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THE DARK SIDE OF CONSENSUS IN TUNISIA: Lessons from 2015-2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has been considered a model for its pursuit of consensus between secular and Islamist forces. While other Arab Spring countries descended into civil war or military dictatorship, Tunisia instead chose dialogue and cooperation, forming a secular-Islamist coalition government in 2011 and approving a constitution by near unanimity in 2014. Even after the constitution was approved, Tunisia from 2015 to 2019 was governed by a grand coalition that included both the major secular and Islamist parties.

However, Tunisia's experience has also raised the concern of whether there is such a thing as *too much* consensus. In this paper, we argue that the extended pursuit of consensus in Tunisia has also had a dark side, constraining its democratic transition. In the name of consensus, the national unity government of 2015-2019 abandoned controversial but necessary issues like transitional justice and security sector reform and could not take bold action on the economy or on the formation of the Constitutional Court. That the largest parties were in government together also meant that there was no effective opposition, which in turn contributed to public disillusionment with political parties and democracy. The failure of the unity government was illustrated in the 2019 elections, when the establishment was largely defeated in favor of political outsiders.

Moreover, the consensus government merely postponed rather than resolved the underlying secular-Islamist tensions. That attempt to ignore or paper-over these tensions has contributed to the rise of new, more dogmatically secular and Islamist parties today. Ironically, the extended pursuit of consensus has now made it more difficult to form not just a consensus government but any government at all.

Finally, the Tunisian case suggests that the very presence of consensus politics long into a transition may not be a sign of democratic success, but rather an indication of a deeper weakness in the transition. The decision of Ennahda, the country's largest

Islamist party, to join the consensus government in 2015 rather than lead the opposition stemmed from a fear that it would be repressed or even dissolved. If political parties do not feel comfortable leading the opposition out of fear of repression, then this means democracy is on shaky ground. The presence of consensus can thus be used as an indicator of the lack of democratic consolidation.

INTRODUCTION

The defining feature of Tunisia's nine years of democratic transition has been consensus. Time and again, secular and Islamist forces have come together to find common ground, forming a coalition government in 2011 and almost unanimously approving the 2014 constitution. Most importantly, Tunisia from 2015 to 2018 was governed by a grand coalition that included both the winning secular party Nidaa Tounes and its Islamist rival Ennahda. That coalition then continued through 2019 between Ennahda and the major breakaway factions from Nidaa Tounes — Tahya Tounes and Machrou Tounes.

This consensus, or *tawafuq*, between the major political forces has won Tunisia international acclaim, including a Nobel Peace Prize. Observers almost uniformly consider consensus to be why Tunisia has stayed on a democratic path while its neighbors collapsed into civil war or military dictatorship. Consensus has become a buzzword, helping Tunisia to attract foreign aid and investment. The general impression has been: the more consensus, the better.

This interest in consensus-driven politics hearkens back to a vast academic literature on democratic transitions which finds that for democracy to survive, there must be consensus over the “rules of the game” — the constitution, the electoral system, and so on.¹ But that literature also notes that within those rules of the game, democracy requires competition. Democracy works when parties with distinct policy agendas compete for votes. Only with a differentiation of party platforms do individuals come to feel represented and invested in elections and democracy.

Tunisia seemed to fulfill the former condition, approving the 2014 constitution — in effect, the rules of the game — by near consensus. But instead of transitioning to competitive politics within those rules, it embraced yet more consensus, forming a grand secular-Islamist coalition government in 2015, extending consensus politics through 2019. We might expect that as a transition reaches its sixth or seventh year, it becomes more secure and solid, and therefore a prioritization of consensus would be less necessary. But in Tunisia, it continued, raising the question of whether there's such a thing as too *much* consensus.

What led Tunisian political parties to continue to pursue consensus, and were they successful in achieving their goals? What implications has continued consensus had for democratic consolidation in Tunisia? And finally, what lessons can we learn from this period for how political parties should position themselves in the future?

We make six major observations. First, the consensus government between 2015 and 2019 had a mixed record at best in addressing the country's challenges or consolidating democracy. It failed to deliver progress on structural economic reforms, could not agree on the establishment of a Constitutional Court, postponed rather than resolved secular-Islamist tensions, and even where it enjoyed some success — restoring security — it turned a blind eye to police abuse and abandoned security sector reform. Meanwhile,

Tunisians became increasingly disillusioned with political parties, institutions, and the idea of democracy more broadly.

However, despite this track record, many of the motivations pushing parties toward consensus in 2015 remain present today. Consensus is still needed to create the Constitutional Court and push through difficult economic reforms. Moreover, the domestic and international environment still appear reluctant to allow the Islamist party Ennahda to pursue a dominant role, either in government or in opposition. Given that consensus may continue, it is important that we diagnose why exactly Tunisia's consensual politics failed.

We argue that the primary cause of the failure of consensus politics in 2015-2019 was that the winning secular party, Nidaa Tounes, was never as committed to consensus as its leader, the late President Beji Caid Essebsi. This disconnect was compounded by a lack of internally democratic party structures, few attempts to convince party cadres of the need for consensus, and the fact that the party was born first and foremost to oppose Ennahda. As a result, the decision to enter into a grand coalition with Ennahda led Nidaa Tounes to fracture internally, leaving it unable to deliver votes on key reforms. Moving forward, if consensus is to continue, parties must learn from the mistakes of Nidaa Tounes. To commit to consensus (or even a coalition), they must develop strong, internally democratic structures and real policy platforms, rather than relying on anti-Islamist campaign rhetoric — in other words, focus on what they are rather than what they're not.

By contrast, Ennahda was too committed to consensus, making far greater compromises than its coalition partners. In doing so, it facilitated the counterrevolutionary tendencies of Nidaa Tounes, providing an amnesty for corruption, undermining the transitional justice process, and permitting impunity for abuses by security forces. In practice, Ennahda's non-confrontational approach also helped create the impression among Nidaa Tounes officials that consensus could be maintained *without* significant compromises on their end. While Ennahda claims that its concessions to the old regime helped Tunisia avoid a coup or even a civil war, they may also have undermined democratic consolidation in the long run.

Moreover, the very fact that consensus was still deemed necessary is itself evidence that democracy in Tunisia has not yet consolidated. This has major implications not just for Tunisia but for how outside observers view grand coalitions in young democracies. If a major party in a transitional context feel compelled to make disproportionate compromises out of fear of an authoritarian reversal, then that, true or false, suggests that democracy is on shaky grounds. In short, the presence (and perceived necessity) of consensual politics is itself an indicator of a deeper weakness in the transition. More perniciously, the persistence of consensus can create a cycle where addressing those deeper weaknesses is postponed indefinitely in the interest of maintaining that consensus.

These dynamics are more than apparent in Tunisia. Nine years into the transition, a major political party, Ennahda, still has a significant and perhaps legitimate fear of being dissolved. To move beyond — and end — the politics of consensus, secular parties would need to give stronger guarantees to commit to cohabitation and abide by democratic outcomes — especially parties like the Popular Front, Democratic Patriots, and Free Destourian Party (PDL) that continue to call for the dissolution of Ennahda.² The burden of “not repolarizing” society has thus far seemed to fall disproportionately on Islamists, but would need to be more equitably distributed moving forward.

Finally, and somewhat ironically, the extended pursuit of consensus has had the consequence of making consensus even less likely today. The compromises made by both sides of the 2015-2019 national unity government has fueled the rise of more ideologically extreme parties on either end of the spectrum, such as the very secularist PDL and the very Islamist Karama Coalition. By postponing rather than addressing Islamist-secular tensions and by contributing to the fragmentation and polarization of the political spectrum, the extended consensus has made it not just more difficult to form a consensus government today, but any government at all. The legacy of the Ennahda-Nidaa Tounes alliance is thus continuing to undermine Tunisia's democratic transition well after the alliance collapsed.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We first examine the scholarly background on consensus and on Tunisia's transition to democracy. We then outline the stated goals of the 2015-2019 consensus government and examine whether those goals were met. We then diagnose the causes of those failures, focusing first on Nidaa Tounes and then on Ennahda. We then conclude with lessons learned for Tunisia, the major political parties, and an international community that has come to see consensus as an unqualified good.

THE REVOLUTION CHOOSES CONSENSUS

Scholars have long highlighted the importance of consensus, especially among elites, in the democratization process. The “pacted transitions” literature argues that democratic forces must find consensus with elements of the old regime in order to prevent the emergence of spoilers to the transition.³ More generally, democracy requires all sides to agree upon the “rules of the game” — the ground rules of the democracy within which they will compete. Such rules include formal structures such as the constitution, the electoral system, and electoral commission, as well as the norms governing proper political behavior.⁴

The implication, then, is that new democracies need to be cautious, consensual, and in some sense conservative when deciding on foundational constitutional and electoral rules. Eventually, however, they should transition into more competitive politics. Democracy, after all, is about competition: parties are supposed to represent different interests and compete for votes in elections. If parties fail to represent popular political positions, however “ideological” those may be, and give a voice to the people, then the population may become disillusioned with democracy. A continued emphasis on consensus at the expense of competition could therefore threaten rather than consolidate the transition. At what point should politics move from consensus to competition?

Tunisia provides a test of this question in real-time. Tunisia began a transition to democracy in 2011, following the ouster of strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in a popular uprising. Since then, consensus has been the name of the game. After the 2011 elections, the winning party, the Islamist movement Ennahda, chose to form a coalition government with two secular parties, Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the leftist Ettakatol. A coalition with just CPR would have been enough to reach a simple majority: Ennahda's 89 seats and CPR's 29 made 118 total seats in the 217-seat parliament, well over the 109 needed. But Ennahda sought a larger “grand” coalition, inviting Ettakatol's 20 seats as well, for a “troika” government that controlled 64% of the parliament. This illustrates the difference between consensus or national unity governments and “normal” coalition governments. Rather than requiring a mere 50% plus one majority to form a government, consensus is about gathering as many parties together as possible *above* the minimum required to form a government.

This Islamist-secular coalition was soon challenged by debates over the new constitution and growing security threats. The Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia escalated its attacks in late 2012, targeting the U.S. Embassy in September and Tunisian military outposts in December. It was subsequently accused of two assassinations of secular politicians in February (Chokri Belaid) and July 2013 (Mohamed Brahmi). Since Ennahda had initially showed openness toward engaging with Ansar al-Sharia to bring it into the political process rather than criminalizing it outright, Tunisian political parties quickly polarized along secular and Islamist lines.

After a military coup in Egypt ousted its Islamist-led government in July 2013, the Tunisian opposition organized mass protests demanding a repeat of the “Egyptian scenario.”⁵ Most of the secular opposition called for dissolving either the democratically elected constituent assembly or the troika government, or both. The echoes of Egypt were hard to miss.⁶ Tunisia’s own “Tamarrod” modeled itself after Egypt’s Tamarrod (Rebellion) movement, which was instrumental in toppling Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi. Tunisia’s “Salvation Front,” drawing inspiration from Egypt’s National Salvation Front, announced a campaign to remove local and national officials appointed by Ennahda.⁷

But unlike in Egypt, the Tunisian military did not intervene, leaving the opposition with no option but to negotiate with the troika government.⁸ By October most parties agreed to a national dialogue brokered by four civil society organizations. The agreement reached led to a progressive, new constitution that passed almost unanimously in January 2014 and the subsequent formation of a technocratic government. When it came to an electoral law to regulate the 2014 elections, Ennahda made one of its most far-reaching compromises in the service of consensus. A proposed “exclusion law” — which would have barred thousands of Tunisians associated with the Ben Ali regime — failed to pass by only one vote.⁹ To ensure the bill’s defeat, Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi expended considerable political capital to get just enough Ennahda deputies to flip their votes at the last minute.

Most of the rules of the game were, by now, set, and at this point we might have expected that Tunisia would transition to more competitive politics. The secular catch-all party, Nidaa Tounes, campaigned on a staunchly anti-Ennahda platform and championed aspects of the old regime, including a strong state and relative secularism. It also appealed to coastal areas that had been privileged by the old regime. Ennahda, meanwhile, represented a more Islamist and pro-revolution constituency, especially in rural areas in the interior and south of the country.¹⁰ The top political parties represented distinct ideological camps, even as one camp — the Islamist camp — deemphasized its Islamist credentials and instead made a bid for the center.

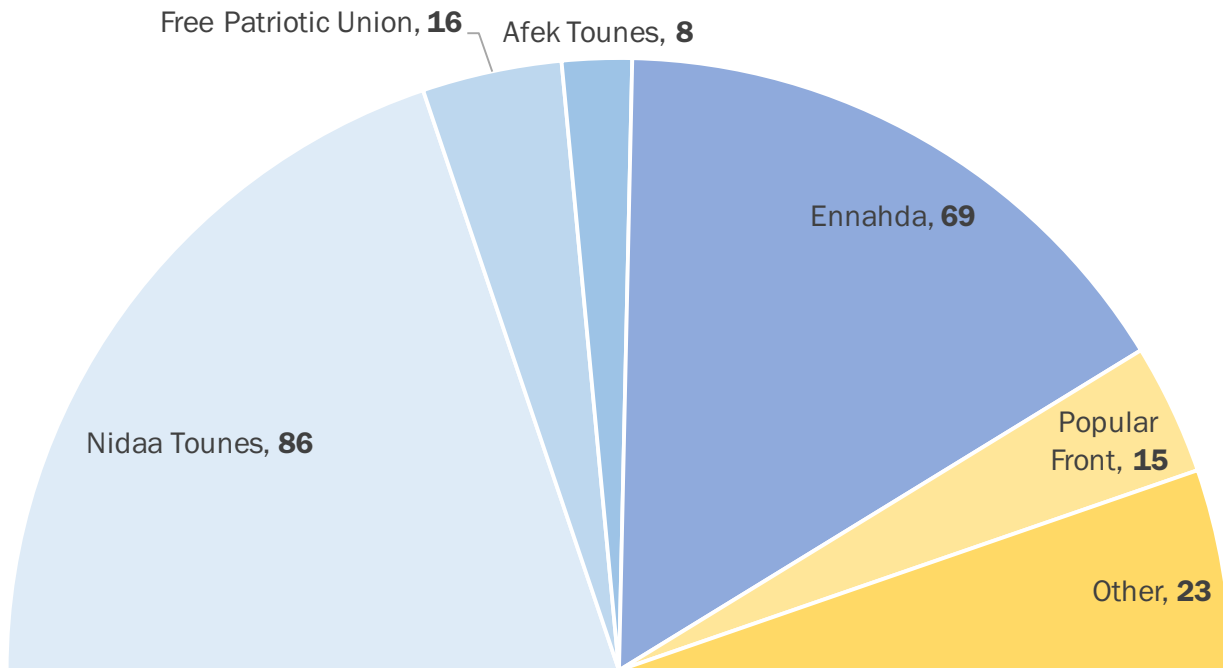
After a polarizing electoral campaign, Nidaa Tounes and its leader Beji Caid Essebsi emerged victorious in the 2014 elections, with Essebsi winning the presidency and the party winning 86 seats in parliament. Together with its close allies the Free Patriotic Union (UPL, 16 seats) and Afek Tounes (8 seats), Nidaa Tounes would have had 110 members of parliament (MPs), surpassing the 109-seat threshold for a simple majority. If needed, such a coalition could have been further strengthened with the addition of other secular, pro-old regime parties like the National Destourian Initiative (Moubadara, 3 seats) or even the secular leftist Popular Front (15 seats).

However, newly-elected President Essebsi, an 88-year old statesman who had served under previous autocrats Ben Ali and Habib Bourguiba and as prime minister in 2011, shocked his own party members by deciding to form a grand coalition government

with not just UPL and Afek Tounes, but also second-place Ennahda, the party they had sought to topple and then vehemently campaigned against. With Ennahda’s 69 seats, the governing coalition would claim 82% of the parliament (179 seats), leaving the opposition with a mere 18%.

FIGURE 1: TUNISIA’S 2014 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS RESULTS

109 seats needed for majority



That four-party grand coalition remained until 2018, first under the stewardship of Prime Minister Habib Essid (2015-2016) and then under Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. Following the fracturing of Nidaa Tounes, it was then replaced with yet another grand coalition between the two largest splinters from Nidaa Tounes (Tahya Tounes and Machrou Tounes), Ennahda, Afek Tounes, and Moubadara. Together, that 2018-2019 coalition reached between 60-64% of the parliament, about 20-30 votes over the simple majority of 109.¹¹ In other words, a broad governing coalition consisting of the largest secular and Islamist parties continued from 2015 up through the 2019 elections.

WHY NIDAA TOUNES AND ENNAHDA PARTNERED TO GOVERN

President Essebsi explained that it was time to put aside secular-religious divides in order to tackle the nation’s pressing concerns. “Tunisia has its problems, security problems and economic problems,” noted Essebsi. “We are in a very difficult situation, and if Tunisia is going to get out of that, we need support.” Noting that Ennahda “had put the Islamist parts of its agenda aside,” Essebsi observed: “Ennahda, bit by bit, is becoming Tunisified. ... For now, we cohabit together, we accept them, and they accept us.”¹²

Essebsi, after all, had regularly met one-on-one with Ghannouchi to alleviate the 2013 political crisis, and the personal connection between them appeared to overcome the gap between their parties. “Particularly impressive to me,” said Essebsi, “is that the leader of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi, called last month to congratulate me for Nidaa Tounes’s victory in the legislative elections. I truly appreciated his gesture and look forward to working with him and all Tunisians to overcome our difficulties and establish our nation as a solid democracy.”¹³

While other leaders within Nidaa Tounes did not have the same personal rapport with Ghannouchi, some similarly recognized that the challenges facing Tunisia transcended party. “The country’s true enemies are poverty, illiteracy, and economic underdevelopment,” asserted Nidaa Tounes member of parliament and executive board member Mondher Belhaj Ali in defending the alliance with Ennahda. “We can even have excellent relations with [Ennahda].”¹⁴ Similarly, Nidaa Tounes MP Mohamed Troudi claimed that: “Under the current economic situation, there must be political consensus.”¹⁵

Presenting a face of elite consensus offered Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda several advantages. First, it would help to convince Tunisians to accept the sacrifices accompanying austerity reforms and to push back against the powerful Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), which was sure to resist these reforms. Second, it would allow each party to avoid blame for policy failures by hiding behind national consensus. Finally, consensus was also important for attracting greater international aid and investment. Indeed, both Essebsi and Ghannouchi penned op-eds in the international media with precisely this goal in mind.¹⁶

While Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes were miles apart on issues of religion and the revolution, they saw relatively eye to eye on the major economic and security challenges. One Ennahda MP told us that: “If you check the programs of our party and Nidaa Tounes before the elections you will be shocked that there is no big difference between the parties. Because we are two parties on the right and we are [economically] liberal and share the same principles, ideas, and ways of thinking about the economy.”¹⁷

Beyond these shared incentives for consensus, Ennahda was also motivated by additional concerns. As Ennahda saw it, moving past secular-Islamist divides was critical to reducing polarization, which, in turn, would help preserve Tunisia’s democratic transition. Even prior to the elections, Ghannouchi observed that: “Democracy in Tunisia is in a transitional stage and cannot handle a return to the conflict between the state and an opposition force. This is why we believe that a [mere] majority is incapable of leading the next stage and that the solution is consensus based on mutual trust between Tunisia’s various actors.” Warning of the polarization in Egypt, Ghannouchi concluded: “Our goal is to ensure democracy triumphs over chaos and dreams of *coup d’état*.”¹⁸

As Ennahda leaders see it, if they had instead insisted on opposition and not joined a coalition government, President Essebsi would have been able to more easily justify a crackdown on the movement. Osama al-Saghir, a rising star in Ennahda and one of the country’s youngest members of parliament, argued that:

“Ennahda is afraid of being in the opposition [unless] we already have a successful democracy, and nothing will happen, no coup no nothing. ... We were afraid from it, yes. Who knows if the situation is blocked. [and] they may feel that they are not able to do what they want in terms of the government or policies or appointments, [and] Ennahda is in the opposition, talking to the public, pushing the government,

making peaceful demonstrations — there are people who would not accept that kind of opposition. ... Someone may advise the president to dissolve the parliament, to push the government to resign, etc. ... This is the past we're afraid of. Some of these people don't believe in democracy."¹⁹

Within the governing coalition, moreover, Ennahda would be able to exert a check on Nidaa Tounes' more anti-democratic tendencies. An Ennahda MP explained:

"If we are in the opposition, what will we have? We will have Nidaa Tounes — a huge part of old regime — alone, as the main part of government. We think that this is not good for the transitional process and for a real process of building a strong democracy. ... We had a deep conviction that we must play the main role in the transitional process, as we represent the revolutionary clan. We must not let the old regime play this game alone. We must oblige them to [respect] the principles of the constitution especially on human rights and freedom."²⁰

That eagerness to check Nidaa Tounes and preserve democracy led Ennahda to join the national unity government even with very little formal representation. The initial government, led by Prime Minister Habib Essid, allocated just one of 27 ministers (4 percent) to Ennahda, despite Ennahda commanding 32% of seats in the parliament.²¹ Meanwhile, the two junior coalition partners, UPL and Afek Tounes, received three ministers each.

EVALUATION OF THE CONSENSUS GOVERNMENT

To what extent did the consensus government between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda succeed in achieving its stated goals? Did consensus politics help them tackle the country's security and economic challenges? And did consensus contribute to democratic consolidation in Tunisia? We examine each of these questions in turn.

Security

Tunisia was struck by three terror attacks in urban areas in 2015, making security the initial priority of the coalition government. To its credit, the government reached consensus in passing a counterterrorism law in July 2015, and it was able to enhance the capacity and material resources of the military and security forces.

These measures have been successful. Terrorism is a much lower concern today, with a relatively minor threat against security forces remaining in the mountains near the Algerian border.²² Surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute find that while 47% of Tunisians ranked terrorism as Tunisia's biggest problem in 2015, only 1% did so in 2019.²³ Ennahda MP and former vice president of the constituent assembly, Mehrezia Laabidi, in listing the coalition's successes, ranked security first:

"The coalition with Nidaa Tounes gave results. It gave a successful war on terrorism in spite of the three times we were struck by terrorists in Sousse, Bardo, and Tunis. Yet we succeeded in making those who identify with violence marginalized in society."²⁴

But while security has been restored, it has come at the cost of security sector reform.²⁵ Abuse of power by security forces has reemerged, with human rights watchdogs estimating over 100 cases of torture each year since 2015.²⁶ Even the government —

on the one occasion it released official figures — found 81 cases of torture in 2015.²⁷ Security forces have also arbitrarily applied travel restrictions on individuals they suspect to be terrorists.²⁸ The state of emergency put in place after the 2015 attacks continues until today, despite the threat subsiding.

While Ennahda officials claimed that this abuse was happening outside the purview of the counterterrorism law, there is no doubt that the law empowers and emboldens security forces to disregard human rights. The law has an overly broad definition of terrorism that could extend to peaceful political activity, and permits security forces to detain terrorism suspects without charge and without access to a lawyer for 15 days.²⁹ Civil society organizations and activists raised these concerns at the time, but found deaf ears in the parliament. Facing pressure to look “patriotic,” even the few opposition MPs voted in favor of the law. The law passed with just 10 abstentions and not a single vote against.³⁰ A win for consensus perhaps, but a potential threat to democratic consolidation in the long term.

Economy

The second priority of Tunisia’s governing coalition was the economy. Here, the coalition was less successful. The chosen approach was to implement neoliberal reforms, including cutting the public sector and creating a conducive environment for private investment.

In 2016, the governing coalition was able to find consensus on some reforms. It granted the central bank more independence in April,³¹ and passed a banking law in June³² and a new investment code in September.³³ It then held a “Tunisia 2020” conference in November and secured important pledges of foreign investment.

Consensus played a role in attracting this investment and aid. Nouredine Bhiri, head of Ennahda’s parliamentary bloc, observed: “It [consensus] gained international support, which in itself is important. The coexistence of the two biggest sides in the political equation inspired trust in the regional and international community in the Tunisian experience. That trust resulted in political, financial, and military support.”³⁴

But while the governing coalition was able to improve the investment climate, it could not deliver on structural economic reforms, particularly cutting the public sector. It implemented a hiring freeze, but could not freeze wages or reform subsidies in the face of rising inflation and opposition from the UGTT. In July 2016, in what was known as the Carthage Agreement, the governing coalition negotiated with both the UGTT and the employers’ union (the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, UTICA), in the hopes of expanding consensus also to these unions and thereby avoiding strikes.

Ennahda MP Mehrezia Laabidi noted that: “To consolidate this coalition, Ghannouchi and Essebsi opened [the door] to civil society: UGTT, UTICA, and the agricultural union. OK, that’s good, yet UGTT does not agree with UTICA on privatization or taxation reform. [Without agreement] the reforms were blocked.”³⁵ In spring 2018, the coalition tried again in a second attempt dubbed “Carthage 2.” Here, coalition partners even agreed on 63 specific reforms, but disagreed on the 64th: whether to keep Prime Minister Youssef Chahed in power or to create a new government. As a result, none of the prior 63 points were implemented.

Meanwhile, the economy continues to stagnate, and Tunisians continue to suffer. Economic growth, around 4-5% annually prior to the revolution, struggles to reach 2% today. Unemployment, 10-12% prior to the revolution, remains at 15% today. Inflation, 3-4% prior to the revolution, has doubled to 7.4% today. By most metrics, the economic situation is worse than that which paved the way for revolution in 2011.

Democratic institutions

Three “rules of the game” still needed to be completed after the 2014 elections. The first concerned the judiciary: the 2014 constitution mandated the new parliament create the Supreme Judicial Council within six months and the Constitutional Court within one year. Second, the parliament needed to pass a decentralization law and hold municipal elections. Third, it needed to promulgate laws governing the five independent constitutional bodies — the electoral commission, the anti-corruption authority, the human rights commission, the audio-visual communications authority, and the sustainable development commission.

The consensus government succeeded in creating the Supreme Judicial Council on May 15, 2015, within the six-month mandate.³⁶ It also passed an organic law in November 2015 creating the Constitutional Court,³⁷ but over four years later has still not chosen its 12 members.³⁸ Four of the 12 members of the court are to be elected by parliament, with four each subsequently chosen by the president and the Supreme Judicial Council, respectively. The parliament has on multiple occasions voted to choose its members, but has routinely failed to reach the required two-thirds threshold (145 votes).

In March 2018, a potential deal was reached. The heads of the ruling parliamentary blocs all signed off on voting for four candidates.³⁹ As promised, Ennahda lent its weight in favor of Nidaa Tounes’ nominee, Raoudha Ouersighni, allowing her to reach 150 votes. But when Ennahda nominee Abdellatif Bouazizi came up for a vote, Nidaa Tounes’ MPs split, garnering him only 116 votes, not enough to meet the 145-vote threshold.⁴⁰ With Nidaa Tounes unable or unwilling to maintain consensus, only one candidate — theirs — was approved. No more have been approved since, and the court thereby remains vacant today, four years after the one-year deadline.

Similar challenges delayed parliament’s second task: decentralization. The municipal elections, originally scheduled for 2016, were not held until May 2018. The cause of the delay was an inability to agree on a) the decentralization law outlining the powers of the municipalities,⁴¹ b) the electoral law on how to conduct the municipal elections, and c) the members of electoral commission that would oversee the election. To its credit, the coalition did eventually find consensus on these issues, but far later than expected.

Finally, the parliament has been slow to draft laws governing the five independent constitutional bodies. Two of the five — the High Independent Authority for Elections (ISIE) and the High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HAICA) — continue to operate under legal texts pre-dating the constitution.⁴² Basic laws were approved for the good governance and anti-corruption authority⁴³ and the human rights commission⁴⁴ in July 2017 and October 2018, respectively. However, the parliament has not yet chosen the nine members of either body.⁴⁵ The final constitutional body, the commission for sustainable development and the rights of future generations, is perhaps being left to those future generations.

Polarization

As part of consensus, both sides attempted to reduce polarization around the issues of religion and transitional justice that marked the 2014 electoral campaign. Both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes reined in some of their hardline members who were calling for investigations and prosecutions of members of each other's camps.⁴⁶

Parliamentarians from Nidaa Tounes had sought to investigate Ennahda on several fronts. The first was for any role in facilitating Tunisian foreign fighters to Syria, Iraq, and Libya. In January 2017, the parliament created a commission of inquiry to investigate channels of recruitment to conflict zones.⁴⁷ MP Leila Chettaoui, a co-founder of Nidaa Tounes, presided over the commission. On May 1, Chettaoui announced that the troika government in December 2011 “rolled out the red carpet” for an unnamed Saudi national she called the “mufti of Daesh” and allowed him to recruit young people over two weeks in Tunisia.⁴⁸ She also claimed that “200 charitable and religious associations formed after September 2011 with the blessing of a political party,” which she avoided naming, “were involved in the indoctrination and recruitment of young people.”⁴⁹

Days later, on May 19, she was removed as president of the committee by the speaker of the parliament, Nidaa Tounes' Mohamed Ennaceur. “We were blocked by ‘the consensus’ three months into the commission’s investigation,” Chettaoui exclaimed:

“I believe in transparency. I believe that we shouldn’t be a coward when it comes to these issues. These are issues related to national security that we should have worked on, not in a way that accuses the other side, but in a way that holds them accountable and responsible. This is for the benefit of us and for the other and the whole country. Because it will always be a black spot that will deepen the cleavage between Tunisians and not unite them.”⁵⁰

Other than this investigation into foreign fighters, Nidaa Tounes likely reined in other members who sought to investigate Ennahda for an alleged role in the 2013 Brahmi and Belaid assassinations. As soon as the consensus between Ghannouchi and Essebsi unraveled in September 2018, rumors began to spin about Ennahda harboring a “secret apparatus” that helped conduct the assassinations. President Essebsi then elevated and legitimized these rumors by publicly tasking the national security council with investigating Ennahda on live television in November 2018.⁵¹ This investigation had likely been suppressed between 2015 and 2018 as a result of the desire for consensus and depolarization.

Ennahda, likewise, made efforts to rein in its hardline members who wished to prosecute figures from the old regime under the transitional justice process. In particular, Ennahda in September 2017 voted in favor of the administrative reconciliation law, which provided an amnesty to anyone in the Bourguiba or Ben Ali administrations who was involved in corruption. The law not only pursued reconciliation without truth, but also undercut the authority of the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD), effectively stripping it of jurisdiction over corruption.

Ennahda MPs justify their support for the reconciliation law in two ways. First, they argue that they were able to dilute some of the more negative aspects of the bill. President Essebsi’s original 2015 draft was an “economic” reconciliation law providing an amnesty to businessmen. Ennahda MPs claim they were able to shift the focus instead to bureaucrats, who they contend simply “signed papers” and were pawns in

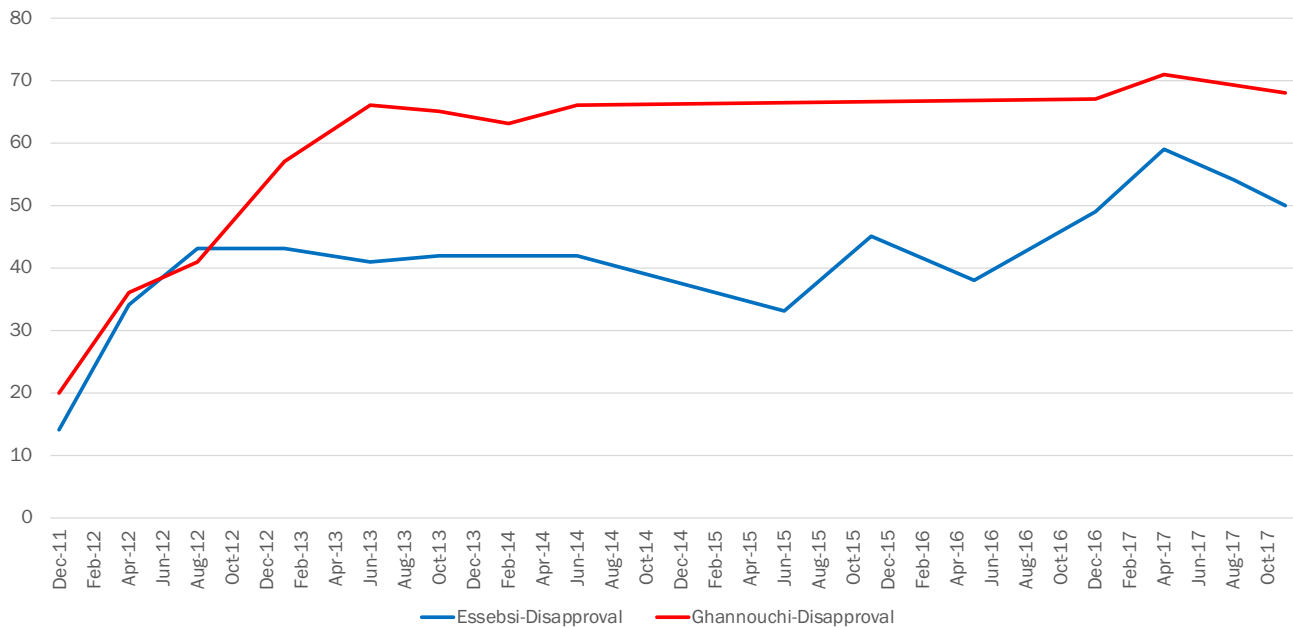
corruption schemes. Second, they contend that voting for reconciliation was critical to maintaining consensus and depolarizing the political landscape. As one Ennahda MP put it, “We have an alliance with the president. We didn’t want to put him in a situation where the president presents a law and it doesn’t get approved.”⁵²

The compromises both sides made succeeded in moving Tunisia “from a dynamic of conflict or confrontation to a dynamic of partnership,” as Mehrezia Laabidi put it. “It gave Tunisian democracy time to breathe.”⁵³ Without a doubt, consensus contributed to reducing the appearance of elite polarization. But in some ways, consensus simply postponed rather than resolved the underlying cleavages. Indeed, once the consensus between Ghannouchi and Essebsi ended, this polarization reemerged. Essebsi introduced a bill to grant women equal inheritance rights in an effort to rekindle the secular-Islamist cleavage.⁵⁴ As mentioned earlier, he also elevated rumors of Ennahda harboring a secret apparatus, encouraging leftists to call for — and file lawsuits demanding — Ennahda’s dissolution under the anti-terrorism law.⁵⁵

Public opinion

As the consensus government fell short in its efforts to improve the economy and advance the transition, the public became increasingly disillusioned with the entire process. Public trust in the government, in political parties, and democracy decreased rapidly and significantly. The individuals most associated with consensus, such as Essebsi and Ghannouchi, suffered as well. One might have expected that as they made, as Ghannouchi termed it to one of us, “our big trip to the center,” that Tunisians would hold them in higher esteem. The opposite happened. As Essebsi and Ghannouchi pursued consensus, their favorability ratings cratered, with their unfavorability ratings increasing from 10-20% to 50-70% from 2011 to 2017.⁵⁶

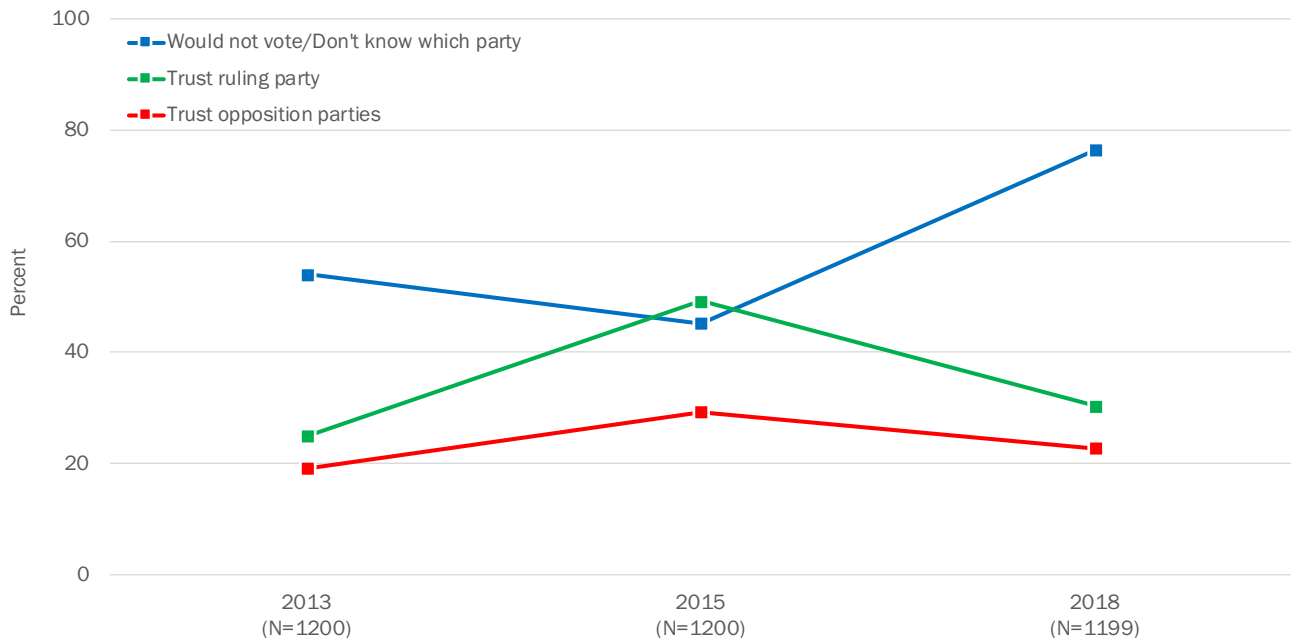
FIGURE 2: UNFAVORABILITY RATINGS



Source: International Republican Institute⁵⁷

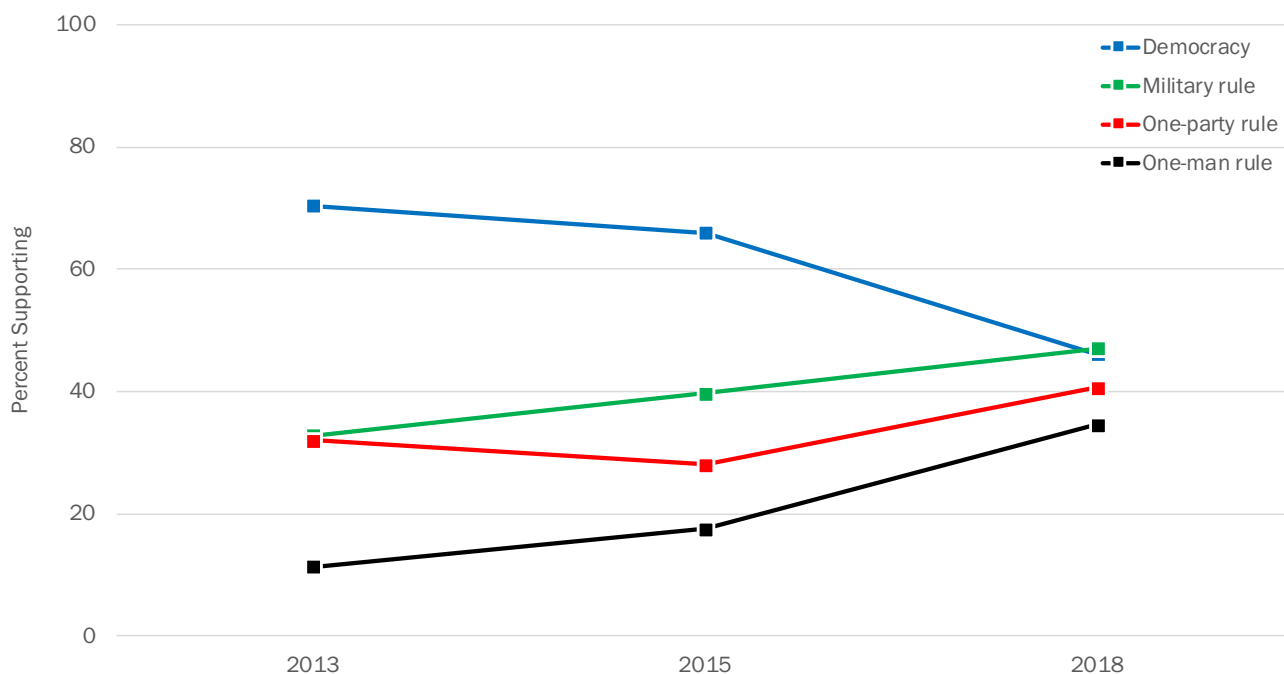
This frustration was not limited to these individuals, but to their political parties as well. Consensus made it harder for the public to differentiate the parties.⁵⁸ In 2014, things were simple. Nidaa Tounes represented secularism, the old regime, and the coastal regions, while Ennahda represented the opposite. Between 2015 and 2018, the parties were nearly indistinguishable, both attempting to pursue IMF reforms, reconciliation with the old regime, and security at the expense of police brutality. With no policy differentiation in the major parties, Tunisians no longer felt represented by them. The 2018 Afrobarometer survey found that 81% of Tunisians did “not feel close to any political party,” and 79% either would not vote or would not know who to vote for if elections were held tomorrow.⁵⁹ This disillusionment with parties was reflected in the 2018 municipal elections, which saw a turnout of just 34% and where the largest vote-getters were independents.

FIGURE 3: DISAFFECTION WITH PARTIES



Source: Afrobarometer⁶⁰

Relatedly, consensus relegated opposition parties to irrelevance. As Mehrezia Laabidi told one of us, “Democracy normally is based on an opposition to the governing majority. If the two majority groups have an alliance, the opposition becomes insignificant.”⁶¹ With 82% of the parliament in the ruling coalition, the remaining 18% could do little. No matter how much Tunisians protested or civil society rose concerns, they went nowhere without a strong partner in the parliament. The reconciliation law, for instance, passed despite both major protests against it and the majority of Tunisians opposing it.⁶² Without a strong opposition, there was nothing to keep frustrated Tunisians invested in the system. Not surprisingly, support for democracy declined precipitously. While 70% ranked democracy as preferable to all other systems of government in 2013, only 46% did so in 2018.⁶³

FIGURE 4: DISILLUSIONMENT WITH DEMOCRACY

Source: Afrobarometer⁶⁴

Meanwhile, support for each of democracy’s alternatives — military rule, one-party rule, and one-man rule — all increased to alarming degrees. While the Ennahda-Nidaa Tounes alliance was supposed to preserve democracy, democratic consolidation — if one takes into account public support for democracy as “the only game in town”⁶⁵ — was, if anything, *less* likely after the three years of extended consensus.⁶⁶

The failure of the consensus government and frustration with existing political parties came to the fore in the 2019 elections, which led to devastating results for all parties involved in the consensus period. Each of the secular coalition partners were roundly defeated. Nidaa Tounes, which had won 86 seats in 2014 but had splintered down to 25 seats, won just 3 seats in the 2019 elections. The other factions of Nidaa Tounes, Tahya Tounes and Machrou Tounes,⁶⁷ also fell, from 43 to 14 seats and from 15 to 4 seats, respectively. The junior coalition partners fared no better, with the Free Patriotic Union dropping from 16 to 0, and Afek Tounes from 8 to 2.⁶⁸ For reasons described below, Ennahda also lost support, though to a lesser extent, dropping from 69 to 52 seats. The two largest opposition parties from the 2014-2019 parliament, who had been powerless in facing a unity government, also fared poorly, with the Popular Front dropping from 15 to 1, and CPR dropping from 4 to 0.

TABLE 1: THE DEFEAT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT

Party	Parliamentary Seats		
	2014 Elections Result	Eve of 2019 Elections	2019 Elections Result
Nidaa Tounes	86	25	3
Ennahda	69	68	52
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	16	0	0
Afek Tounes	8	8	2
Tahya Tounes	-	43	14
Machrou Tounes	-	15	4
Popular Front	15	9	1
Congress for the Republic (CPR)	4	4	0

Instead, the 2019 elections saw the rise of new faces and political outsiders, each of which campaigned on criticism of the consensus government. Frustration with Ennahda's compromises on religion and the revolution contributed to the rise of the Karama Coalition, a more hardline Islamist party that placed fourth in the parliamentary elections with 21 seats. Importantly, this is the first time Ennahda has seen a major electoral competitor on its right flank. Until 2019, Ennahda was only Islamist party with parliamentary representation.⁶⁹

Frustration with Nidaa Tounes' compromises also contributed to the rise of Nabil Karoui's Qalb Tounes and Abir Moussi's Free Destourian Party, both of which championed Nidaa Tounes' original demand for the revival of a strong "Bourguibist" secular state, to claim second and fifth place, respectively. Finally, the frustration with political parties fueled the rise and election of President Kais Saied, a populist and relatively unknown law professor, who argued that corrupt political parties hijacked the revolution and that power needed to be devolved directly to the people.⁷⁰ In short, the polarized and fragmented landscape Tunisia faces after the 2019 elections is partly the consequence of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes' fateful decision to form a consensus government, despite its unpopularity. Had they not, the two parties may very well have stayed in control of the two ends of the political spectrum.

Overall, the consensus government may have succeeded in improving security and reducing the appearance of polarization. But as even its proponents acknowledge, it "did not succeed in pushing consensus onto economic and social problems"⁷¹ nor onto the creation of the remaining democratic institutions like the Constitutional Court. Tunisians, meanwhile, grew disillusioned with the entire process, roundly punishing the consensus government in the 2019 elections. Why wasn't the consensus government more effective?

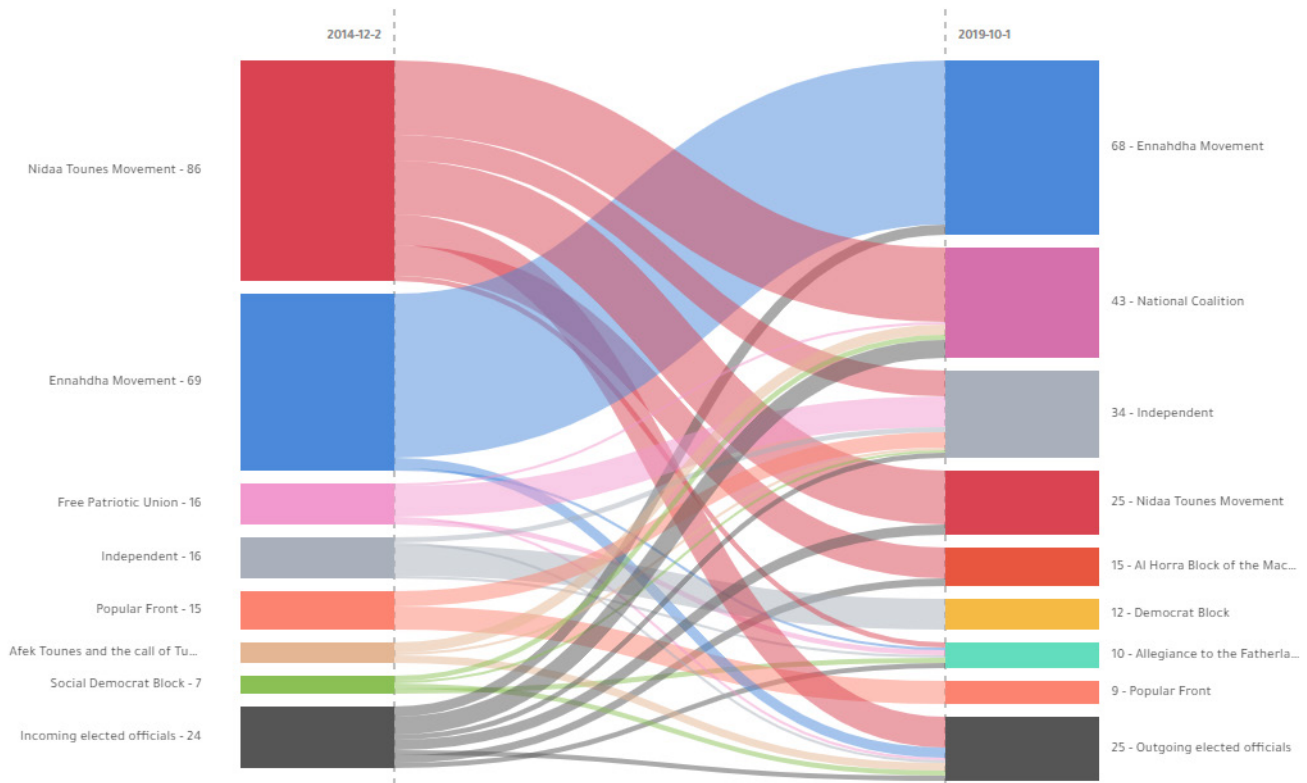
DIAGNOSIS OF THE CONSENSUS GOVERNMENT'S FAILURES

The failure of the consensus government to tackle economic challenges and help consolidate democracy can be attributed to two primary weaknesses: 1) the inability of Nidaa Tounes to deliver consensus, and 2) the over-willingness of Ennahda to compromise to keep the coalition alive.

The fragmentation of Nidaa Tounes

The primary cause of the consensus government's failure was the fragmentation of Nidaa Tounes. Having originally won the parliamentary elections with 86 seats in the parliament, after widespread defections, only 25 MPs remained with Nidaa Tounes in 2019. Its lack of party discipline hindered its ability to deliver the votes needed, for instance, on the Constitutional Court.

FIGURE 5: FRAGMENTATION OF PARLIAMENTARY BLOCS, 2014-2019



Source: Marsad Majles⁷²

It is no surprise that Nidaa Tounes was unable to sustain consensus with Ennahda. After all, it was formed in 2012 for the *sole purpose* of opposing Ennahda. It brought together a diverse array of secularists — both leftists and liberals, working class champions and business-oriented neoliberals — whose commonality was opposition to Ennahda's rule. The party then chose to explicitly campaign against Ennahda, blaming it for the country's problems, calling it a terrorist organization, and accusing it of responsibility for the 2013 assassinations.

It was inevitable that a party with that kind of history would fragment when trying to form an alliance with its arch-rival. Moreover, President Essebsi did little to try to prevent such fragmentation. He reportedly announced the coalition with Ennahda without consulting or even informing members of his own party. As Chettaoui recounts:

“All of our campaigning was against Ennahda. So for us, it was very normal for Ennahda to be in opposition and us as the ruling party. But this was not the case. The founder of our party said otherwise. ... There was no consultation at all. He took the decision alone, and it was very hard for us. We had strong resistance to it. He didn’t communicate the reasons, where the country was heading from that moment. We told him that we need to focus on the party, and that what you are going to do will destabilize and fracture the party.”⁷³

Indeed, two weeks prior to the announcement of the coalition, Nidaa co-founder Mondher Belhaj Ali had ruled out an alliance with Ennahda, claiming that 70 of Nidaa’s 89 MPs were absolutely against it.⁷⁴ Some of these MPs naturally broke off from Nidaa, frustrated both with the alliance and the lack of internal consultation. The first faction of MPs to split from Nidaa Tounes, Mohsen Marzouk’s Mashrou Tounes, did so largely because of the coalition with Ennahda. “The party had lost sight of its vision to build a democratic, modern and secular state,” he told his supporters at a rally announcing the split.⁷⁵

This lack of party discipline meant that even when President Essebsi or other Nidaa Tounes leaders found agreement with Ennahda, such as on the Constitutional Court, their MPs often did not follow suit. Ennahda MP Mehrezia Laabidi lamented that:

“It was so bizarre in the parliament that in many affairs the leaders of Nidaa met with leaders of Ennahda and the chief of government and agreed on voting for this or that element of the budget or this or that law. When we enter into plenary, surprise, surprise! Half of their MPs reject the vote or are absent or refuse to vote.”⁷⁶

Similarly, on structural economic reforms, the coalition was able in 2018 to agree on 63 specific reforms, but disagreed on whether to keep then Prime Minister Youssef Chahed in power, dooming the entire process. That failure was again the result of Nidaa Tounes’ internal fragmentation. A rivalry had developed between Chahed and the president’s son, Hafedh Caid Essebsi, for control over the party.

This rivalry ultimately ended the relationship between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda altogether. Chahed’s membership in Nidaa Tounes was suspended in September 2018, and MPs close to him left the party as well, dropping Nidaa to the third largest bloc in the parliament. At that point, consensus required speaking not only to Essebsi and Nidaa Tounes, but also to Chahed and his parliamentary bloc. Bitter that Ennahda was cooperating with rather than marginalizing Chahed, Essebsi terminated the alliance with Ennahda in October 2018. But in many ways, it had died well before then, when the splits within Nidaa Tounes prevented progress on key economic and political reforms.

Ennahda, on the other hand, remained intact despite the alliance with Nidaa Tounes. Examining why demonstrates what is needed to make consensus work. Of course, the party could claim a much longer history, with solidarity built over decades of repression. Moreover, as an Islamist party, Ennahda could claim a distinctive ideological orientation and a shared religious impetus among its members. This, in turn, facilitated

internal coherence and organizational discipline. It is difficult for parties that lack a clear ideological platform or Ennahda's history to replicate that strong identity. But other aspects are more replicable. First, Ennahda had relatively democratic internal structures and internally debated most of its major political decisions before making them. Second, Ennahda pre-selected parliamentary candidates in 2014 who would be more open to an alliance with Nidaa Tounes.⁷⁷ Finally, it campaigned on national unity rather than an anti-Nidaa Tounes stance, not even endorsing its former coalition partner Moncef Marzouki in the presidential elections. As an illustration of how much Ennahda party leaders worked to develop consensus, President Essebsi was even invited to speak at Ennahda's 2016 party congress. In short, consensus failed in large part because Nidaa Tounes was simply not as committed to it as Ennahda was. Some of this has to do with inherent gaps between secular and Islamist parties — but not all of it.

Facilitating the counterrevolution

For its part, Ennahda also bears some of the blame for the coalition's failure to consolidate democracy. It bent over backwards to try to keep the coalition alive, and in doing so, facilitated the counterrevolutionary tendencies within Nidaa Tounes. While Ennahda believed it could better check these tendencies from within the coalition than in the opposition, it ultimately caved in to them far more than necessary.

An overzealousness in compromise was clear from the beginning, and Ennahda was never able to shift the lopsided dynamic, despite loyally staying within the coalition for four years. As discussed earlier, after winning almost 32% of the seats in the 2014 elections (to Nidaa Tounes' 40%), Ennahda was willing to join the coalition government with an offer of just one cabinet minister out of a total of 27. In contrast, Afek Tounes, with 3.7% percent of the seats, gained control of three ministries.

At key junctures and on key priorities, Ennahda was willing to concede when Nidaa Tounes was not, which allowed the latter's counterrevolutionary instincts to remain largely unchecked. Ennahda's leaders argued that their efforts made certain bills less problematic than they otherwise could have been, but it is unclear if modest benefits such as these outweighed the costs. Perhaps, Ennahda could have blocked the bills entirely from the opposition.

The core, however, of Ennahda's justifications for insisting on consensus tend to return to a more fundamental assessment of what was at risk.⁷⁸ Ennahda's leaders believed that without consensus, Tunisia's democratic transition would have been threatened by worsening polarization. Not only that, Tunisia might have fallen into civil war. As one Ennahda MP put it:

"I am deeply convinced that if we didn't make those concessions we would have right now a civil war in Tunisia. So at the time we had to make these concessions for the sake of the country, to step back and play a second role for the sake of Tunisia, for the women and children of Tunisia."⁷⁹

Noureddine Bhiri, the head of Ennahda's parliamentary bloc, echoed these concerns:

"The Libyan experience is in front of us, the Syrian experience as well. The Egyptian system is facing the same despite its strength. All of these experiences, Tunisia is unable to handle. ... So we were faced with two alternatives. Either the choice

of reconciliation, a state that includes and combines all its forces under the constitution, or an open civil war that we don't know when it will end. ... So our choice was strategic, even if in this period we might lose some votes because of anger or a revolutionary spirit that doesn't take into consideration the reality. But we believe we are winning and Tunisia is winning, and that for us, losing votes is better than losing Tunisia."⁸⁰

In this sense, Ennahda's approach to consensus hinged on a set of assumptions about the likelihood of repression and civil war. If these outcomes were likely, then Ennahda would be more than justified to stay in a consensus government even if that government produced legislation that undermined the longer-term prospect of democratic consolidation. The question then becomes how likely was it that President Essebsi would have attacked and repressed Ennahda had they not pursued consensus?

Whether Ennahda would have been repressed in this scenario, we think, depends on at least two factors. The first is whether Ennahda would have protested Essebsi alone or been joined by other, secular opposition groups, thereby presenting a cross-section of society. If the former, it would have been easier to paint the protesters as a narrow out-group, much like during the Rabaa massacre in Egypt in August 2013. The second factor is the reaction of the international community. Would Europe and the United States have looked the other way, or would they have been sufficiently invested in democracy in Tunisia to publicly stand with an Islamist group?

It is difficult to know what the answers to these questions would have been. While we believe repression was unlikely, it is telling that Ennahda's calculation was that the domestic and international environment would have permitted their repression. True or false, this perception on Ennahda's part suggests a fundamental weakness in Tunisia's transition: that secular parties and the international community have failed to provide sufficient guarantees to Ennahda of cohabitation or credible promises that their party has been normalized and that any attempt to ban it is off the table. Even in 2019, despite Ennahda's decision to move to the center, establish a separation between politics and preaching, further distance themselves from Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region, and formally define themselves as "Muslim Democrats"⁸¹ rather than Islamists, Essebsi still did not find these moves "sufficient":

"I attended the opening session of Ennahda's last general congress to encourage its transition to a real political party, but it became clear that this effort was not sufficient because it was solely based on the idea of separating political activity from preaching and religious activity and this is not possible and not what is required. In any case, what is for certain now is that we need to ascertain first whether this secret arm exists or not, for the sake of safeguarding stability and then check whether this secret arm had a hand in the assassinations or not. We need to check that out."⁸²

This rhetoric is worrisome, and contributes to Ennahda's fear — real or exaggerated — that it could be dissolved if it does not pursue consensus. In that sense, the presence of continued consensus nine years into Tunisia's transition is not necessarily something to be praised, but instead is a reflection that democracy is far from consolidated. If all parties were truly committed to democracy, consensus would no longer be necessary.

Inherent limitations to consensus

The 2015-2019 consensus government also illustrates two broader limitations to consensus politics, beyond the particular flaws of the parties involved. The first is that consensus risks becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to pass difficult reforms. Consensus politics creates a collective action problem, where no single party or leader has a strong enough incentive to push hard on anything that might be controversial either within the coalition or without. Because the emphasis is on consensus, anything that threatens that consensus is avoided. Indeed, over 80 bills, some dating as far back as 2014, simply sat in the 2014-2019 parliament waiting to be considered.⁸³

Continued consensus thus undermined its initial intent, reducing rather than improving government performance. As Amel Boubekour writes, “Both camps have avoided politically costly and potentially explosive issues, such as structural economic reform and transitional justice.”⁸⁴ Sarah Yerkes and Zeineb Ben Yahmed similarly conclude that “while national unity governments are designed to make difficult policy decisions more feasible — as blame is shared between parties — in Tunisia, this did not occur.”⁸⁵

Without consensus, there is no doubt that politics would have been more conflictual and tense, and polarization would have increased. But polarization is often a feature of divided societies, even in the oldest democracies. As long as it stays within the bounds of democratic competition, polarization should not necessarily be seen as something to forestall at all costs. In Tunisia’s case, (peaceful) political conflict, however uncomfortable, could have generated a wider range of distinct policy options, mobilized greater popular buy-in for the democratic process, increased differentiation between parties, boosted the leverage of civil society, and put pressure on the government to take responsibility and actually deliver on reforms.

The second fundamental limitation with consensus is that while it may reduce the appearance of polarization, it simply postpones rather than resolves the underlying sources of tension. Those tensions — in this case, religious and ideological divides — may therefore reemerge in an even stronger and more institutionalized fashion, as they now have in Tunisia in the form of more stridently secular and Islamist parties. In other words, the consensus government in Tunisia helped produce the very polarization it was designed to prevent, making compromise over contentious issues potentially even more difficult to achieve today.

TOWARDS A BETTER CONSENSUS?

Despite its mixed track record, efforts at consensus — in the sense of a large unity government bringing together former rivals — may continue in Tunisia. Each of the motivations for consensus in 2015 remain relevant today. Consensus is still needed to create the Constitutional Court, and is still useful to avoid blame for passing painful economic reforms. Moreover, many in Ennahda still feel that the domestic and international environment is not ready to accept it in a dominant role in the government or opposition.⁸⁶

Given that consensus may return, what lessons can be learned from 2015-2019 to improve its effectiveness? We provide three recommendations.

First, political parties should develop internally democratic structures. Without these internal channels to express dissent, parties are likely to continue fracturing and will be unable to deliver votes in the parliament. Party leaders, meanwhile, need to be internally elected in order to have the legitimacy to negotiate with other parliamentary blocs. It goes without saying that party leaders should seek the approval of their parties or parliamentary blocs before joining a unity government or voting on major reforms.

Second, while too late for the 2019 elections, parties would be well served to campaign on coherent policy platforms, and not simply polarizing, identity-based rhetoric against another party. Nidaa Tounes' anti-Ennahda campaign in 2014 led both its MPs and its electorate to view an alliance with Ennahda as unconscionable. If instead it had campaigned on a more affirmative agenda – structural economic reforms, restoring security, etc. – voters and party members may have been more willing to consider the common ground it shared with Ennahda.

Finally, political parties should build on that common ground to develop an explicit agenda for any proposed grand coalition. Such transparency will help voters differentiate each parties' original policy preferences from that of the eventual coalition government. As such, parties will be better able to retain their identities, and voters will feel more represented by them. Over time, if voters decide that they would rather not have their preferred parties "dilute" their ideological or programmatic preferences through forming coalitions with other parties, then they can vote with their feet.

Commenting on the lessons learned from Nidaa Tounes's failures, Chettaoui observed: "When we talk about cohabitation it means that I will keep my identity and you will keep yours, and we will have a program or charter of things we will work on together. This was not done [in 2015]. Nothing was studied or planned or even said."⁸⁷

Ennahda's Mehrezia Laabidi learned the same lesson:

"First of all [we have learned] to have consensus with parties [not individuals] and on a common program. [In 2015] we needed consensus between these two leaders, it was necessary, and maybe could not do better. Now we are ... discussing a written program: what are our priorities in the future parliament, in the economy, where do we want Tunisia to go. Consensus on a program, a written consensus, that commits not only persons but institutions and parties."⁸⁸

CONSENSUS AS A BELLWETHER OF WEAKNESS

While these aforementioned suggestions may improve consensus politics, it is worth repeating one fundamental point. The presence of consensus is not necessarily something to praise, but rather reflects that a democratic transition is not complete and may be on shaky grounds. Once democracy is consolidated and all parties are genuinely committed to democracy, consensus may still be an option, but it will no longer be necessary.

Ennahda's decision to join the consensus government in 2015 rather than lead the opposition stemmed from the perception that if it did not, it would be repressed or even dissolved. Ennahda's continued fears of dissolution – partly exaggerated but also partly real – pose a major obstacle to democratic consolidation. If a major political party, due to fear of repression, is afraid to lead the opposition, then this will extend

transitions, making it longer to achieve consolidation. Consensus governments — and for that matter, technocratic governments — have their place as temporary stopgaps during the early phases of democratic transitions, but over time, if used and re-used, can obscure the lines of democratic accountability and responsibility between parties and their voters and between governments and the people who elect them. Unwieldy coalitions mean that voters can never be quite sure who in the coalition was responsible for failure, and are almost certain to face policy paralysis.

Rather than forcing grand cross-ideological coalitions out of fear of polarization, democracy can be well served by narrower, more ideologically similar coalitions governing on their own. Then voters can more clearly discern party performance. To move away from consensus, then, means that parties can develop into stronger, more effective, and more coherent institutions.

To end the politics of consensus, secular parties as well as the international community can play an important role in offering Ennahda guarantees, stating publicly that Ennahda's participation has been “normalized”⁸⁹ and that a party ban or legal restrictions on Ennahda's (or any other party's) activities are off the table.⁹⁰ Once Ennahda, or any other party for that matter, no longer fears repression, it will be more comfortable expressing rather than suppressing its political preferences.

Consensus, in this sense, can serve as a bellwether. Domestic and international observers who have an interest in Tunisian democracy can closely follow Tunisia's progress by considering the state of consensus at any given moment. If consensus continues, then, based on the analysis above, it is likely to be an indicator of the lack of consolidation. If or when consensus ends — and assuming it does so without a major authoritarian reversal — then this will provide important evidence that Tunisia's democratic transition is safer and more secure.

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87 Grewal interview with Leila Chettaoui, Tunis, January 22, 2019.

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90 That said, some of these characteristics may be, by now, ingrained in Ennahda and certainly within its leader and co-founder, who retains a level of respect and deference within the party that is unlikely to be replicated. This may be a particular feature of Middle East party systems, where if at least one major party is Islamist in orientation, it will either "lose on purpose" or otherwise suppress its goals. If Ennahda were a leftist party, it would act differently, and there would more likely be a meaningful check on executive power and a more normal "oppositional" dynamic.

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