

IN THE CROSSFIRE: ISLAMISTS' TRAVAILS IN TUNISIA

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Tunisia is struggling with insecurity, social tensions, and ideological divisions three years after President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali was ousted during a popular uprising. But the country is making progress on the path to democracy. Islamist and secular politicians have struck a potentially landmark agreement that could get Tunisia's democratic transition back on track. To solidify gains and ensure that a successful Tunisian experiment reverberates across the Arab world, socioeconomic struggles that fuel protests and radicalism must be confronted.

Deep Divisions

- Tunisia's major Islamist and secular political forces reached a general accord on the institutional bases for completing the democratic transition.
- The agreement is a major victory for pragmatism over divisive politics. It required political actors who have long deeply mistrusted each other to overcome their enmity and forge nonideological agreements.
- Political struggles between Islamists and secularists are fueled by a tension between individual and religious rights, not competing political doctrines of government.
- Islamist-secularist tensions are exacerbated by the rise of Salafism, a more conservative form of Islamism than that advocated by the Ennahda movement, which led the government from November 2011 to January 2014.
- Political infighting and Ennahda's inexperience hampered government efforts to design and implement a strategy to reduce the country's unemployment rates and economic disparities between the impoverished interior and the more developed coastal areas.
- Failure to address Tunisia's socioeconomic problems deepened the divide between the people and the politicians and contributed to the rise of radical Salafism in the most economically distressed areas of the country.

Implications for Tunisia's Future

The economy is key. The incoming interim government needs to generate the means necessary to finance the budget and provide targeted investments to the most restive and marginalized regions of the country. Social exclusion and economic disenfranchisement of the communities in the interior and border regions is breeding social unrest, criminality, and angry radicals.

Security sector reform should be expedited. The professionalization of the Ministry of Interior, internal security services, and the justice sector is necessary to gain the trust of citizens and stem the deterioration of law and order. These organizations must be more accountable and legitimate.

Outside support is needed. The United States and its European allies with a direct interest in Tunisia can encourage reforms in the security and economic sectors. By mobilizing investments and financial support for development efforts, Tunisia's Western partners can promote job creation in the most marginalized areas of the country.

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