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Tunisia on the edge

On 16 th May the Tunisian President Béji Caïd Essebsi extended the state of emergency for one additional month, up to 16 June 2017. The decision was taken after consultation with the Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and the speaker of the Asssemblée des représentants du peuple (the Tunisian parliament) Mohammed Ennaceur.

Essebsi explained the extension with reference to the fight against terrorism. Indeed, the state of emergency was introduced in November 2015, after the terrorist attack against the Garde présidentielle in Tunis that followed similar attacks at the Bardo Museum in the capital in March and at the Imperial Marhaba Beach Hotel in Sousse in June.

Nevertheless, the security context improved last year in Tunisia. Tunisian security forces successfully repelled a terrorist attack in Ben Guerdane in March 2016, killing more than 50 militants and preventing their attempt to take control of the border city. Moreover, counterterrorism operations displayed the increasing capabilities of the security forces, which were able to neutralize senior leaders of the jihadist groups.

Considering the recent successes in weakening terrorist cells inside the country, the decision of President Essebsi to prolong the state of emergency appeared controversial. It is noteworthy that the decision increases the powers of the authorities, for example allowing them to ban strikes or censoring the press.

Many observers drew attention to the current socio-economic context as the real reason behind the presidential decision. Protests and demonstrations multiplied since the start of 2017, in particular in the marginalized parts of the country. At the end of March workers of the Coroplast car manufacturing staged sit-ins and closed roads in Kef, protesting against the shutdown of the factory.

The situation in Tataouine was even tenser, as protesters demanded jobs and development projects for the region. Two general strikes took place in Tataouine on 11 April and in Kef on 20 April. Confronted with the growing unrest, on 27 April the Prime Minister Chahed visited Tataouine, promising new measures for the development of the marginalised region. However, the Prime Minister was forced to leave, after the crowd shouted at him in front of the governorate building.

In May things got worse, as protests directly affected the oil and gas output. On 8 th May the Energy Minister Hela Chikhrouhou said that sit-ins halted production at the Baguel and Tarfa fields, operated by the Anglo-French oil company Perenco. Unrest in Tataouine also forced the Austrian company OMV to withdraw 700 non-essential staff and contractors from southern Tunisia as a precaution, while

the Canadian Serinus Energy confirmed that its Chouech Essaida field has been shut since 29 th February.

In this uneasy context, the extension of the state of emergency is undoubtedly motivated by socio-economic reasons. As a confirmation of that, the Tunisian President had already decided to raise the stakes on 11 May, when he ordered the Tunisian army to protect the critical infrastructure of the country, in particular the phosphate, gas and oil production facilities.

In a speech to the nation, Essebsi confessed that it was a difficult decision and acknowledged that the democratic path of the country was at risk. After having been referred to as the only success case of the Arab Spring and commended for its efforts during the transition period, Essebsi's remark confirms that Tunisia is now stuck in a quagmire.

Protests and demonstrations are forcing the hand of the Tunisian authorities, unveiling the discomfort with the social contract resulted from the Jasmine revolution, a discomfort that had already emerged from the resignation of the head of the Instance supérieure indépendante électorale Chafik Sarsar on 9 th May.

Sarsar, who was supposed to oversee the municipal elections set for 17 th December, said that he was unable to carry out his duty independently and impartially. The resignation of Sarsar and the deployment of the army to protect oilfields mark an underground tug of war in Tunisia that could finally reveal the real nature of the regime.

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