

THE RECKONING: TUNISIA'S PERILOUS PATH TO DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

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For Tunisia, 2014 was a year of historic milestones. But despite a new constitution and free elections that led to the peaceful transfer of power to the secular Nidaa Tounes party, the democratic consensus forged after the country's 2011 revolution remains fragile. The hard work of reconciling a deeply polarized society—one torn between Islamists and secularists, young and old, democrats and counterrevolutionaries, cosmopolitan coastal areas and the underdeveloped interior and south—still lies ahead.

Risks of Social and Regional Fragmentation

- Tunisia is divided by a generation gap. Young people are struggling to find jobs and feel alienated from politics, which is dominated by old faces and old ways of doing business.
- Tunisia's developed north and neglected south are far apart ideologically and socially. These deep-rooted schisms were long overshadowed by a contentious debate over religious rights and individual liberties, but they surfaced during the 2014 elections.
- This sense of disgruntlement and exclusion partly explains the growing appeal of extremist groups in Tunisia's poor neighborhoods and marginalized regions.
- The debate over political Islam is not settled. There is sharp disagreement within the Islamist Ennahdha movement and in broader Tunisian society about the role of religion in politics.
- As Tunisia's new leaders try to contain the effects of regional turmoil and combat escalating terror attacks by fragmented jihadi groups, they may be tempted to weaken checks on their power and marginalize political Islam. Those moves would threaten the country's great experiment in fostering inclusiveness and building political consensus.

Recommendations for Tunisia's Leaders and Outside Supporters

Nidaa Tounes should be as magnanimous in victory as its opponents were gracious in defeat. The first task for Tunisia's new rulers is to find equilibrium among the country's multiple opposing forces and aspirations.

Economic reform should be a priority. The new executive and legislative branches must put in place policies to decentralize the government and lure foreign investment to marginalized interior and border regions.

The international community should encourage Tunisia's domestic reforms and democratic consolidation. The United States and its democratic partners should provide Tunisia with a package of loans and grants to improve democratic governance, security, and economic development. They should also prod the new government to seize the opportunity of low oil prices to cut subsidies and enact other structural reforms.

The United States and its allies must keep a watchful eye on Tunisia's fight against terrorism. Any political backsliding or human rights violations by Tunisian authorities under the pretext of fighting terror should not be tolerated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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