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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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MAGHREB

Algeria's government reshuffle discloses FLN difficulties

The main political event in Algeria during May 2015 was the cabinet reshuffle, the first after the presidential election of 2014. After consultations with the Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, the 14th May President Bouteflika ordered a government shake-up. Important changes were made in four ministries. Tayeb Belaiz left his place at the Interior ministry to Nourdine Beddouï and Abderhmane Benkhelifa was named as the new minister of Finances. The appointment of Abdelkader Messahel as minister of Maghreb Affairs, African Union and Arab League raised doubts, especially from the Foreign minister, Ramtane Lamamra. It could be expected a new form of dualism between these two figures, detrimental to Algeria's foreign policy.

The designations of the Energy and Culture ministers were particularly relevant: former director of the Algerian Petroleum Institute, Salah Kebri, is the new Energy minister, in a crucial moment for Algerian oil & gas sector, due to the effects of the Sonatrach-Saipem affair. On May 13 the preliminary judicial hearing started in Milan, involving Italian officers, the Algerian mediator Nouredine Bedjaoui and former Energy minister Chabib Khelil. Accuses of corruption were also made against Nadia Labidi, minister of Culture,

replaced by Azzedine Mihuoni. Labidi was suspected of embezzlement and misappropriations of public subsidies and her position became weaker after the critics of the Parti des Travailleurs (PT).

After all, corruption started representing an important issue to deal with not only for the government, but also for the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). The cabinet reshuffle resulted in a blow for the Algerian main political party. Despite the Secretary General Amar Saadani's aspirations of being more represented in the government, Bouteflika's choices were more in line with stability concerns, as represented by the confirmation of Sellal. It is likely that further confrontation between the FLN and the government could be expected, putting more pressure on the leadership role of Saadani in the party.

Jihadist rivalries pose increasing risks to Tunisia

Islamic State (ISIS) expansion in Maghreb is having important consequences on the terrorist groups of the region. Through an audio statement by Adnan Aboud Walid Sharaoui, head of the Sahel branch of al-Mourabitoun, on May 15 the terrorist group pledged allegiance to ISIS. However, the same day the leader of the organization Mokhtar Belmokhtar denied the claim, affirming that al-Mourabitoun will continue to follow al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on the road to jihad. This dispute shows how the rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda in the region is challenging the old leadership of the terrorist groups in the region, creating new dynamics and the risk of further fragmentation of terrorist activities.

The jihadist divide is also affecting Tunisia, where the Islamic State intends to expand and set a new province, Wilayath Ifriqiya. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) is still prevalent in the country, thanks to the activities of the Oqba ibn Nafaa brigade, accused by the authorities to be the main perpetrator of the Bardo attack in March 2015. However, the brigade activities are mainly confined to the Chambi mountains region, while ISIS is claiming the most recent attacks in the country. Strengthened by the chaos in Libya and the smuggling activities in the border region, the Islamic State could pose a more dangerous threat for Tunisia in the next months.

In order to thwart this trend, the Tunisian government is discussing new laws with the aim of improving security and counterterrorism programmes. After the approval of a draft by the cabinet, in April the government approved a new law to conferring new powers to military and security forces. These measures have being criticised by the civil society and activist groups as severely limiting constitutional freedoms and civil rights. For all these reasons, it is likely that Tunisia will continue to manage a delicate balance between the necessity of counterterrorism and the return of a police state as it was during the regime of former president Ben Ali. It can be expected that the result of this balance will not have any direct and deep

consequences on Tunisia's relationship with its main international supporter: the United States elevated the status of Tunisia as Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) during the last visit of President Beji Caïd Essebsi in Washington the 21st May.

Tobruk-Turkey tension persists

In Libya the political dialogue was called off again by the General National Congress (GNC). Tripoli parliament refused the recent draft proposal submitted by the United Nations (UN). Furthermore, the 9th of May 60 out of 200 members of the GNC called to suspend its participation to the United Nations Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)-brokered dialogue and asked for UNSMIL head Bernardino León and other UNSMIL officials to be replaced. Criticism against León was also expressed by some Western officials: in case the political stalemate will persist, it could not be ruled out a new leadership for UNSMIL, in order to strengthen the UN efforts in solving the crisis.

At regional level, the shelling of a Turkish cargo off the Libyan coast on 11th May represented a worrisome signal. Causing one dead and one injured, the attack by Libyan Dignity forces loyal to Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) was carried out to contrast Turkey's supply of weapons and fighters to Islamist parties in Derna. However, the Turkish government stated that the ship was approaching Tobruk for commercial reasons and protested against the attack claiming it occurred in international waters. Although the event did not escalate into a diplomatic row as in the case of Mavi Marmara in 2010, further similar incidents could increase tensions between Tobruk and Ankara in the following months, in particular after the parliamentary elections that will take place in Turkey at the beginning of June.