

COVID-19 and Tunisian Democracy: High Risks Ahead

by Giulia Cimini

The COVID-19 outbreak in Tunisia, although apparently under control, comes at another critical moment for the young Tunisian democracy.¹ As elsewhere, the crisis has exacerbated existing criticalities. It will have far-reaching consequences on an already struggling economy, possibly fuelling renewed waves of protests, increasing pressure on political leaders and the new Tunisian government. Politics is more than ever under the spotlight, and excessive competition – as well as centralisation – can threaten Tunisia's democratic gains.

Tunisia had just overcome a political deadlock with the new cabinet led by prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh taking office on 27 February after months of intense negotiations in a parliament with an unprecedented level of political diversity. Last October, the jurist and outsider Kais Saied was sworn in as

president of the Republic. By playing on integrity, composure and his solid image of personal incorruptibility, Saied surfed the waves of anti-elitist discontent in Tunisia, setting himself up as the embodiment of citizen empowerment promised by the 2011 revolution.

Yet, the desired changes struggled to take off. Political reshuffles have been met with mixed feelings over the ability of decision makers to face Tunisia's deepening economic challenges. The country's economy has been in trouble for years now, and social discontent continued to manifest itself in various locations of the country.

Tunisians, like everyone else in the world, were unprepared to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak and its multidimensional impact on health, the economy, politics and society. Suddenly, both rulers and citizens were forced to confront a new type of threat, more treacherous and potentially life-threatening than anything the Tunisian

¹ As of 29 April, the Ministry of Health has officially recorded 975 cases and 39 deaths. See: *Tableau de Bord*, <https://covid-19.tn/fr/tableau-de-bord>.

Giulia Cimini is a Gerda Henkel Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Bologna.

authorities have dealt with over the past decade of political transition. The multiple terrorist attacks experienced by Tunisia over the years did not threaten everyday life as COVID-19 is doing.

In line with a consolidated pattern of transparency since 2011, the authorities have so far engaged in active communication with citizens, raising awareness about the criticalities facing national healthcare infrastructure. In light of poor and outdated resources, prevention has been presented as the most reasonable strategy. In a bid to mitigate the pandemic, Tunisia opted for early measures, including suspending all travel, shutting down schools, places of worship, businesses and banning public gatherings. On 18 March, the president proclaimed a night time curfew and two days later a lockdown for non-essential outings.

These measures, combined with those implemented around the world, will negatively impact key economic sectors and increase already unsustainable levels of public spending.

Despite a downward trend in the state budget deficit to 3.5 per cent of GDP and an inflation rate averaging 6.7 per cent in 2019, the situation remains delicate, not least due to a high tax burden on citizens.² The government has revised the 2020 growth prospects to only 1 per cent from 2.7 and, according to

² "Tunisie Valeurs Believes Effects of COVID-19 on Tunisia's Economy Will Be 'Harmful'", in *African Manager*, 13 March 2020, https://africanmanager.com/site_eng/tunisie-valeurs-believes-effects-of-covid-19-on-tunisia-economy-will-be-harmful.

IMF predictions, Tunisia's economy is expected to contract by 4.3 per cent this year.³

Tourism, which accounts for 14 per cent of Tunisia's GDP, will take a new heavy hit. Having partly recovered from 2015 crisis caused by a string of bloody terrorist attacks, the country's flagship sector had high hopes for the next season, hoping to recover after the sudden collapse of UK tour operator Thomas Cook in September 2019 left substantial debts to Tunisian hotels. Today, the massive restrictions due to COVID-19 are dealing a new alarming blow to highly indebted tourist sector, let alone the troubled national airline Tunisair.⁴

The EU is Tunisia's largest trading partner. In light of the spill-over effects of European manufacturing stoppages, and the shadow of a recession expected to be deeper than the 2008 crisis, Tunisia has seen trade flows disrupted, and prospects ahead are anything but rosy. Lockdown measures can be expected to further aggravates social precarity. For daily and seasonal workers and those in the informal sector, which accounts for around 40 per cent of the economy,⁵ social distancing and home

³ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$745 Million Disbursement to Tunisia to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/10/pr20144-tunisia-imf-executive-board-approves-a-us-745m-disbursement-address-covid19-pandemic>.

⁴ Rihab Boukhatia, "The Coronavirus Infects Tunisia's Economy", in *Nawaat*, 21 March 2020, <http://nawaat.org/portail/2020/03/21/the-coronavirus-infects-tunisia-economy>.

⁵ Lilia Blaise, "En Tunisie, l'économie informelle mise à mal par le coronavirus", in *Le Monde*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>

confinement are luxuries they cannot afford.

To ease the financial and social impact of the pandemic, on 2 April, Fakhfakh announced an emergency package of 3 billion Tunisian dinars (approximately 952 million euro) to help the health system, small and medium businesses, export companies and low-income or poor families.⁶ Funds are raised through a repurposing of certain expenditures and support from international donors.

Whereas the European Union donated 250 million euro and tripled the size of its funds already earmarked for the Health Sector Support Programme for Tunisia, Italy, for instance, has granted a 50 million euro credit line to the Tunisian Central Bank.⁷ The IMF, meanwhile, approved a 745 million dollar emergency assistance loan.⁸

On the political front, COVID-19 will be a stress test for the new government. The crisis has so far empowered the prime minister over other political actors, including the president, and exposed internal political competition among multiple centres of powers.

[afrique/article/2020/03/27/en-tunisie-l-angoisse-des-travailleurs-precaires-face-au-coronavirus_6034654_3212.html](https://www.afrique/article/2020/03/27/en-tunisie-l-angoisse-des-travailleurs-precaires-face-au-coronavirus_6034654_3212.html).

⁶ Fakhri Khliissa, "Face au coronavirus, Elyes Fakhfakh signe le retour de l'État", in *Realités*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.realites.com.tn/?p=170180>.

⁷ See, "COVID-19: EU Decides Immediate Disbursement of €250 Million in Budgetary Support for Tunisia", in *TAP News*, 28 March 2020, <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Economy/12500952>; "COVID-19: Italy Grants €50-Million Credit to BCT", in *TAP News*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Economy/12487806>.

⁸ IMF, *IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$745 Million Disbursement to Tunisia...*, cit.

On 4 April, the People's Assembly (the Tunisian parliament) approved by an overwhelming majority of 178 MPs (out of 217) a bill that delegates legislative powers to the head of government.⁹ Unlike Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who has been given the power to rule by decree with no end date, Fakhfakh's new and unprecedented powers are limited to a period of two months, while the laws he enacts by decree will be submitted for parliament's approval at a later date.

Intended as a way to speed up the government's responsiveness to the COVID-19 crisis, the consolidation of executive and legislative powers without foreseeing a parliamentary oversight committee for instance, could become a source of concern.

This could set a tricky precedent for a young democracy traversed by a reactionary nostalgia for strongman rule and where large sections of the population are growing increasingly disillusioned with traditional politics. Moreover, other important checks and balances, such as a Constitutional Court, are still lacking.¹⁰

There is also the possibility of an institutional short circuit with both the president and prime minister simultaneously calling for exceptional powers, citing two different articles of

⁹ Eya Jrad, "Tunisia Facing COVID-19: To Exceptional Circumstances, Exceptional Measures?", in *Arab Reform Initiative Dossiers*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=10117>.

¹⁰ Foreseen by the new 2014 Constitution, political parties have failed to reach an agreement on its composition and nominated only one out of four members.

the constitution.¹¹ Despite moderate tones and the reassuring calls about a unified leadership, new power games are emerging among the highest offices of the state and these could further spell trouble for Tunisia's transition.

These developments recall the confrontation between now deceased president Beji Caid Essebsi and the then prime ministers Habib Essid and Youssef Chahed, but with a reverse balance of power. Whereas the Essebsi presidency was distinguished for being strong-willed and proactive – particularly in security matters – and strongly advocated for a “presidentialisation” of the system, Saied has lagged behind, at least in communication compared to prime minister Fakhfakh. The prime minister's frank tone and demeanour has so far won him public confidence, somewhat overshadowing the Saied presidency.

While Tunisia's fledgling democracy is more likely to be threatened by the economic fallout than a securitised response to the pandemic, one should not lose sight of these risks. The technology to track citizens' movements and enforce the lockdown, the absence of judicial recourse and the delegation of measures usually prescribed by judicial authorities to security officers – like mandatory

¹¹ Article 80 allows for a concentration of both executive and legislative powers in the hands of the presidency under the “state of exception”. Without openly declaring it, Saied has already issued two decrees on this basis. Simultaneously, Fakhfakh's calling on Article 70(2) to issue decree-laws of legislative character raised concern on overlapping prerogatives in the exercise of exceptional powers during the ongoing health crisis.

hospitalisation¹² – could be equally useful against demonstrators or political opponents as they are for the virus.

Despite reassurances about the temporary nature of these measures, in a country infamously known for being a “mukhabarat” (police and intelligence) state in the Ben Ali era, the prompt deployment of anti-COVID technology to monitor population – like drones for detection and robots to enforce the lockdown – is not exempt from criticism.

This is all the more so given that equally updated technologies are largely if not completely absent from other sectors of society, from administration, to justice and education. The short-lived proposal for a draft law aimed at fighting fake-news and criminalising online defamation, for instance, was seen by some as a renewed attempt to restrict freedom of expression and information in Tunisia under the guise of combatting the COVID-19 emergency.¹³

To avoid power abuses, it is essential that Tunisia's vibrant civil society remains vigilant and that Tunisian partners, particularly in Europe, do everything necessary to support the country's economic sustainability and political process. Meanwhile, local political actors should refrain from excessive competition, and buck-passing on responsibilities if something goes

¹² Eya Jrad, “Tunisia Facing COVID-19”, cit.

¹³ Ghaya Ben Mbarek and Fadil Aliriza, “Amid Pandemic, Efforts to Restrict Freedom of Speech Continue”, in *Meshkal*, 20 April 2020, <http://mesh-kal.com/?p=765>.

wrong. This implies real harmonisation and coordination between Tunisian institutions and political actors and an avoidance of excessive centralisation.

Given the deep economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy and social services top the agenda of priorities to mitigate expected short- and medium-term challenges. Mindful of past lessons and mistakes, international donors should keep this in mind when setting conditions for new loans and assistance, doing what is necessary support Tunisia's fragile democracy from this new and unexpected threat.

29 April 2020

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 20 | 30 Giulia Cimini, *COVID-19 and Tunisian Democracy: High Risks Ahead*
- 20 | 29 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *A COVID-19 Moment for Technological Sovereignty in Europe?*
- 20 | 28 Davide Zurlo, *Beyond Hydrocarbons: Libya's Blue Gold*
- 20 | 27 Tobias Bunde, Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, Boris Ruge and Nathalie Tocci, *European Vision and Ambition Needed: Italy and Germany Must Promote a Global EU Response to COVID-19*
- 20 | 26 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Beyond Coronabonds: A New Constituent for Europe*
- 20 | 25 Nona Mikhelidze, *Russia and the COVID-19 Crisis: Hardship at Home, Soft Power Flexing Abroad*
- 20 | 24 Luca Barana, *A Tale of Two Unions: Africa, Europe and a Pragmatic Investment in Multilateralism in Times of COVID-19*
- 20 | 23 Tommaso Emiliani, *Between God and the Sugar Dates: Lessons for a "Geopolitical" EU from the US–Iran Crisis*
- 20 | 22 Elena A. Korosteleva and Irina Petrova, *Resilience Is Dead. Long Live Resilience?*
- 20 | 21 Stefano Manservigi, *COVID-19: A Stress Test for International Development Cooperation*