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**Social Rights in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia:  
Is a Consensus-driven Policy Still on The table?**

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### **1) INTRODUCTION**

The immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the demonstrations that followed in December 2010 triggered the Tunisian revolution. But there were more deep-seated issues at stake: unemployment, poverty and exclusion, coupled with a deep sense of injustice, humiliation and helplessness of the peripheries to influence the political centre. Five years after the revolution, the social and economic problems are still persistent and arguably worse. Many people believe Tunisians are facing a distorted revolution; political progress has not coincided with reforms leading to welfare.

Worries about change surfaced during the first days of the revolution. Through press and media which finally broke free from the yoke of censorship, Tunisians were discovering the reality of inequality, but this debate was side-lined by a separate debate on the nature of the regime, and the choice between a parliamentary and presidential system. The question of identity dominated the conversation, especially the nature of the relationship between religion and the state. The idea of a country where the economic crisis is endemic was forcefully installed. The crisis was partly explained by the pressure of social protest movements which seemed to provoke capital flight, and lack of investment.

Some did not hesitate to stigmatize the protest movements which prevented, as Tunisians say, "the economy's wheel from turning". In December 2012, a leading actor of the Tunisian revolution, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) saw its headquarters blockaded and attacked by members of the League of the Protection of the Revolution shouting the slogan "destroy the country".

Today, a new 'political' debate is stirring about the nature of the regime and the question of whether the constitution needs to be revised, or more powers assigned to the president. This is a debate in

which the two major parties, Nidaa Tounes and the Ennahda Movement, viewed institutional change as a priority, considering it as the way out of the crisis, while the country lags in stagnation.

Meanwhile, socio-economic conditions are stagnating, as evidenced by the "revolt of the unemployed" in January 2016. The protest movement which started from Kasserine, Tunisia's poorest region, and spread to several regions of the republic was triggered by the electrocution of 27-year-old Ridha Yahiaoui during a demonstration against the withdrawal of a list of employees in the public service. The slogans chanted by protesters were reminiscent of, if not replicated, the ones chanted during the revolution which took place between December 2010 and January 2011.

In early April 2016, the crisis simmering since the beginning of the year exploded on the island of Kerkennah. An oil company which is 51% state-owned backtracked on its previous promise to hire nearly 300 young unemployed graduates, triggering protests that turned violent.

Confronted with economic hardship (unemployment went up from 10% in 2010 to 15.4% in 2015) and lack of reform, protests and strikes have not decreased in number and take the same pre-Revolution forms: immolation by fire, strikes, peaceful and violent protests. According to the Social Tunisian Observatory (OST), 534 protests were recorded throughout December 2015, a huge rise compared to 390 protests documented in November 2015. The socio-economic, health and environmental reasons represent almost 40% of all protests' causes. It has to be mentioned that protests are turning increasingly violent, while also increasing in number; the number of violent demonstrations jumped from 84 in October 2015 to 143 in December of the same year. The violent protests triggered clashes with security forces, degradation of property, and ransacking of office spaces. The 2015 Report of the OST (Observatoire Social Tunisien) on "suicide and suicide attempts in 2015"<sup>1</sup> also indicated an estimated 170.4% increase in the number of suicides and suicide attempts over 2014.

The progress in terms of politics (a multiparty system, freedom of expression, dynamism of civil society organisations), and the constitutionalisation process of social and economic rights don't not mark any concrete progress in terms of social reforms, which continues to feed social tensions. Given

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<sup>1</sup> Rapport annuel « Suicide et tentatives de suicide en Tunisie 2015 », 25 february 2016, Observatoire Social Tunisien, FTDeS: <http://ftdes.net/rapports/suicide2015.ar.pdf>.

the socio-economic agenda imposed by the revolution, it was predictable that expectations would be high, especially when one considers the traditionally important role the Tunisian state plays in the areas of health, education, and social benefits. In this sense, and according to the summary report of the survey on Tunisia in 2016, the Arab Barometer reveals that around 50% of Tunisians associate democracy with political and economic instability (an increase from 20% of Tunisians in 2011). However, paradoxically, more than 86% of them still believe that democracy is the most appropriate political system.

The government in place since February 2015 was immediately confronted with the risks of transition; it had to formulate quick responses to social needs while working in an atmosphere of discontent, reluctant social partners and a continued rise in social claims and expectations. Lotfi Zitoun, a leader of the Ennahda Movement, assessing the period of the government of the Troika (December 2011-January 2014), said, "We were not fully aware of the weakness of the country's resources and the major economic needs. We might have exaggerated some promises, which increased expectations and disappointment when we were not able to deliver on those promises. "

This begs the question if democratic legitimacy will continue to be enough to ensure the stability of a state that has long depended on its joint ability of providing welfare and redistributing resources?

## **2- A REVOLUTIONARY CONSTITUTION STRONGLY BINDING THE STATE**

The Tunisian constitution strengthened the social and economic rights of citizens, reflecting the demands of the revolution. Guarantees have been instituted to ensure the implementation of these rights.

In the new constitution, the state has been assigned heavy responsibilities in both the protection and implementation of socio-economic rights. Economic and social rights were included in both the preamble, general principles (Chapter 1) and occupied a large part of the chapter on rights and freedoms (Chapter 2). Almost all socio-economic rights have been included.

The preamble highlighted the rights associated with revolutionary demands and bound the state to work towards equality among the regions and social justice. The state must also work to preserve a healthy environment. The preamble considers work, alongside science and creativity, as noble human values, as the revolution had emphasised work and employment as a fundamental dimension of human dignity.

In terms of general principles, Article 10 is dedicated to the fight against tax evasion, fraud and corruption, and stresses the duty of each citizen to pay taxes and contribute to the public office under a fair and equitable system. It is for the state to set and define the management and operation mechanisms.

Article 12 urges the state to be responsible for social justice, regional development and maintaining a balance among the regions as part of affirmative action. As previously noted, territorial disparities and regional imbalances in Tunisia were exposed by the revolution and are ever more evident; they now represent the main challenge for every government. On the map of regional wealth distribution, it is clear that the benefits of growth are not equally allocated; protest movements demanding employment and equality are a regular occurrence. The coastline is still privileged, with Tunis, Sousse and Sfax -the three main coastal cities-, representing 85 % of GDP.

While the national unemployment rate is 15.4%, it is 28% in the mining base region of Gafsa. The south-east and southwest are the regions most affected by unemployment, with 22.2 % and 26.1 % rates of unemployment respectively. Both are trounced by the Governorate of Tataouine which has an unemployment rate of 30%. The national illiteracy rate is 19%, but rises to a shocking 30% in the central-west region.

One alarming health indicator is the maternal mortality rate. The national average stands at 44.8 per 100,000 births.<sup>2</sup> While for the northwest, central-west and southwestern provinces, these rates are 67, 60 and 57 per 100,000 births respectively. In the domain of health, the density indicator of doctors' territorial distribution shows a national average of 128.2 doctors for every 100,000 citizens. However, the same index falls to 47.8 in Kasserine and 48.8 in Sidi Bouzid. The government is striving to issue a package of incentives, especially financial ones, to encourage young specialised physicians to work

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<sup>2</sup> 2009-2010 figures.

in public hospitals in the more remote areas of the country, but the latter reject their placement in those regions citing the negative work conditions prevailing in those areas.

Article 14 comes as a response to this unequal distribution among regions and it is devoted to decentralisation as a preferential mode of governance, urging the state to implement it. Chapter 7 of the constitution is devoted to local government and provides for the creation of a high representative body of all local government councils - the High Assembly of Local Authorities - with the task of monitoring, among other issues, the implementation of a new regional balance. This body will have to break with a tradition of centralisation implemented as part of the statist policies of Bourguiba who, with the exception of national allegiance, wanted an end to other forms of loyalty. Both the Husseinite dynasty (1705-1957) and the French protectorate (1881-1956) had historically accommodated those other allegiances, especially tribal ones, and had not parted from the territorial Bey organisation. The French protectorate, for example, had limited itself to "tightening" the control screw by reducing the number of caïds from 70 to 38. The caïds were mainly responsible for security and taxes and were directly dependent on the resident-general. They relied on this broad territorial network to implement policies encouraging the settlement of nomadic tribes.

The various regional development policies undertaken since independence and the creation of the governorates, 14 in 1956 and 24 today, were top-down orders imposed from above and handed over to regional bodies, whose powers and room for manoeuvre were limited because for a period of time they didn't use to be elected. Even when they later were elected, the elections were unfair and undemocratic. Citizens and associations that were not submissive to power were excluded from deliberations.

A Ministry of Local Affairs was established by a government decree dated March 18 2016 with the task of developing and executing the implementation process of decentralisation throughout the territory of the Republic. It also ensured, among other things, the monitoring of the general public policy of decentralisation.

In the Rights and Freedoms Chapter, Article 21 engages the state to "ensure the conditions for a dignified life" for all citizens; Article 36 sanctions trade union rights and the right to strike; Article 38 enshrines the right to health and the state's role as guarantor of free quality care to the poor and

social protection. Tunisia is a country with a long-standing tradition of free public healthcare and to this day still provides 84% of hospital capacity. Minister Said Aidi, from Nidaa Tounes, addressing the structural shortcomings blighting the public sector, has proposed an action plan that highlights five priorities: 1) investing in prevention, 2) reorganisation of the public sector by strengthening the territorial health department with the aim of reducing inequality<sup>3</sup>; 3) modernisation of public sector investment on research and new technologies (particularly a law organizing telemedicine); 4) a new mode of governance which involves reconsidering funding and introducing an investments code; and 5) finally, restructuring of the health system with the creation of a multidisciplinary commission in charge of a national plan for healthcare-connected services, export development and a pilot project of satisfaction surveys in the public health sector.

The right to a free public education is guaranteed by the state under Article 39.

Article 40 states that work is a right of every citizen and that the conditions of work have to be decent and in return for a decent wage. The SMIG (the minimum legal wage which covers some 250,000 workers) and pensions were both increased in November 2015. Five deputies from the Social Democratic bloc, who were elected in five regions of the interior, have also suggested adding to the 2016 budget an article providing for the payment of a job search allowance of 200 dinars per month to unemployed people. This provision will benefit some 500,000 people in search of a job, of which 420,000 are between the ages of 15 and 29, and would be financed from a tax increase on high incomes. Zied Laâdhari (Ennahda), Minister of Employment, does not back this proposal considering it a "band aid solution", whereas the government prefers to invest in offering young people "real opportunities" to enter the job market.

The deputy of the People's Representatives Assembly, Mustapha Ben Ahmed (Nidaa Tounes and Al Hurra) submitted on 3 April 2015 a motion to the president requesting the reintroduction of a monthly allowance (of the same value as the SMIG) to be granted to all job seekers and its incorporation in the supplementary finance law of 2015. This proposal wanted to fill the vacuum left by the conclusion of the programme "Amal", set up by the Beji Caid Essebsi's transitional government of, which ended

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<sup>3</sup> The average distance of access to university hospitals, for example, is 2 km for Tunis residents and 300 km for a resident of Kasserine and Tozeur. This inequality is also raised as an issue when it comes to the average ratio of doctor per inhabitant: It is one doctor for 271 inhabitants of Tunis, while one doctor for 2,178 inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid. Moreover, several regional hospitals lack specialized doctors.

in March 2015 and consisted of a monthly allowance of 200 dinars allocated to unemployed university graduates in order to support them seeking employment. Overall, approximately 156,000 people benefited from the programme.

Articles 42 (right to culture), 43 (sport and leisure), 44 (right to water) 45 (right to a healthy and protected environment), which fall under the category of affirmative action rights involving positive action from the state to ensure their effectiveness, are acknowledged as permanent and non-reversible achievements and constitutionally safe-guarded in Article 49. This limitation clause clearly establishes a constitutional framework guaranteeing the protection of all fundamental rights. In fact, any amendment affecting or removing human rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution will be judged unconstitutional. Constitutional protection of socio-economic rights can no longer be reversed or nullified by simple laws or majority votes.

The state is committed to the protection of human rights, in facilitating the participation of citizens and affirmative action needed in order to ensure citizen's rights to welfare. Yet in a context of political transition marked by great instability and a general weakening of all state institutions, the state's ability to deliver these benefits is uncertain.

### **3-MANY PROMISES, FEW ACHIEVEMENTS**

The first transitional government which held office from February 2011 to November 2011, led by the current President of the Republic Beji Caid Essebsi drafted a 'White Paper' including 49 proposals and an implementation schedule with the aim of fighting all forms of inequality and regional and territorial disparities. This program was meant to be a roadmap for future elected governments to initiate reforms under the banner of three guiding principles: 1) social and territorial cohesion, 2) efficiency and 3) competitiveness. In fact, the White Paper pointed to social and territorial imbalances across all sectors, ranging from health to culture through to education (with 100,000 children out of school annually) as the breeding ground for revolution. However, the most important decisions that marked government activity in this first period of office were related to political freedoms: general amnesty for prisoners of conscience, dissolution of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) and abolition of the Press Code.

The White Paper was published during a period of a tense socio-political upheaval, a time where economic indicators were at their lowest level. The economic growth rate had drastically fallen from 3% in 2010 to 0.2% by the end of 2011. Today it is estimated at 1 %, after being sluggish for the last five years<sup>4</sup>.

Faced with rising claims and grievances advanced by trade unions, mainly from the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) as well as the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) - which alone has roughly 10,000 members - political parties, including the two which are currently ruling, have devoted a considerable part of their electoral programs to socio-economic issues. It was necessary to respond to the demands raised by the revolution.

It was surprising to witness the renewed upsurge of illegal immigration flows of Tunisian youth from the very first weeks of the Revolution. During the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) elections which took place in October 2011, there was a palpable sense of disappointment, a feeling of urgency and general distrust toward the political class and élite, voter turnout was estimated to be slightly over 50%. This is a trend that became more pronounced in the following parliamentary elections of 2014, where again over 48% of the electorate did not register in the lists. In fact, this voter apathy primarily affected those under 25.

Confronting a party-independent, ideology-free revolution pushed by social reform perspectives, successive governments have responded with wavering, prevarication as much as unpreparedness. Commenting on the outcome of the national dialogue on employment (March 2016), organised by the government in response to the Kasserine protests in January 2016, Abdeljelil Bédoui, University professor and economist, believes that "the recommendations of the national dialogue are nothing but misleading and short-terms solutions (...) that promote the squandering of public funds through allocating financial subsidies to companies in order to encourage them to hire young people without having conducted a prior assessment." Bédoui further considered that "The authorities do not sustain any effort, refuse any dialogue and lack a clear vision to address them [the challenges]."

This initiative of the national dialogue on employment was boycotted by the UDC who considered it a waste of time and energy, hiding the government's lack of political will to solve the unemployment

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<sup>4</sup> Figures from the National Institute of statistics for the first quarter of 2016.

problem. "Any approach that does not take into account the revision of the development model that has generated a considerable rate of unemployment is doomed to failure," declared Sherif Khraifi, the UDC founder.

Houcine Abassi, the Secretary General of the UGTT, has partially taken up the UDC call but holds the view that the position of trade unions has not been productive in the long-term economical course undertaken by the country in the last thirty years. Trade unions, particularly the UGTT, consider that the way out of the crisis will come through the adoption of an alternative development model, different from the neoliberal one that caused the revolution. UGTT proposes the introduction of a new model of "economic solidarity", fairness and equity, and is preparing a new draft law to strengthen workers' and employers' interests in the fight against unemployment.<sup>5</sup>

At any rate, the National Dialogue's initiative culminated in a package of sixteen urgent measures notably concerning employment, support and guidance to the creation of SMEs (Small and medium-size enterprises)<sup>6</sup>, a Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) and a new regulatory and institutional framework. The important message that weaves through all these measures - a message which was endorsed by the Minister of Employment - is that the public sector can no longer remain the prominent employer it used to be.

Nafaa Ennaiffar, Secretary General of the Economic Affairs Committee to UTICA, praised the initiative but criticised the approach. He believes that the recommendations of the national dialogue merely replicate those of the social contract previously signed by the government, the UTICA and UGTT in January 2013. According to Ennaiffar, the latter already defined the general economic and social policy guidelines. In fact, one of the five axes of the social contract, was devoted to 'employment policies and vocational training'. Ennaiffar adds that what is lacking is government's steadfastness and audacity in the implementation. Moreover, seeking consensus by all means possible, as well as the will to "smooth out the rough edges" is not effective in the current exceptionally difficult circumstances in which the government operates. According to the leader of UTICA, there are many factors which constitute a major problem: strikes (even those legal and

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<sup>5</sup> "Une initiative de l'UGTT sur l'économie sociale et solidaire", WMC, Web Manager Center, March 10, 2016, <http://www.webmanagercenter.com/actualite/economie/2016/05/10/169522/tunisie-arp-une-initiative-de-l-ugtt-sur-l-economie-sociale-et-solidaire>.

<sup>6</sup> For example, introduction of a single window and benefits for sponsors.

objective); the slowness of parliamentary procedures; the dysfunction of the public-private partnership; the heavy input of ideological ends in debates; and the government's will to appease all social partners.

This difficulty or "impossibility of reforming" is blocking the draft of the voluntary extension of the legal retirement age, which is part of social security reform. To reduce the pensions fund deficit, two options were considered: a mandatory or a voluntary extension. The consensus draft presented after concertation by the UGTT fails to be submitted to the National Assembly. The government and UGTT made a last minute U-turn and presented a new project which revises the contributions of active employees upward and reduces the amounts of pensions. The Ministry of Social Affairs maintained the Tunisian generous pension system while the UGTT presents figures that contradict this statement; one third of pensioners receive a pension equal to, or below the minimum wage (guaranteed minimum industrial wage of 338 dinars (around 147 euros) per 48 hours a week. Another third receives around, or slightly above the minimum wage board. In the end, the government altogether dropped the revision of the retirement age at 62. A new wave of protests and demonstrations in various regions is about to hit the country with the aim of forcing the government's hand once for all on this very sensitive point.

The lack of fundamental reforms can be explained by the absence of a clear political line and the difficulty of imposing difficult choices given the state's vulnerability. The state is helpless in the face of the wild protests and it can no longer play its regulatory role since it appears unable to tackle the problems that further undermine an already battered economy. One of the most pressing problems is the level reached by the informal economy, which is mostly financed by smuggling and whose financial weight is estimated at around 40% of GDP<sup>7</sup>: experts estimate the gradual phasing out of the informal economy could bring extra state revenue of up to 28 billion dinars. The state budget for 2016 will be 29,250 billion dinars.

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<sup>7</sup> Source : <http://www.webmanagercenter.com/actualite/economie/2015/04/06/162227/l-informel-pese-40-milliards-de-dinars-dans-l-economie-tunisienne>.

The state fails to control tax evasion, which amounted to 50% of tax revenues in 2014<sup>8</sup>, while many Tunisian companies do not pay taxes at all<sup>9</sup>- 40% of enterprises, of which 60% exporting companies officially exempt.<sup>10</sup> Export-oriented enterprises are mainly in the manufacturing sector, that plays an important role in the economy, contributing for 18% of the GDP. However, those companies are largely dependent on foreign capital (2/3 are owned by foreign companies, mainly French and Italian) and operating “under the 1972 offshore regime that offers tax incentives and many benefits to foreign investors”.<sup>11</sup>

Generally speaking, companies pay less tax than individuals (65% for the former, 35% for the latter).<sup>12</sup> Globally, the tax burden is unevenly distributed: employees that make up the middle class, pay the bulk (80%) of direct taxes, even if they only contribute 36% of the GDP.<sup>13</sup> This brings some economists to conclude that Tunisian economy is still very fragile and that the political parties in power have failed to prompt new economic thinking about addressing the country’s needs. This points to a broadly unchanged macroeconomic scenario since 2011, as “the country imports machinery, mostly from the European Union, and exports low value-added goods (e.g. textiles, electronic and mechanic components) with a high level of imported content. There are very few possibilities for knowledge and technology transfer, while re-investment tends to be rather low”.<sup>14</sup>

Corruption has spread in the context of what the World Bank (WB) defined as "crony capitalism." This is a system of privileges established by the Ben Ali clan, which according to the WB report continues to this day. "Those who have no relations, are excluded from the economy," it reads.

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<sup>8</sup> Firas Jaber and Iyad al Riyahi, "Comparative study: tax system in six Arab countries", Arab NGO Network of Development, no.9/2014, p.18, [http://www.globaltaxjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ANND\\_study\\_Tax\\_systems\\_in\\_six\\_Arab\\_countries-1.pdf](http://www.globaltaxjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ANND_study_Tax_systems_in_six_Arab_countries-1.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> "Establishing a business in Tunisia requires twice as many procedural steps and costs almost 5 times as much (as a percentage of per-capita income). This helps explain why so many Tunisian businesses — representing more than a third of the country’s GDP — operate informally. When enterprises are not formally registered, they don’t pay taxes and have trouble accessing capital and hiring." (Abdulwahab Alkebsi and Mohamed Malouche, "It's time for Tunisians to take the next big step", *Foreign Politics*, April 11, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/11/tunisians-next-big-step-arab-spring/>)

<sup>10</sup> Source : "Qu'en est-il de la fraude fiscale en Tunisie ?" DirectInfo, March 21, 2014, <http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2014/03/21/quen-est-il-de-la-fraude-fiscale-en-tunisie/>.

<sup>11</sup> Clara Capelli, " Tunisia in Turmoil: When Supply-Side Orthodoxy Meets an Angry Citizenry", Institute for New Economic Thinking, May 23, 2016, <http://ineteconomics.org/ideas-papers/blog/tunisia-in-turmoil-when-supply-side-orthodoxy-meets-an-angry-citizenry>.

<sup>12</sup> "Tunisia’s economic challenges", Carnegie papers, Carnegie Institute, Beirut, December 2011, p.18, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/tunisia\\_economy.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/tunisia_economy.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Amir Mastouri, "Tunisie: réformer la fiscalité pour réussir la transition démocratique", *Libre Afrique*, <http://www.librefrique.org/AmirMastouri-fiscalite-tunisie-160215>.

<sup>14</sup> See note no.11 above.

The transparency rating of Tunisia continues to decrease and in 2015, its standing on the Transparency International rating system fell from 41/100 to 38/100. As a response, the government of Habib Essid decided in May 2016 to grant, in the 2016 financial year, a significant budget increase for the National Forum to Fight Against Corruption (INLUCC). In fact, Chawki Tabib, the Chair of the INLUCC Forum, has declared just a few days ago that "the state suffers losses of 25% of the total value of public procurement because of widespread corruption in the management of public procurement." However, Kamel Ayadi, the Minister for the Civil Service in charge of the fight against corruption, has refuted the data, denouncing them as pure conjecture and citing the more accurate percentages provided by the World Bank's statistics which estimate the corruption level between 5 and 10% of GDP.<sup>15</sup>

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The state wants to save both its providential status and to undertake reforms that may be unpopular. Its unpopularity lies in the fact that it will break the social contract so prevalent in state-society relations in Tunisia. Furthermore, these reforms will put the state in a difficult position in a context of rising claims for equality and social justice which had brought about the revolution.

Given this paradoxical situation, some analysts start to believe that standardised procrastination and organisational weaknesses are inherently caused by the electoral model and political system adopted after the revolution. Only one party, the Popular Front, regularly denounces the concentration of wealth in the hands of few families at the top of closed economic and political circles surviving the 2011 revolution as the principle cause of the current deadlock. Choukri Belaid, the leader of the Popular Front who was assassinated in 2013, openly advocated a new plan for the distribution of wealth at the national level and among the regions, but he failed to mobilise high numbers of supporters.

The slow pace of vital economic reforms likely to restart the economy, is explained by all parties as the consequence of an institutional system highly fragmented, resulting in a highly volatile and

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<sup>15</sup> "Tunisie, Kamel Ayadi conteste les chiffres de Chawki Tabib sur la corruption dans les marchés publics", WMC, *WebManager Center*, May 9, 2016 : <http://www.webmanagercenter.com/actualite/economie/2016/05/09/169499/tunisie-gouvernance-kamel-ayadi-conteste-les-chiffres-de-chawki-tabib-sur-la-corruption-dans-les-marches-publics>.

unstable executive power. Analysts point to the fact that under the current system, some politicians may be elected in the government by winning only 3,000 votes instead of the 150,000 needed for the post. In fact, the single-ballot proportional voting system was adopted to hold elections of the Constituent National Assembly (ANC), which was assigned the task of drafting the new Tunisian Constitution. Proportional voting was chosen in order to reach all layers of society and build an assembly truly representative of the entire range of Tunisian political families, thus “equally sharing the burden” in the development of future political course of Tunisia.

Renewed for the election of members of the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP), this system has led to a parliamentary system where no comfortable majority can emerge. The need for consensus between political parties sometimes with conflicting interests, slows down the decisions within a fragile majority, as much as the issuing of reforms and major policy decisions.

Parties are also swamped in the obsessive search to reach a broad consensus among themselves, despite their lack of confidence in their government allies: This fact creates a very opaque political environment, unmanageable by the majority party and difficult to read for the average citizen. Recurrent conflicts among Afek Tounes, the Ennahda Movement and the Free Patriotic Union (UPL), Nidaa Tounes and its splinter group Al Hurra and with the extreme leftist parties, caused continuous deadlocks in parliamentary work. The original 2014 election alliance of four parties (Nidaa Tounes, the Ennahda Movement, Afek Tounes and UPL) ruling Tunisia, initially held 180 seats. Then the majority party Nidaa Tounes, in a negotiated consensus policy mainly with the Ennahda Movement, was able to appoint Habib Essid, a leading independent member and former minister, as head of the coalition government in order to advance a non-partisan agenda. However, the Nida crisis, which broke out soon after, resulted in the loss of 30 of the party's deputies and had a tremendous impact on government work.

The political balance achieved after the 2014 elections seems even more fragile since a fifth party, Nidaa Tounes' splinter group Al Hurra, entered the political scene in November 2015. Al Hurra supports the government from outside the coalition, despite acting as an opposition bloc on some draft laws, such as that on the reform of the banking system.

The path ahead is a tremendously difficult challenge for a government that took office during a time of great social turmoil. It inherited the task of negotiating with social partners (primarily the UGTT and the Entrepreneurial association UTICA) not only to reformulate, but also to relaunch a new social pact, all the while managing a crisis and acting as a policeman. In the meantime, all other parties taking part in the coalition government are burying their heads in the sand for fear of offending their voters and spoiling their revolutionary credibility.

Part of the solution lies in the rapid establishment of legal and institutional mechanisms that will accelerate the implementation of an effective decentralisation process. This would boost participation and advance the model of participatory democracy, the latter being one of the major objectives of the revolution. Part of the solution will be also to recast economic and social issues on the agenda while promoting a “politics of proximity” and breaking with the top-down model of state-society relationship adopted so far, which in the recent crises has shown all its inherent limits.