political decisions that are interpreted and perceived as repressive (the anti-terror law, the state of emergency) and as favouring corruption and impunity (the draft law on economic and financial reconciliation) or reproducing dictatorial practices contributes to the strengthening of critical positions towards the regime. Whether it is the economic stimulus or the anti-terror fight, the solutions proposed to public opinion are each time summed up in a condemnation of collective action.

What is at play today is the confrontation between two types of resources: institutional resources versus collective action. At the moment, the second is devalued and the State is managing social movements in a coercive manner,

³⁹ Myriam Ben Zineb, “Nidaa Tounes-Ennahdha : La guerre froide des imams”, in *Business News*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/nidaa-tounes--ennahdha--la-guerre-froide-des-imams,519,58939,3>.

⁴⁰ “Ridha Jaouadi remonte sur ‘son minbar’ et savoure sa victoire”, in *EspaceManager*, 18 September 2015, <http://www.espacemanager.com/node/42373>.

but this power balance is dependent on the stability of the collusive relationship between the State and UGTT (thus maintaining the differentiation between the political arena and the union arena).

Although the government is highly contested, it is only in case of loss of support by both key players, Ennahdha and UGTT – one at the political level (vote on laws within the ARP) and the other through its ability to contain social contestation – that we might find ourselves in a situation where we risk a loss of legitimacy of the government.

In short, the president of the Republic and the government are on the back foot. They must undertake major reforms and make difficult decisions in the political, economic and security sectors while avoiding the effects of an already maximal risk of social subversion. Moreover, maintaining collusive relations that provide important political support is often done at the expense of compromise (as shown by the case of the dismissal of imams) or is seen as an admission of weakness (as is the case in the face of UGTT), which might increase popular ire and discredit the regime. The stability of these relations is still the safest way to secure a stable government, but this should go hand in hand with a rapid implementation of economic and security reforms and a consolidation of the party ranks of Nidaa Tounes, which too closely resembles a catch-all party struggling with internal conflicts.

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