

CAN SECULAR PARTIES LEAD THE NEW TUNISIA?

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Three years after Tunisia's revolution, the country's elected government—an Islamist-led coalition known as the Troika—has resigned owing to pressure by secular opposition forces in the National Salvation Front (NSF). As they look toward the next general election, Tunisia's secular parties, largely sidelined after the revolution, are seeking greater prominence in politics. To achieve this goal, they must tackle deep-seated challenges and find a way to cooperate more closely.

Tunisia's Political Landscape

- Tunisian politics are more complex than a binary competition between secularists and Islamists. Secular parties' ideological rivalries, strategic differences, and leadership divisions undermine their force in politics.
- After the 2011 revolution that ousted then president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, secular parties failed to form strong coalitions, develop regional networks, or create viable party platforms, often using anti-Islamist rhetoric to attract voters instead of offering solutions to Tunisia's challenges. Some were perceived to have been co-opted by Ben Ali's regime.
- Under the Troika, secular parties with a well-defined platform and ideological stance, especially regarding the ruling Islamist Ennahda party, proved more resilient than ideologically diverse parties or those relying on a popular leader to unite a fragmented base.
- Many secular parties lack internal democracy, with leaders making decisions unilaterally or with their cronies, who act in their self-interest.
- Generally, secular parties legalized before the revolution are experiencing a generational clash, with the old guard clinging to power and resisting structural reform, while parties legalized after the revolution lack a clear unifying vision and strategy.
- Secular voices like the Nidaa Tounes party and the Popular Front coalition, backed by major media outlets and civil society organizations, have gained popular support since the NSF forced the Troika's resignation.

Recommendations for Tunisia's Secular Parties

Move beyond anti-Islamist rhetoric and fix structural problems. Secular parties need to address their dependency on single-personality politics, lack of party platforms, ideological fragmentation, and resistance to a new generation of leaders. Failure to do so risks a gradual decrease in their current momentum.

Put aside old rivalries to create strong, lasting coalitions. Divisions and frictions will remain as long as secular leaders continue prioritizing personal ambitions or rivalries over unity and collaboration. To maximize their leverage, secular parties should form several coalitions based on common ideological principles and cooperate through the NSF to advance their shared interests.

Democratize from within. To promote party unity, leaders of secular parties should consider the views of all members, not just a small cadre of elites, when making decisions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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