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A series of unfortunate events in Tunisia

In the post-Ben Ali era, September 2017 represented a turning point for Tunisia's democratic experiment. Political developments came in succession rapidly, underlining the distance between the legitimate aspirations of the Tunisian people and the evident contradictions inside the ruling elite. On 6th September the Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed announced a partial cabinet reshuffle one year after having been appointed by President Beji Caid Essebsi. The decision came after increased political tensions between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, the leading parties in the government coalition. In an interview in August Ennahda's leader Rached Ghannouchi had called on Chahed to publicly announce that he will not run for the 2019 presidential elections, drawing the ire of Nidaa Tounes officials. On the other hand President Essebsi stoke tensions inside the Islamist Ennahda when he expressed hopes for the abrogation of a 1973 decree that bans Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims and said he was favourable to the gender equality in heritage.

The partial reshuffle didn't alter the political balance inside the majority coalition. Among the new faces was Slim Chaker, appointed Minister of Health, while the independent Abdelkrim Zbidi replaced Farhat Horchani at the Defence Ministry and Lofti Brahem, former head of the Garde Nationale, became Minister of Interior. The choice to appoint Ridha Chalgoum (director of the Prime Minister's office since June) as Minister of Finance was particularly relevant: as Chahed said presenting the new team, the new government will be a war cabinet to tackle the urgent economic reforms needed to consolidate the budget, reduce the trade deficit and help the public companies in financial difficulties [Sana Harb, Tunisia: un "gouvernement de guerre" pour des réformers difficiles exigée par le FMI, Maghreb Emergent, 7 September 2017].

However, a quick look at the profiles of the government's new entries suggests different reasons behind the reshuffle. Zbidi was already Minister of Defence between 2011 and 2013, while Chalgoum was Minister of Finances in 2010-2011 and Hatem Ben Salem, appointed Minister of Education, already held the same office from 2008 to 2011. More importantly, all these figures already served under Ben Ali's rule in different capacities. In this context, the partial reshuffle disappointed the Tunisian people [Emir Sfaxi, In With the Old in Tunisia, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 September 2017], but also highlighted Chahed's increasing isolation weeks after the launch of the fight against corruption in May 2017 [Frida Dahmani, Tunisie: la composition du gouvernement "Chahed 2" dévoilée, Jeune Afrique, 6 September 2017].

For all these reasons most observers believed that the partial reshuffle was planned at the Palais de Carthage and ideated by President Essebsi as a part of a broad strategy to rein in the ambitious Prime Minister [Comment Essebsi a repris le contrôle de l'Exécutif, el-Watan, 13 September 2017]. In the following days, further measures confirmed this speculation, suggesting that a silent restoration was

also taking place. On 13th September the Assemblée des Représentants du peuple (ARP, the Tunisian parliament) approved the economic reconciliation law with 117 votes in favour and nine opposed. Backed by President Essebsi and presented to the ARP in 2015, the law grants amnesty to officials accused of corruption during Ben Ali's rule.

Criticized by opposition parties and demonstrators of the Manich Msamah (I will not forgive!) movement that took the streets immediately after the vote, the economic reconciliation law was perceived as a watershed in Tunisia's recent history. The measure was not only in stark contrast with Chahed's fight against corruption but it also meddled with the prerogatives of the Instance Vérité et Dignité, Tunisia's transitional justice body established in 2013 [Monia Ben Hamadi, Tunisie: Le grand pardon de Beji Caid Essebsi au profit des corruptus, que dit le projet de loi?, Huffington Post Maghreb, 15 September 2017].

On 18th September the announcement that the Tunisia's local elections, expected to take place in December 2017, were postponed indefinitely was a further confirmation of Tunisia's reversing trend. The postponement had been demanded since early September by different parties, including Afek Tounes (part of the government's coalition) and has been motivated by the increasing difficulties of the Instance supérieure indépendante pour les élections (ISIE). The head of ISIE Chafik Sarsar had resigned in May 2017, citing his inability to work independently, impartially and in a transparent way. The postponement had been anticipated by Rached Ghannouchi some days earlier and was accepted by Ennahda, despite the fact that the Islamist party is considered the main favourite in an eventual poll, as it seems more organised and structured than other coalition partners.

The postponement of the local elections, as well as the economic reconciliation law and the partial reshuffle showed that Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes are forced in a marriage of convenience. Both parties cannot survive without clinging to the other in Tunisia's fragmented political landscape. However, Ennahda's inability to resist Essebsi's moves is allowing a gradual restoration to take place, turning the tide of the Tunisia's transition. This could represent a risk for the country's young democracy, as it is depriving the Islamist party of its natural opposition role following the 2014 elections, it is strengthening extra-parliamentarian forces and opposition movements in the streets and it is ushering-in a counter-revolution stage.

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