

CONSENSUS CONTINUES TO BE THE KEY FOR TUNISIA'S POLITICAL SUCCESS STORY

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Many have explained Tunisia's democratic success story by referring to the country's consensus seeking political climate. There are many factors behind this continuous compromise seeking policy, which continues to be at the core of Tunisian politics.

It was the 26-year-old Tunisian fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17 2010 that ignited a protest wave that would spread beyond the country's borders. However, it was only in the so-called Arab Spring's birthplace that the revolution not only ousted former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali but also paved the way for a peaceful and stable democratic transition. Today Tunisia is seen as a success story, deemed by watchdog Freedom House as a "[Free](#)" country and labelled by the Economist as the only "[fully democratic](#)" country in the region. What is the secret behind the Tunisian success story, ask observers. One important element for the country's ability to avoid unrest is the country's commitment to political compromise and inclusive governance, which has been evident throughout the country's post-revolutionary development.

Post-revolutionary Tunisian politics

Nine months after the revolution, in the country's first free and fair elections, the moderate Islamist party Ennahda gained 41% of the votes, thereby receiving 90 seats of the 217-seat National Constituent Assembly. The party formed a political alliance, which became known as the Troika, including the centre-left party Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, the country's biggest social democratic party. But the weak economic situation and fragile security situation following the revolution made people increasingly question the coalition's efficiency to govern.

In 2013, after two political assassinations of secular political leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi the country was thrown into a political crisis. Concerns grew that sit-in strikes and demonstrations would dissolve the National Constituent Assembly before finalising the country's new constitution, thereby stalling the country's democratic transition. In efforts to avoid this scenario, a national dialogue was initiated in the summer of 2013.

During this volatile period of political dead-lock the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) acted as an important mediator, as well as during the last phase of the constitutional deliberations. Historically Tunisia has a strong culture of unionism, UGTT has been intertwined in the country's political development since its establishment in 1946. Approximately 5% of Tunisians are believed to be union members and the institution is

visible in most parts of the country. During the important year of 2013 UGTT also had other important players by its side, including the employer's union UTICA, the Tunisian Bar Association, as well as the Human Rights League (LTDH). After months of negotiations an agreement that would stir the country away from its political dead-lock was reached. The Ennahdha-led Troika coalition stepped down from power after assuring the establishment of a new constitution in January 2014, peacefully handing over power to an interim technocratic government. The referral of power and the adoption of the constitution on January 26 were proof of the country's commitment to compromise and dialogue. This was a milestone, one of the reasons to why Tunisia was able to avoid political breakdowns witnessed in the other Arab Spring countries like Egypt, Libya and Yemen. With the constitution, in addition one of the region's most progressive pieces of legislation, in place the interim technocratic government was set to govern until the following legislative and presidential elections later in 2014.

A polarising political climate?

As the country's elections were nearing fear rose that the country's increasingly polarised political environment would stir violence. Tunisian voters were at large divided between the two biggest parties, secular and liberal Nidaa Tounes, with ties to the old regime, and the moderate Islamist party Ennahda. The political campaign rhetoric, from both camps, was growing more and more hostile. Nidaa Tounes strongly campaigned on the so-called "Utility vote," arguing that a vote for any other party would indirectly support Ennahda. This campaign is believed to have been efficient, especially for voters who were disappointed in what the Troika-government had managed to achieve, but at the same time the rhetoric contributed to creating a two-party division seen through secularism vs. Islamism prism.

Unlike Nidaa Tounes who presented its leader Beji Caid Essebsi as a presidential candidate Ennahdha didn't present a Presidential candidate, arguing that the party didn't want to dominate the political scene. "We believe that the country will need a coalition government that brings together the main parties in the country," Ennahdha leader Rachid Ghannouchi said.

The legislative vote on October 26 assured Nidaa Tounes 86 of the Parliament's seats, whilst Ennahda came second by assuring 69 seats. The party quickly accepted defeat, Ghannouchi called Essebsi before the official results were released to congratulate him on the victory. The party celebrated with a street party outside its head-quarters in Tunis with music and fire works. Despite the defeat Ghannouchi and Ennahdha members celebrated by chanting democracy and freedom slogans.

As neither Presidential candidate managed to receive the required number of votes on November 23, a run-up between the two top candidates Essebsi and Moncef Marzouki on December 21, when about 55% of the Tunisian voters chose Essebsi as the country's new President.

A stable Islamist-secular coalition?

However, despite winning both the legislative and presidential elections, with only 86 of the Parliamentary seats, Nidaa Tounes could not govern alone. Prime Minister Habib Essid was given the task to form a new government. His first suggestion excluded Ennahda and included

only one other political party. However, the proposal was rejected, as it didn't have enough seats in parliament to pass a no-confidence vote.

A coalition excluding Ennahdha would likely have been unstable and inefficient, either relying on many of the smaller parties or a large number of technocrats. Either way it would likely have been risky at a time when Tunisia needs firm leadership to ensure stability and perhaps most importantly economic reform.

Essid's second set-up was more inclusive, including five parties and was approved by 166 members of the 217-seat parliament. Nidaa Tounes' Selim Chaker was appointed finance minister and Taieb Baccouche foreign minister, while Ennahdha's Ziad Ladhari was given the employment minister post, and a number of junior ministerial positions. By agreeing to form an islamist-secular coalition and continue to build on Tunisia's commitment to consensus building the country shows dedication to its peaceful democratic transition.