Tunisia: a new political balance after Béji Caïd Essebsi?

The legacy of Béji Caïd Essebsi

President Béji Caïd Essebsi, the oldest sitting president in the world, died on July 25 at the age of 92.1 Essebsi served as Tunisia’s transitional leader after the 2011 popular uprising that drove out long-time ruler Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali, and then was elected president in 2014 elections. He was the only senior politician in Tunisia to hold political office in the new democracy as well as under the previous dictatorships of Habib Bourguiba – who became president after the country gained independence from France and who was among the most important, and most stridently secular, nationalists in the Arabic-speaking world – and Ben Ali, who was ultimately ousted.

Essebsi fought for Tunisian democracy, but also served the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1980s, and served as a vehicle for the reemergence of the old guard after the country’s 2011 democratic upheaval.2 He came out of retirement in 2011 to be interim prime minister after the uprising that of Ben Ali. The revolt in Tunisia ignited antigovernment protests across North Africa and the Middle East, starting the turmoil in the entire MENA area known as the Arab Spring. When Ben Ali was overthrown in January 2011, ending the 23-year rule, and fled to Saudi Arabia, Essebsi was chosen as interim prime minister because of his government experience and his relatively untainted reputation.3

Essebsi helped found a secular political party, Nidaa Tounis (Call for Tunisia), leading a movement to oust the increasingly unpopular Islamist government. In contrast to Egypt, where Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi operated directly against the Muslim Brotherhood – and where the military seized power and cracked down violently on the country’s elected Islamists – Tunisia managed in 2013-2014 a negotiated attempt to stabilise the country, fight outbreaks of terrorism, and improve a struggling economy. A national dialogue, which reached a compromise with the Islamists and recognized their role as a legitimate political actor. An approach that helped to preserve the Tunisian democratic experiment by forming a coalition with Ennahdha after the 2014 elections, despite resistance to such a decision from within the secularist camp.

On the political and social front, Regarding, according to Youssef Cherif, a political analyst at the Columbia Global Center in Tunis, Essebsi “tried to foster education and progressive values, but he also encouraged nepotism through offering his son the leadership of his party and by nominating a lot of people in high positions by their degree of allegiance not their competency”.4

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Today, because 60 years of dictatorship, Tunisian society remains fractured. Politically, secularists, including local leftists and Arab nationalists, contend with Islamists. Socially, rich elite lives in the coastal cities at a far remove from the poor, underdeveloped inland regions, where the revolution began and where popular unrest continues.  

**Political dynamics**

Tunisia’s president — who is elected by the people for a once-renewable five-year term — mainly has authority over foreign and defence policy, governing alongside a prime minister chosen by parliament who has authority over domestic affairs. The interim, the president of the Parliament, Mohamed Ennaceur (85 years old), took over the position of head of state. According to the country’s constitution, the president of the parliament assumed the presidency for 45 to 90 days while elections are organized: Originally scheduled for November, the elections will take place on September 15, as confirmed by Nabil Baffoun, the head of the Independent Higher Authority for Elections; the campaigns are scheduled to run from September 2 to September 13, with the results announced two days after the polls. A date for the second round of presidential elections has not yet been decided but, according to officials, it would be held no later than November 3. This means that Tunisia may vote in September and November for the early presidential elections and in October for the parliamentary elections.

**Nidaa Tounes** is splintered and recently collapsed; Essebsi became embroiled in a long-running series of political battles with his own prime minister, Youssef Chahed, and Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist party **Ennahda**. Essebsi’s passing will likely prompt for influence within the party **Nidaa Tounis** between his son, Hafedh Caid Essebsi – who assumed the leadership of the political party – and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who leads the breakaway faction **Tahya Tounis**.

Slim Azzabi, secretary-general of the **Tahya Tounis** party, stated that Tunisia’s liberal Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed, would run for president in an early election, making him one of the likely frontrunners to succeed Beji Caid Essebsi. The **Tahaya Tounis** party, which split off from Essebsi’s party this year, is now the biggest liberal group in Tunisia’s parliament and governs in coalition with the Islamist **Ennahda** Party and a smaller liberal group.

Other candidates who have announced their intention to stand include liberal former Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, and Moncef Marzouki, who served as interim president for three years after autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was toppled, until Essebsi was chosen in the first democratic presidential election in 2014.

**Ennahda**, which has not yet named its candidate for the presidency, in 2016 decided to downplay its origins in political Islam declaring to distance itself from its Islamist origins and recast itself as a political vehicle for Muslim democrats; but the political movement remains a conservative Islamic party. What **Ennahda**’s carefully orchestrated rebranding demonstrates is just how skillfully its leaders continue to adapt

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6 Asharq al-Awsat. 31 July 2019, in shorturl.at/plM34.
7 Reuters, July 31st 2019.
to the changing landscape of Tunisian electoral politics. When the president of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, announced the move away from traditional Islamism, he also proclaimed a separation of the party’s political and religious activities: a way to allows party leaders to focus on politics in the capital while other members in the provinces – where there is more popular support because there are as many people whose vision of society, whose way of life is more conservative, less liberal, less Western to the party – continue to engage in the civic and religious spheres.⁸

Security concerns

Institutional and economic crisis and jihadist threat: Essebsi’s death occurs in a period of potential destabilization for the North African country.

Tunisia is the only country to have emerged from the so-called Arab Spring with a full-blooded if somewhat wobbly democracy. The country has managed to survive a wave of political assassinations and deadly terrorist attacks targeting its security forces and productive tourism industry amid rising joblessness and inflation. However, it remains under a state of emergency.⁹

The Mediterranean haven was beginning to recover from the attacks mainly claimed by the Islamic State terror group (IS) as Western tourists slowly started to file back. Today’s news at the peak of the holiday season will likely put a big damper on that. On the one hand, there is the risk about the country’s low ability to cope with returning IS fighters veterans; between 5000 and 8000 of Tunisians joined the Islamic state group: some are thought to be redeploying to violence-wrecked, neighboring Libya, while others have returned home.¹⁰ On the other hand, armed opposition groups operate in mountain areas on the border with Algeria.

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

The departure of Essebsi is important not only because of what he did for democracy, but also with regard to the ambiguous situation through which Tunisia is currently passing. In general, it will not seriously affect Tunisia’s stability, because the country has a clear process in place that is widely accepted as legitimate¹¹.

However, regarding the implications for the future, the death of the old president, on the one hand, puts in evidence the absence of a prominent leader and open to a risk of greater divisions and fragmentation within the secularist political front - with all the consequences for how this might affect Tunisia’s consensus-based democracy.

On the other hand, we must consider two main factors: the first is the political disaffection and the distrust in democracy which open to a growing discontent among the people – characterized by numerous protests – often contrasted with repressive security measures; the second factor is the competition among the power-groups, which

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⁸ Piser K., *The Mainstreaming of Tunisia’s Islamists*, in Foreign Policy, 7 August 2016, in shorturl.at/jENW3.
coincide with the fault line between the political parties Ennahda and Nidaa (and within Nidaa).

Because of the political stalemate and the ideological differences that led to the division of the secular front, Ennahda appears to be the only cohesive and stable party.

In conclusion, the general unstable situation may affect the electoral process, which could shift the votes of a large disappointed electorate in favor of some independent candidates.\textsuperscript{12}

**Main events in Maghreb and Mashreq**

- **Israel and Egypt.** Israel will begin exporting natural gas to Egypt in November, with volumes eventually set to reach seven billion cubic meters a year. The supplies will mark the start of a $15bn export agreement between Israel's Delek Drilling and US-based partner Noble Energy with an Egyptian counterpart in what Israeli officials called the most significant deal to emerge since the neighbors made peace in 1979. The deal signed early last year will bring natural gas from Israeli offshore fields Tamar and Leviathan into the Egyptian gas grid.\textsuperscript{13}

- **Lebanon.** Possible dispute between President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Hariri over referring the shooting of two members of the Lebanese Democratic Party in the Druze area of Aley to a senior Judicial Council. The political repercussions of the deadly event have paralyzed government at a critical moment and risk complicating efforts to enact reforms needed to steer the heavily indebted state away from financial crisis.\textsuperscript{14}

- **Syria.** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country is determined to destroy "to pieces" what he called a "terror corridor" in northern Syria - regardless of whether or not Turkey and the United States agree on the establishment of a safe zone. Ankara wants a zone along the border with Syria that would be cleared of the Kurdish fighters. It also says such a zone would be safe for Syrians and allow some of the country's refugees to return. Turkey has warned of a possible new offensive into Syria if an agreement on a safe zone is not reached, and has recently been sending reinforcements to its border area.\textsuperscript{15}

- **Algeria.** Protesters remain in Algeria's streets, having forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation in April. In this uncertain transition period, important questions face two groups key to Algeria's political future: protesters and military personnel. According to a new Brookings institute report – titled “Algeria’s uprising: A survey of protesters and the military” – the results show a wide support for change among protesters, while illustrating a divide between the upper and lower ranks of the Algerian military in support for the protest movement. While 80% of the lower ranks support the goals and continuation of the protests, “the senior officers, by contrast, are a bit more hesitant, [as] only 60% are saying that they support the protests".\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Torelli S., *Tunisia: tra crisi politica e turbolenze nel vicinato*, in “Focus Mediterraneo Allarga to” n.10, 27th June 2019, in shorturl.at/hGY47.

\textsuperscript{13} Al-Jazeera, 25th July 2019.

\textsuperscript{14} Asharq al-Awsat, 8th July 2019.

\textsuperscript{15} Associated Press, 26th July 2019.

Morocco. In his speech for this year's Throne Day on 30th of July, Moroccan king Mohammed VI announced new development programs and a government reshuffle for domestic policy. For foreign policy, he called again for dialogue with Algeria and for "unity among North African populations". As concerns the Western Sahara, Morocco's position remains "firmly anchored to territorial integrity". To celebrate his 20 years as king, Mohammed VI pardoned 4,764 detainees, including some detainees for terrorism.\(^\text{17}\)

Libya. Libya's national oil company has suspended operations at the country's largest oil field over the "unlawful" closure of a pipeline valve. The National Oil Corporation announced the move without saying who was behind the closure of the pipeline linking the Sharara oilfield to the port of Zawiya, on the Mediterranean coast. The Sharara oil field, which produces around 290,000 barrels a day worth $19 million, is controlled by forces loyal to Khalifa Hifter, head of the so-called Libyan National Army, which launched an offensive in April to capture the capital.\(^\text{18}\)

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17 ANSAmed, 30th July 2019.