



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# 2019: a tough year for Tunisia?

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## Summary

A power sharing agreement was negotiated between Nidaa Tounes, the president's secularist party, and centrist Islamists Ennahda in 2014, providing for a coalition government and a degree of consensus on policy.

In the last year or two that consensus has broken down as powerful individuals in the elite have been manoeuvring for personal advantage. President Essebsi put his son at the head of his party and tried to force the Prime Minister out, but several Nidaa MPs subsequently left it. Ennahda, meanwhile, shifted its support to Prime Minister Chahed, depriving Nidaa Tounes of its majority in parliament.

The end of the power-sharing agreement and splits in Nidaa Tounes has made it more difficult to pass legislation and carry out reforms. In May 2018, Ennahda strengthened its position further with a strong performance in elections to local and regional councils, which are being empowered as part of a decentralisation policy.

[Economic problems](#) for Tunisians have been mounting. Unemployment, particularly among young people, is high and inflation has been cutting purchasing power, while the IMF has been imposing austerity policies on the government in exchange for loans to keep the government going. [International economic forecasts](#) suggest that the economy will continue on a gradually strengthening trend.

The biggest union, the UGTT, has called nationwide strikes and persuaded the government to back off a public sector pay freeze.

Institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the Truth and Dignity Commission could do a lot to ensure that democratic rules are not undermined in the increased atmosphere of infighting.

[Tunisians are largely dissatisfied](#) with their economic situation, corruption and the performance of politicians. Meanwhile threats to stability from outside the country and within have not gone away.

[Some observers](#) are concerned that instability, infighting and citizen dissatisfaction in the run-up to this year's planned elections could threaten Tunisia's fledgling democratic project.

# 1. Tunisia's politics

## 1.1 Political system

The present [constitution](#) was introduced in 2014.

The President and the legislature are each elected by universal suffrage for a period of five years.

Tunisia has a unicameral parliament whose 217 members are elected by proportional representation on a party-list system. Party lists must be gender balanced, with women and men alternating in the ranking.

Tunisians may vote from the age of 18 and stand as candidates from the age of 23.

Executive power is shared between the President and the Council of Ministers led by the Prime Minister, who is the leader of the largest group in the Assembly of Representatives of the People (Majlis al-Nuwaab al-Chaab). The president is responsible for defence and foreign policy and security (including calling a state of emergency), in consultation with the government. The President makes several top appointments. She or he can also dissolve the parliament.

## 1.2 Elections 2019

The third round of elections since 2011 will take place in late 2019, with a Parliamentary election to be held on 6 October and a presidential election due on 10 November 2019, [according to a report](#) quoting the Tunisian electoral commission.

## 1.3 Political developments

After the 2014 elections, President Beji Caid Essabsi of Nidaa Tounes and Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahda, struck a power-sharing deal, finalised in January 2015, creating a coalition government.

Shortly afterwards Beiji Caid Essebsi appointed his son party leader and appeared to be grooming him for the succession. The President then started trying to get the Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed, to resign. Nidaa Tounes was beset by splits over the move and in January 2016 several Nidaa Tounes MPs resigned from the party, giving Ennahda a majority in parliament.

This brought to a head the clash between the President, and his former protégé Chahed, then both members of Nidaa Tounes party. Many important figures from Nidaa Tounes supported Chahed.

Ennahda, the mainstream Islamist party, made gains in the May 2018 local elections, clearly beating Nidaa Tounes and strengthening its national presence, although only a third of the electorate turned out. Low participation hit Nidaa Tounes harder than Ennahda, which is a more disciplined party whose support appears to be harder.

The municipal elections, [observed by the Council of Europe](#), were a step in the policy of decentralisation.

Tussles at the top

Boosted by the municipal results and capitalising on the dispute over Essabsi's son, Ennahda transferred its support from Nidaa Tounes to Youssef Chahed.

The combined effect of infighting within Nidaa Tounes and its split with Ennahda has been paralysis in Tunisian politics. Bills are stuck at committee stage. [One report](#) said that hundreds of civil service appointments have been made on the basis of personal connections. The uncertainty over the outcome of the Essebsi/Chahed contest means that many are doing very little as a precaution, so as not to be identified with either side and keep their jobs when one camp or the other does finally win: "senior officials have practically stopped work".<sup>1</sup>

Civil servants  
keeping their heads  
down?

On 24 September 2018 President Essebsi formally announced he was ending the pact between his Nidaa Tounes party and Ennahda, the centrist Islamist party.

Also in September, Prime Minister Chahed announced he was leaving Nidaa Tounes and forming a new party, Tahya Tounes.

In December 2018 Essebsi hit back with investigations into alleged terrorist activities by Ennahda.

Some commentators welcomed the end of the pact, arguing that it would invigorate Tunisian politics.<sup>2</sup> Others worried that the move could increase polarisation and might not improve the system's ability to take political decisions, especially with the Nidaa Tounes party split between supporters of Essebsi and his son, Hafedh, and Chahed's backers.

As the split between Islamists and secularists has hardened, the two sides have attracted some support from the pro- and anti-Islamist camps in the Sunni world; Turkish and Qatari sources tend to side with Ennahda while the Saudis, the Emiratis and the Egyptians are firmly against political Islam. Essebsi has [courted the Saudis](#) but *de facto* Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman, visiting Tunis in November 2018, was greeted by hundreds of protesters angry about the death of Jamal Khashoggi, a supporter of political Islam. [Qatari-backed news sources](#) have warned that Tunisia is "under threat from a Gulf-backed coup". The Saudi/Qatari dispute is intractable and could exacerbate Tunisian divisions.

Saudis and Qataris

## Economic problems

Just like its neighbours, Tunisia is beset by high (and rising) unemployment, generating dissatisfaction among a relatively educated young population. About a third of Tunisian graduates are unemployed. The falling dinar has brought sharp rises in the cost of living while incomes have stagnated. Despite accelerating year-on-year GDP growth of 2.8% in the second quarter of 2018 and a slight moderation of the

<sup>1</sup> [Tunisia in 2019: a Pivotal Year?](#), International Crisis Group, 4 February 2019

<sup>2</sup> Shadi Hamid and Sharan Grewal, [Tunisia Just Lost Its Anchor of Stability. That's a Good Thing.](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 12 October 2018

inflation rate, Tunisian purchasing power continues to decline.<sup>3</sup> The IMF, however, [sees](#) “a certain robustness of the economic recovery”.

The International Monetary Fund has imposed a reform programme in return for a financial support package. The programme includes privatisation, cuts to public expenditure including public sector salary restrictions and has provoked widespread opposition, including demonstrations in January 2018. The programme also led to the [fall in the Tunisian dinar](#), while the national debt soared. Debt service payments were projected to account for some 22% of the government’s budget in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

The powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) staged a nationwide strike in November 2018, then a larger general strike in January 2019 that paralysed the country’s economy and closed its airspace.

The government and the UGTT [reached a deal](#) on pay increases in February 2019 and plans for another nationwide strike were dropped.

Having shared the Nobel Peace Prize for its work supporting the transition to democracy, [some analysts](#) now accuse the UGTT of blocking necessary reforms. Others say the union is justified in trying to protect living standards.

This tussle signalled the shift that is taking place in the country’s politics towards ‘bread and butter’ economic issues, although these are intertwined with the Islamism/secularism debate.

While Ennahda and Nidaa tounes used to be largely in agreement on a free-market economic policy and complying with IMF reform stipulations, the nationalist, socialist and sometimes pan-Arabist and anti-Western currents have had less representation. The UGTT is in favour of a strong economic role for the state, including a programme of nationalisation.<sup>5</sup>

Free markets or state intervention?

The split between Essebsi and Chahed, however, saw the Prime Minister in favour of implementing IMF-mandated free-market reforms and Ennahda supporting him. This may leave Nidaa Tounes moving towards the left, espousing more nationalist/socialist policies.

## Security

A woman blew herself up on avenue Habib Bourguiba, in the heart of Tunis, on 29 October 2018. The explosion killed her and eight policemen, her presumed targets.

The attack damaged an otherwise improved security scene in Tunisia, after the disastrous attacks of 2015, including the beach attack that left 38 dead, 30 of them British. A state of emergency, imposed in 2015, remains in place.

<sup>3</sup> [‘Tunisia : Fourth Review Under the Extended Fund Facility Arrangement and Request for Modification of Performance Criteria’](#), IMF press release, 8 October 2018  
<sup>4</sup> [‘Dette publique : la Tunisie va-t-elle pouvoir franchir le Mur de la dette ?’](#), Observatoire Tunisien de l’Economie, 15 December 2017  
<sup>5</sup> Youssef Cherif, [‘Bringing the Economy Back Into Tunisian Politics’](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 February 2019

Despite skirmishes near the Algerian border from time to time, the rest of Tunisia had been relatively safe. Closer monitoring of the border with Libya has been especially helpful. Tourists have been returning. The Tunisian Government said in June that tourist revenues for the first half of 2018 were 40% higher than for the same period last year.<sup>6</sup>

Tourists returning

Radicalisation is, nevertheless, a problem in Tunisia: in one source the country came top of a table showing number of ISIS fighters per 100,000 of the population.<sup>7</sup> The Tunisian government says that a thousand ISIS fighters have returned to Tunisia and as the self-styled Caliphate comes to an end that flow could increase. There is little attempt to deradicalise returned *jihadis*; unemployment, combined with an often corrupt and brutal police force could encourage young people towards radicalisation.<sup>8</sup>

Returning fighters

### Truth and Dignity Commission

In March 2018, the government voted not to extend the mandate of the commission set up to investigate human rights abuses that took place largely under the Ben Ali regime. The mandate would have expired in May 2018, but that decision was overturned by a court allowing the Commission to follow through with its work and produce its report.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Chahed's "war on corruption" has targeted people close to Nidaa Tounes and Essebsi, exemplifying the entanglement of policy with factional infighting.<sup>9</sup>

Having heard many witnesses describe their ordeals, often on live TV, the Truth and Dignity Commission handed in its final report at the end of 2018. It was the result of five years' work and its head, Siham Bensedrine, said that, as a minimum, 50,000 victims should be officially recognised and compensated. She said:

50,000 "should be compensated"

The IVD [Truth and Dignity Commission's French initials] and transitional justice represent the moral high ground in the public space. You have to pick your sides. Either you take the necessary measures or you are in the other camp.<sup>10</sup>

So far 20 trials associated with the IVD's investigations have already started. The Government has a year from the delivery of the report to develop a plan of action in response but with the elections due towards the end of 2019 no quick action is expected.

Human rights organisation Amnesty International said:

It is essential that the progress towards justice does not stall with the end of the IVD's mandate. Tunisia's authorities must follow

<sup>6</sup> ['Tunisia tourism revenues jump as Europeans return'](#), Reuters, 22 June 2018

<sup>7</sup> Vision of Humanity, [Global Terrorism Index 2017](#), p67

<sup>8</sup> ['Intel: How latest beheading could signal jihadi comeback in Tunisia'](#), al-Monitor, 21 February 2019

<sup>9</sup> 'Unlike other Arab regimes, Tunisia's remembers old crimes; Truth and reconciliation in Tunisia', *Economist*, 22 December 2018

<sup>10</sup> ['Tunisians cautiously optimistic as truth commission delivers final report'](#), al-Monitor,

through with the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes that have remained unpunished for decades.<sup>11</sup>

## Independence of the judiciary

A recent judgment by the Court of Appeal was cause for optimism about independence of the judiciary and accountability of politicians. An activist who had claimed that there would be a bloodbath if Essebsi won the election had been given a suspended sentence of three months for what Essebsi had claimed was personally threatening behaviour. The activist appealed against the sentence and won, with Essebsi being ordered to pay legal costs. Democracy activists shared the hashtag "After the revolution Tunisia is better". One activist posted: "Is there anything more beautiful than freedom, democracy, and [fair and free justice](#)?"<sup>12</sup>

#Aftertherevolution  
Tunisiaisbetter

A Nidaa Tounes member of the Majlis claimed credit for the President's party: "Nidaa Tounes, the ruling party, has not interfered in the judicial process. We believe in the independence and supremacy of the judiciary."<sup>13</sup>

## Constitutional Court

The 2014 constitution provides for a Constitutional Court but the process remains incomplete. Parliament, the President, and the Supreme Judicial Council (responsible for judicial appointments) must appoint four each of the 12 judges to the court, but so far only one has been appointed.

One crucial step towards protecting Tunisia's democracy in this important year would be for the Parliament to go ahead and set up the Constitutional Court. Although the constitution provides for it to be created within a year, the temporary court set up to review the constitutionality of draft laws remains the body providing constitutional arbitration and it cannot decide on anything other than draft legislation. As the tensions between factions rise, the full Constitutional Court is urgently needed to adjudicate on the powers of the President and the Council of Ministers, for example.

On 6 February 2019 the President [extended the state of emergency](#) for another month. The Constitutional Court could have examined the constitutionality of this move, and other controversial acts such as the 2017 law giving immunity to public servants implicated in corruption scandals under the Ben Ali regime. Most importantly it would be able to safeguard the coming elections.

The nomination process is likely to be highly divisive, however, and pushing ahead with the appointments could destroy the remaining fragile consensus between factions.

<sup>11</sup> '[Tunisian authorities must sustain progress on transitional justice](#)', Amnesty International press release, 13 December 2018

<sup>12</sup> '[Tunisians celebrate landmark victory against president](#)', Al-Monitor, 20 February 2019

<sup>13</sup> '[Ibid.](#)



## 2. Outlook

Observers see an increasingly authoritarian drift in Tunisia, particularly after the passage of the new anti-terrorism law in 2015.<sup>14</sup> They are also concerned about the old regime creeping back into power, pointing to the amnesty for crimes of corruption committed during the former regime.

The increasingly personalised nature of politics, with little attention to setting out policies, combined with the elevation of the President's son, have done nothing to alleviate fears about a return to autocracy.<sup>15</sup> Tunisians are [largely dissatisfied](#) with the economy, corruption and the performance of their representatives in the parliament. They have noticed improvements in freedom of expression, however.

Some observers foresee a close fight between the three parties. With so much infighting and a volatile and disenchanted electorate, however, it is very early to make any predictions. Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi may be using Prime Minister Chahed as a proxy for his own candidacy at the presidential election. Essebsi has [suggested that there](#) is a secret pact between him and Ennahda, while the President may well be thinking of his son standing for Nidaa Tounes –the incumbent is 92 and has indicated that he will not stand.

The UGTT union intends to intervene more directly in the forthcoming parliamentary election but it is not yet clear how. While the IMF sees strengthening growth during the year, there is little time for that to feed through to improved living standards.

Political change in neighbouring Algeria could affect Tunisia; President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was a supporter of the power sharing agreement between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda and has announced that he is standing down after massive demonstrations against his candidacy in the forthcoming election. The chaos across the eastern border, in Libya, could still pose a serious threat to Tunisia, despite improved border security.

International Crisis Group delivered a stark warning in February 2019:

Tunisia's political transition is in trouble. Hopes that the country's post-uprising leadership would successfully tackle its myriad of political and socio-economic challenges have started to dim. The economy is in the doldrums and the political leadership is increasingly split between Islamists and non-Islamists, both competing for control of state resources. This confluence of problems is stirring a general crisis of confidence in the political elite, and there is reason to fear that the country may backslide from its post-2011 democratic opening ahead of presidential and parliamentary polls at the end of the year.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more see the Commons Briefing Paper [Tunisia 2018](#), June 2018.

<sup>15</sup> For more background see the Commons Briefing Paper [Tunisia 2018](#), June 2018

<sup>16</sup> [Tunisia in 2019: a Pivotal Year?](#), International Crisis Group, 4 February 2019

### 3. UK relations

The UK has been funding programmes in Tunisia from the Conflict Stability and Security Fund. The budget allocation for 2018/19 is £10 million. The largest project is in education and economic development and is being implemented by the African Development Bank, the British Council, UNICEF and the World Bank.<sup>17</sup>

Education and economic development

On security, the Government says:

The UK will provide support to the Tunisian government on integrating strategic planning capabilities and increasing accountability to citizens to help build stability through security sector reform whilst protecting human rights.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2018 Lord Ahmad underlined the UK's continued support for Tunisia's political development and particularly for the establishment of the Constitutional Court:

Successful municipal elections in May were an important milestone in Tunisia's transition, but it is vital that the Tunisian Government continues to prioritise the development of independent democratic institutions, particularly the establishment of a Constitutional Court. The International Development Secretary, Penny Mordaunt, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt, and I have visited Tunisia this year to reinforce this message and to underline the UK's continued support.<sup>19</sup>

The UK [Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises](#) against travel to the far west and south of the country. 120,000 UK [tourists visited](#) Tunisia in 2018 - up from 25,000 in 2017.

UK/Tunisia trade is at present conducted on the basis of Tunisia's [Association Agreement with the EU](#) (the sides are negotiating a deal for freer trade through a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area).

The UK government is attempting to replicate the conditions of the Association Agreement in a bilateral accord:

DIT and FCO officials have been in regular dialogue with Tunisia to achieve continuity of existing trading arrangements by replicating the effects of the existing EU-Tunisia Association Agreement. We will inform Parliament and the public when an agreement has been signed. Securing continuity will be a strong foundation to build further on our successful trading relationship.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [Tunisia CSSF programme summary 2018/19](#)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> [Written question - HL12160](#), 20 December 2018

<sup>20</sup> [HC Written question – 205925](#), 14 January 2019

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