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CAN SECULAR PARTIES LEAD THE NEW TUNISIA?

Anne Wolf

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About the Author

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Summary

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.

Introduction

The passage of Tunisia's new constitution on January 26, 2014, and the transition to a government of technocrats has in many ways hit a reset button on Tunisian politics. For the three years since the revolution that ousted then president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, Tunisia has seen increasingly polarized debate over the constitution and the future political direction of the country.

The Islamist Ennahda party was illegal and harshly repressed under Ben Ali, but it has dominated Tunisian politics since his ouster. Now, secular parties are seeking greater prominence in Tunisia's emerging political landscape.¹

Since 2012, secular parties have profited from a deteriorating economic situation and the emergence of religious violence, which has led wide sectors of the population to fear unchecked Islamism. Members of the National Salvation Front (NSF), an alliance of secular opposition forces, blamed Ennahda for the assassinations of two opposition figures in 2013, which stoked the fires of anti-Islamism in the country.

However, the secularists' anti-Islamist discourse has been weakened by recent developments. In January 2014 Ennahda, then the ruling party, peacefully resigned as part of a compromise with the political opposition. This move, along with the finalization of the constitution, displayed that—contrary to the secularists' proclamations—the Islamist-led government did not cling to power by all means.

Yet even in this new political climate, many secular parties still limit their strategy to proclaiming that they “saved” the country from the Islamists instead of focusing on developing convincing party platforms that address Tunisia's underlying socioeconomic needs. This practice continues despite the fact that the experiences of secular opposition parties both under Ben Ali and after the revolution suggest that their focus on anti-Islamism is one of their greatest weaknesses. Relying on anti-Islamist rhetoric reflects not only these parties' detachment from the population's needs and expectations but also their lack of a strong unifying vision and strategy.

Indeed, secular opposition parties in Tunisia have long been fragmented because of both Ben Ali's repressive policies and their own internal divisions. As a result of this disorganization, opposition parties were completely unprepared to step into the void when Ben Ali was forced out of power. Instead, many filled the postrevolutionary vacuum by returning to a deep-seated secular-Islamist divide

The Islamist Ennahda party has dominated Tunisian politics since Ben Ali's ouster.

that had dominated politics under Ben Ali. Their inability to form strong coalitions and their reliance on anti-Islamist rhetoric contributed to their poor performance in the first democratic election after the revolution.

Secular parties are approaching the next elections, currently scheduled for December 2014, in a more united way. They have created a number of coalitions, such as the Union for Tunisia, the Popular Front, and the NSF, which helped force the Ennahda government out of office. To ensure a better performance in the next elections, secular parties need to sustain a great deal of unity by addressing deep structural and leadership challenges.

To maintain the momentum gained by the NSF's success and become a consistent force for democratic change, secular parties will have to go beyond resorting to fierce anti-Islamist rhetoric and instead propose concrete solutions to Tunisia's socioeconomic and security challenges.

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This approach should also include a reevaluation of the government that stepped down in January, a coalition between Ennahda and the secular Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic (CPR) parties known as the Troika. This regime has been fiercely criticized by the political opposition, but secular parties share the responsibility for many of the flaws of this cross-ideological experiment.

A History of Disunity

Opposition politics under Ben Ali were weak and fragmented. This is in part because the longtime leader was notorious for promoting fear of Islamism as a way of co-opting the opposition, ensuring that most secular parties feared the possibility of Islamist rule more than they opposed his regime.

But another factor that significantly weakened opposition politics was the fact that many secular opposition parties were created as a result of personal and strategic rivalries and not because they sought to introduce new voter constituencies.² Efforts to overcome divisions between Islamists and secularists, as well as among secularists, in order to challenge the Ben Ali regime existed but never gained momentum.

One such attempt at a united coalition, the October 18 Movement, was created in 2005. It included the CPR, Ettakatol, the secular Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), and the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (now known as the Workers' Party), as well as the Islamist Ennahda party. Although the movement's members agreed on several foundational democratic principles, a senior leader of the group recalls that "it was from the very beginning strongly weakened by internal power struggles,"³ specifically citing tension between PDP leader Ahmed Nejib Chebbi and Ettakatol's Mustapha Ben Jaafar, both of whom wanted to run as presidential candidates.

The movement also suffered from divisions over strategy and ideology. One of the October 18 Movement's leaders, Moncef Marzouki—then an exiled opposition activist and now president of Tunisia—was occasionally critical of the coalition's approach. According to another of the movement's leaders, Marzouki “published several statements from exile showing that he did not really believe in the . . . [movement] but instead advocated upfront confrontation with the regime, further undermining the unity of the initiative.” Some members also eventually joined the left-wing Ettajdid party, which was more tolerant of the Ben Ali regime and did not believe in the October 18 Movement's cross-ideological promises. Ettajdid particularly rejected cooperation between secularists and Islamists.

Weakened by decades of authoritarian rule, most parties did not participate in the protests during the 2011 revolution. Key opposition figures even backed the regime's pledge to launch reforms over the population's demand for full revolution. For example, when Ben Ali reaffirmed one day before his ousting from power that he would introduce socioeconomic reforms and that he did not intend to run for another term as president, PDP leader Chebbi affirmed that this step was “very good,” and most other opposition parties also welcomed Ben Ali's move. The head of the Ettajdid party insisted that the president's speech was “positive” and that it had “[answered] questions that were raised by our party.” Ben Jaafar was a bit more careful, maintaining that Ben Ali's announcement “opens up possibilities” but that “intentions still have to be applied.” By contrast, then senior member of the CPR Mohamed Abbou rejected the speech, claiming that Ben Ali was “fooling the Tunisians with promises that have no tomorrow.”⁴

“Almost all political parties were completely detached from reality,” claimed a founding member of the CPR, one of two important secular opposition parties that were illegal under Ben Ali (the other being the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party). “They did not see the revolution coming, [and] when it happened parties did not play any significant role in it,” he continued, explaining that the parties' “actions had always been based on the assumption that Ben Ali could never be beaten, and when he was gone . . . [they] did not know how to react.”

Following the revolution, old divisions between Islamists and secularists as well as within the secular camp reemerged.

Most secular parties refused to form coalitions, believing they had enough popular support to get into power by their own means. This confidence was especially surprising given the fact that the image of figures such as Chebbi and Ettajdid leader Ahmed Ibrahim was by then already partially tarnished because they had participated in the first interim government after the revolution, which was led by Ben Ali's prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi. This administration included many people from the former regime and advocated institutional reforms over full revolution.

As the country approached legislative elections in October 2011, the PDP and Ettajdid were keen to propagate the notion that Ennahda would lead Tunisia back to the Middle Ages. Unsurprisingly, therefore, most secular parties rejected an initiative launched by Ettakatol shortly before the elections to create a national unity government that would consist of both secular and Islamist parties. Some even claimed that such an initiative could only be proposed by “traitors.”

In the end, however, those secular parties that adopted a more compromising stance toward the Islamists enjoyed greater success in the elections than those that relied on anti-Islamist rhetoric. The CPR received 8.7 percent of the vote, Ettakatol gained 7 percent, and a populist party known as the Popular Petition for Freedom, Justice, and Development won 6.7 percent. By contrast, the PDP was only able to attract roughly 4 percent of supporters.

Identity, religion, and anti-regime militancy proved central topics for voters.⁵ The Islamists, who gained 37 percent of the vote, were able to capitalize on each of these concerns. They built upon their unity, proximity to the Tunisian people, and legacy of uncompromising anti-regime militancy and fierce repression, as well as on a nationwide network that was quickly revived after the revolution. By comparison, the eight parties that garnered the most support after Ennahda received only a combined total of around 35 percent of the vote.⁶

The Troika Period: Weak Secularists and a Dominant Ennahda

After elections, Tunisia’s secular parties were weakened by fragmentation and poorly defined strategies toward the ruling Islamists. Most decided to join the opposition, where they struggled even according to the standards of opposition politics in Tunisia, which have traditionally been weak due to decades of authoritarian rule. Only the more compromising CPR and Ettakatol—secular parties that had not campaigned on fierce anti-Islamism—agreed to form a coalition with Ennahda.

Ennahda invited other parties to join the government and even offered senior militants such as Hama Hammami, head of the Workers’ Party, ministerial positions—offers that were refused. Many secularists proclaimed that the Islamists would only try to dominate politics, an assertion they considered confirmed when Ennahda took all the key ministries for itself.

Ben Jaafar, who was appointed head of the Constituent Assembly, the body charged with creating a new constitution, and Moncef Marzouki, who became president, were also perceived as weak in comparison to Ennahda leaders. A June 2012 decision by Ennahda’s then prime minister Hamadi Jebali to extradite former Libyan prime minister Baghdadi Mahmoudi against Marzouki’s will—although the prerogative to do so actually lay with the president—was interpreted as evidence that Marzouki was incapable of influencing politics

meaningfully. In some instances, however, Marzouki did manage to demonstrate leadership, such as when he ordered the presidential guard to secure the U.S. embassy in 2012 after the police and military proved unable to deal with an attack by violent Salafis.

Some Ennahda militants concede that a few of the party's early decisions were a mistake. "We were too dominant at the beginning, we still believed at that time that the revolution was not final and that there might be counter-revolutions against us," confirmed a high-ranking member of the movement.

Significantly, however, Ennahda's dominance within the Troika was reinforced by the fragility of secular parties, both in government and opposition. "Ennahda's strength was trust—people had a decade-long history of militancy, but we hardly knew each other, [and] the only person we all knew was Marzouki," explained a CPR deputy. "We are actually still in the process of creating a party ideology, structure, and trust amongst each other."

The CPR's and Ettakatol's trajectories in government are particularly interesting as they illustrate many of the challenges experienced by other secular parties, in particular when cooperating closely with Islamists. They are also important as the CPR and Ettakatol represent two different types of parties—one legalized before the revolution and the other afterward—that tend to vary in structural terms. Most new parties suffer from ideological fragmentation whereas old parties struggle to open themselves up to new voices. The CPR and Ettakatol therefore faced slightly different challenges while in government, an experience secular parties should learn from to avoid repeating past mistakes.

The CPR's Divided Base

Most people who joined or supported the CPR after the revolution did so out of respect for the militancy of its figurehead, Marzouki, rather than for any concrete party line. Marzouki was known not only for his human rights activism but also for his pan-Arabist views, which attracted a wide range of supporters from mostly left-wing and nationalist but also Islamist-leaning backgrounds. Tensions between these various ideological currents quickly emerged when Marzouki left his position as secretary general of the CPR to become president in December 2011.

Marzouki's departure caused a leadership vacuum that the CPR has struggled to fill. The party has had four different secretaries general since Marzouki. All but the current one, Imed Daimi, eventually left the CPR to create their own parties.⁷

The leadership's inability to provide a vision for the movement reinforced rifts on the level of the CPR's base as well as among its ideologically diverse deputies. The CPR's leftists especially disapproved of the coalition with Ennahda. "We were particularly frustrated as we felt that the Islamist wing of [the] CPR became empowered very soon after the elections," explained a former CPR member of parliament. "Ennahda was dealing more often with [those of the]

CPR's deputies who were close to the Islamists, they knew and trusted each other, that's why many of us left. We felt sidelined." Yet mass resignations from the CPR—to date, eighteen out of its initial 29 Constituent Assembly deputies have left the party—have only decreased the voice of the CPR in government and reinforced the leverage of its Islamist-leaning wing.

Hence, many secular parties have increasingly accused the CPR of being a “puppet” of the Islamists. They considered these accusations confirmed by the CPR's reaction to the ousting of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood-backed president of Egypt, in July 2013. The CPR unconditionally condemned Morsi's fall as a coup d'état, while almost all other secular parties stressed the Muslim Brotherhood's responsibility.

Marzouki's refusal to categorically reject Ennahda and other Islamist movements in the region, however, should not be falsely equated with pro-Islamism and “complicity.” The CPR has also taken positions contrary to Ennahda on key issues—although it has been unable to realize most of them.

Ettakatol: Leadership Problems and Calls for Reform

In contrast to the CPR, Ettakatol has an ideologically more homogeneous membership due to its better-defined party line, which enabled it to present a more developed political program. Since his militancy under Ben Ali, Ben Jaafar has stood for social democratic values. Ettakatol prides itself on having been an observer party to the Socialist International, a global organization of socialist, labor, and social democratic parties, since 2004. In 2013, it became a permanent member.

During the electoral campaign, moreover, Ben Jaafar defended the secular nature of his party much more clearly than the nationalist Marzouki, who was already perceived as much friendlier toward the Islamists. This stance enhanced the ideological coherence of Ettakatol's base.

Yet internal divisions still emerged within the party. Before the elections, a “reformist wing” surfaced that accused Ben Jaafar of making decisions unilaterally and of developing a parallel party structure consisting of himself and a close circle of allies, often wealthy Tunisians who had just returned from Europe. They were called “the group of Lac,” alluding to a rich suburb of Tunis where they allegedly met regularly to discuss strategic party priorities. To add to the reformists' frustration, Ben Jaafar did not adopt the party program that had been prepared by his militants in its entirety but instead decided at the last minute to adopt many of the principles of the platform of the French Social Democratic Party.

Although most of Ettakatol's Constituent Assembly deputies did not actively support the revolutionary wing, they too expressed frustration over Ben Jaafar's tendency to make decisions primarily through a trusted circle of confidants. In particular, they blamed Ben Jaafar for not having consulted them when deciding to form a coalition with Ennahda. Most deputies were not

opposed to the coalition in principle, but they deeply resented the conditions under which it took shape.

Ben Jaafar initially managed to control internal divisions by reassuring party members that their plight would be addressed after the elections. But once he was appointed head of the Constituent Assembly, there was little time and will to discuss internal party frictions. Eventually, six deputies opted to leave the party. According to one of those who resigned, “Ennahda needed Ettakatol to present a credible multiparty government, and Ben Jaafar needed Ennahda to become president of the Constituent Assembly. Everything else was of secondary importance.”

Still, in comparison with the CPR, Ettakatol managed to remain more united and critical of the Ennahda party through a better-defined ideological platform that has never stopped defending the notion of *laïcité*, or secularism. It was, therefore, the only party of the Troika that still earned some support among the secular political opposition, which strongly opposed the Islamist-led government.

Opposition Fragmentation Persists

In addition to the institutional fragility that had resulted from decades of authoritarian politics, Tunisia’s opposition was from the very beginning weakened by internal divisions. In many ways, these conflicts reflect the challenges experienced by the CPR and Ettakatol in government, although internal polarization was even more volatile among secular parties in the opposition.

During the Troika period, Tunisia’s opposition consisted in total of 21 parties, of which fifteen had three representatives or fewer in the Constituent Assembly. Significantly, a split within the PDP, which was the assembly’s biggest opposition party, led to the creation of the Democratic Alliance under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdi. The new party, which also included members of the Party of Development and independents, disapproved of the PDP’s reliance on anti-Islamism rather than on an effective party platform to attract voters. It also rejected the so-called cult of personality surrounding the PDP’s leader, Chebbi, and the party’s use of strategies centered on Chebbi’s presidential ambitions. This reliance on one charismatic leader is a trend very characteristic of Tunisia’s established secular parties, and it helps explain why many of them are struggling to open themselves up to new political faces.

In addition to this fragmentation, Constituent Assembly deputies from the opposition had significantly higher absence rates than deputies from the ruling coalition. For example, at the close of 2013, voter participation in the assembly’s opposition democratic bloc was 40 percent, as compared to participation from Ennahda (82 percent), the CPR (59 percent), and Ettakatol (47 percent). Those deputies belonging to no bloc voted on average 44 percent of the time.⁸

Tunisia’s opposition was from the very beginning weakened by internal divisions.

Various explanations have been proposed for the higher absence rate among the political opposition, including the fact that Tunisia's secular parties have a reputation of being less disciplined and organized than the Islamists.

Opposition weakness was reinforced by a sometimes-limited understanding of what an opposition is supposed to do and what means it has with which to influence politics. "During Ben Ali, our understanding of opposition politics was centered on the idea of defeating the regime," explained a leader of the Democratic Alliance. "The opposition has little experience and knowledge of how it can influence politics through dialogue [or] initiatives to compromise and to pressure the government. We should have been more active from the start so that Ennahda could not have taken all ministries," he asserted.

Instead, however, most parties eventually fell back on the old rhetoric of defeating the government through a united front, considering this the only way to topple a regime they viewed as too dominant and incapable of providing a solution to mounting economic and security challenges. Secular parties made various attempts to work together to gain leverage over the Troika, and this confrontational approach eventually succeeded in forcing the government's resignation. But it did little to prepare secular opposition parties to lead Tunisia, not least because Ennahda remains a key player in politics.

Temporary Secular Unity Against the Islamists

The assassination of opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, the second political assassination in the wake of the revolution, created momentum capable of overcoming divergences between major secular parties, which realized that unification was necessary to accomplish the goal they all shared: forcing the Islamists out of power.

Although this broad unity is unlikely to be sustainable due to competition between secular parties, it has had success in the short term. The Troika's resignation in January 2014 was a vivid illustration of the actual leverage secular parties hold when they act as a unit. "It was just like back in the 2000s, when we created the October 18 [Movement]," explained a left-wing militant. "We realized that we had to unite under a National Salvation Front and leave our ideological differences behind in order to confront the regime. The only difference is that we are now more powerful than under Ben Ali."

Early Unification Attempts

Even before Brahmi's assassination, attempts had been made to increase unity among secularists in order to counterbalance the Ennahda government. Among the most significant of these is a movement founded by former interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi called Nidaa Tounes ("Call for Tunisia"), which was formally licensed as a political party on July 6, 2012.

Nidaa Tounes quickly rose in prominence, becoming Tunisia's biggest secular party. Although estimates vary, reliable polls conducted in February 2014 place its support base at about 20 percent of the population,⁹ as compared to 14 percent for Ennahda.¹⁰ What drew Tunisians to Nidaa Tounes was its promise to unite all secular parties under Essebsi, who is a well-respected leadership figure for many secularists. Its supporters view Nidaa Tounes as the only hope for bringing together the secularists to counterbalance the voice of the Islamists, given that all elected parties in parliament have failed to do so.

Such broad unity is, however, unlikely. Not all secular parties supported Essebsi's call, in particular because Nidaa Tounes also integrated people who had worked for Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party. Significantly, Tunisia's Far Left, which had suffered fierce repression under the former regime, quickly launched a counter-initiative through the creation of the Popular Front on October 7, 2012. The front brings together twelve political parties, mostly embracing communist and Arab nationalist ideologies, under the leadership of Hamma Hammami. Recent polls place the support base of the Popular Front at around 4 percent, the second highest of any secular party.¹¹

Other initiatives attempted to unite and regroup the political opposition, but they remained limited. Their lack of success was partially because of the diverse ideological landscape of secular politics, which includes contrasting visions and political strategies, in particular vis-à-vis the Islamists. It was also in part due to persistent leadership frictions between parties with similar ideologies. In April 2012, three secular parties—the PDP, the center-right Afek Tounes party, and the leftist Jomhuri (Republican) Party—merged into a new entity that took the name of its smallest component, the Jomhuri Party. But both Afek Tounes and the Jomhuri Party eventually left the new party under accusations that the PDP's Chebbi dominated its politics, which focused on his presidential ambitions—that is, essentially the same reasons for which the Democratic Alliance had already split from the PDP.

In addition, the Ettajdid movement and several other parties of the Democratic Modernist Pole, a small electoral alliance that won five seats in the Constituent Assembly, merged into the Social Democratic Path, or al-Massar. The new Jomhuri Party and al-Massar, along with two smaller parties not represented in the Constituent Assembly, decided in February 2013 to join Nidaa Tounes in a coalition called the Union for Tunisia, hoping to enhance their profile through an alliance with Tunisia's biggest opposition force. The Jomhuri Party has since left the coalition.

The National Salvation Front

While early unification attempts were clearly limited, these various secular parties came together on July 26, 2013, one day after Brahmi's assassination, to create the NSF. The coalition was dominated by the Popular Front and

Nidaa Tounes, but it also included other voices, such as Ettakatol's reformist current, the Tunisian Anti-Torture Organization, and the Tunisian Union of Unemployed Graduates. In an official statement published upon its founding, the NSF attributed "the responsibility for the increase in violence and organized political crime to the Troika and in particular to the Ennahda movement."¹² It also demanded the fall of the government as well as the dissolution of Tunisia's elected Constituent Assembly.

Having enthusiastically followed the removal of Egyptian President Morsi earlier that month, many opposition parties initially felt that Ennahda's fall was imminent. "The failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has shown that political Islam is outmoded," explained a founding member of Nidaa Tounes in September 2013. "All of the Muslim Brotherhood's regional branches, including Ennahda, will now close automatically," he maintained.

The NSF called for the formation of what it called "a new government of national salvation" that would be charged with finishing the constitution, launching urgent economic and security measures to steer Tunisia out of crisis, and preparing the next elections. It also adopted strongly anti-Islamist rhetoric, demanding the "neutralization" of Tunisia's administration, which it maintained had been "infiltrated" by Islamists.

Although the NSF called for the dissolution of both the government and the Constituent Assembly, many secular Tunisians only supported the resignation of the Troika, not the assembly. Regular protests in front of the Constituent Assembly calling for the fall of the government increased pressure on the Troika to resign, although demonstrations were much more peaceful and limited in Tunisia than they had been in Egypt. Indeed, a few weeks after Morsi's fall, the Tunisian secularists' initial enthusiasm about the failure of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood faded slowly as a violent crackdown began in Cairo. The emerging bloodshed in Egypt served as a warning to Tunisians of what they did not want to repeat at home.

Initially, the Troika government fiercely opposed the NSF's demands, accusing the front of attempting to stage a coup d'état. But pressure on the regime increased significantly as around one-quarter of Constituent Assembly deputies eventually resigned. To the frustration of Ennahda and the CPR, even Ettakatol supported the NSF's demand to dissolve the government.

Eventually, Ennahda agreed to take part in a national dialogue with opposition parties. In October 2013, Islamist and secular parties alike signed a road map for the country's future that forced the Troika to give up political power.

The political opposition, however, did not succeed in all of its demands. In particular, it initially strongly opposed the selection of Mehdi Jomaa, a former minister of industry, as prime minister in the caretaker regime that would replace the Troika government, arguing that Jomaa was close to the Ennahda party. Members of the Popular Front and Nidaa Tounes even left the room when Jomaa's candidacy was announced. However, one of the secularists' own leading candidates, Mohamed Ennaceur, was recently appointed vice president of the Nidaa Tounes party, which calls into question the opposition's sincerity

in finding an independent candidate. The selection of Jomaa, a compromise figure, highlights the fact that, beyond the NSF's success in forcing the dissolution of the government, its impact is not unrestrained. The Islamists remain a powerful force in the country despite the fact that powerful media outlets and civil society forces actively support the NSF.

Support From the Media and Civil Society

The NSF's success in forcing the Islamists out of power was not only due to the unified front it maintained over a period of several months. The support of other powerful domestic forces also played a key role, especially that of the media and Tunisia's labor union, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT).

Most secular Tunisians agree that the fall of Ben Ali has brought them at least one positive thing: a free press, which they continue to dominate. Following its ascent to power, the Ennahda government initially tried to change the secular media landscape through the creation of alternative Islamist media, prohibited under Ben Ali, and the appointment of media staff. But these initiatives largely failed due to fierce resistance by journalists.

Given Tunisia's weak political opposition, many members of this secular media viewed their task as countering the dominance of the Ennahda government. "Having a newspaper in Tunisia is like having a political party," explained the founder of one of Tunisia's most popular Arabic daily newspapers. "We follow the same goal: influencing politics." Many heads of media organizations have recently joined secular parties or created their own, reinforcing their links to political power.

It is, therefore, little surprise that many media outlets were keen to actively support the NSF—and their support was crucial. "We knew that as long as the media was on the side of the National Salvation Front, the public could not be favorable toward the Troika," argued a senior member of Ettakatol. "That's why we decided to support some of the opposition's demands. There was no other way forward."

With a media and public opinion that hostile toward the government, it was only a question of when and how the Troika would resign, and what would come next—a task that was taken up by the UGTT, which allied with three other civil society organizations in what came to be called the "Quartet." These actors became the primary, although deeply partial, mediators between the Troika government and the NSF.

Tunisia's powerful UGTT was quick to support the NSF's demand for a new government, although it did not support the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, which was then just weeks away from finalizing the country's constitution. A senior militant of the UGTT argued that the assembly "as a body was elected and approved by the population, but the Troika government had no

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popular support and was dominated by Ennahda. . . . We are a labor union and try to remain neutral, but of course we can never trust an Islamist movement that is first of all accountable to the Muslim Brotherhood and not to Tunisians.”

With a membership of almost 700,000, the UGTT is arguably Tunisia’s most powerful organization, priding itself on a long history of political activism—including the role it played in the ousting of Ben Ali.¹³ Its leadership has traditionally been secular, although all ideological currents are represented in the union, and Islamists are increasingly active at the grass roots. An internal UGTT law requires all members to have at least nine years of militancy to reach a leadership position, a requirement most Islamists do not meet, given the fierce repression and imprisonment they suffered under the old regime.¹⁴ “After the revolution, the Islamists tried to infiltrate the leadership, but we managed to resist,” recalled a senior leader.

This is one reason that the fall of the Ennahda government was a priority for most UGTT leaders, who even called upon the union’s base to join the NSF protests in front of the Constituent Assembly. Yet the labor union stopped short of formally joining the NSF, considering itself to be more influential as a mediator between various political forces. Together with the employers’ union, the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the Tunisian Bar Association—the other members of the Quartet—the UGTT negotiated between the Troika and the opposition during the national dialogue and advanced the road map. The Quartet’s support of the NSF was therefore crucial in forcing the resignation of the Islamist-led government and the establishment of a government of technocrats, tasked primarily with organizing the next elections.

The Challenges Facing Secular Parties

When the next elections take place, the capacity of secular parties to form united coalitions and develop regional structures will be central to their future and the power balance between secular and Islamist forces.

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But the NSF is already beginning to break apart, which signals that such broad unity alone is not sufficient to sustain the secularists’ momentum. Some of its members, such as the Association of Democratic Women, have recently left the front. In February 2014, the Joumhouri Party was also excluded from the NSF’s central committee because of its decision to leave the Union for Tunisia, highlighting that rivalry between secular parties is reemerging. And the

NSF is not the only secular body struggling, as numerous other parties are losing support and battling old rivalries.

Divisions and Tensions Within Nidaa Tounes

For the moment, Nidaa Tounes remains the secularists' most promising avenue for gaining power on the political scene, especially because the party has close ties to business. Its future prospects and ability to govern, however, remain uncertain due to significant internal ideological and structural fragmentation.

Leaders of Nidaa Tounes are keen to stress the “Destourian” roots of the party,¹⁵ referring to the influential Destour movement formed during Tunisia's struggle for independence. The founders of Nidaa Tounes acknowledged this Destourian legacy in hopes of boosting their party's legitimacy, especially because Essebsi can claim Destourian roots. Still, they chose not to include a reference to the Destour in the party's name. “It was a deliberate choice, we wanted to regroup the entire [secular] political opposition, not only Destourians,” explained one of the party's founding members.¹⁶

Nidaa Tounes now brings together a wide variety of ideological currents. The choice of Taïeb Baccouche, a former head of the UGTT and president of the Arab Institute for Human Rights, as secretary general strengthens the party's democratic credentials and links to the UGTT. Current members of the labor union, such as Ons Hattab, have even recently joined Nidaa Tounes.

However, Nidaa Tounes also includes leftists, represented by figureheads such as journalist and activist Lazhar Akremi and businessman Mohsen Marzouk on the leadership level. Several members of Nidaa Tounes's coalition partner, al-Massar, have also recently joined Nidaa Tounes, further reinforcing the leftist current within the party. In addition, some independents have joined, including many women who fear that Ennahda will diminish their rights.

Yet among the numerically and economically most powerful members of Nidaa Tounes are former members of Ben Ali's party, who often have close ties to business—such as Faouzi Loumi, a former member of the RCD party and head of one of Tunisia's top companies, the Elloumi Group, which generated revenue of around \$800 million in 2011. In September 2013, Mohamed Ghariani, Ben Ali's last secretary general of the RCD, also joined Nidaa Tounes. This clan of figures from the old regime is now keen on reviving the RCD's image by insisting, for example, that “the RCD and the Destour are the same party” and that “it was primarily Ben Ali's family who was responsible for stealing so much money.”

Although most members of Nidaa Tounes accept the idea that RCDists are members of the party, many still fiercely oppose the recent integration of key symbols of the former regime, such as Ghariani. This conflict is particularly visible in the Sahel region, from which the majority of former regime politicians hail and where the bulk of the country's economic activity takes place. Ben Ali's family itself came from Sousse, and some members of Nidaa Tounes now fear that old structures will be revived. Already four senior members, including two deputies, from the party's regional office in Sfax, the economic center of the Sahel, resigned in December 2013. They accuse Nidaa Tounes—and particularly

Faouzi Loumi, who is now president of the electoral commission—of having established “parallel structures” in the region, including in Sfax, Sousse, and Kasserine, that extensively rely on “people who have been documented to have direct links to the system of corruption and dictatorship.”¹⁷

It is particularly tempting to revive old RCD structures as no current secular party is well embedded in these regions. But if this trend intensifies, it will risk alienating voters who take the view that Essebsi’s promise to unite Tunisia’s democratic forces is progressively turning into a comeback of RCDists. It will also play into the hands of Islamists, who have long accused Nidaa Tounes of being dominated by former regime elements.

Beyond deep conflicts between the former RCDists and the other ideological currents inside Nidaa Tounes, party members complain about internal mismanagement and a lack of democratic decisionmaking. One of the key laments of current and former party members is that “the official structures of the party have nothing to do with how things are run internally.” As a party member explained, “responsibilities change every few weeks, and although Taïeb Baccouche is the official number two of the party, he is not really in charge.”¹⁸

Power battles between various senior leaders have reinforced personalized politics over democratic decisionmaking. For example, many party members refused to participate in the local party congress of the regional district of Northern France as they were not notified early on about who would run as candidate for this area. So when Adel Jarbouï was finally announced and elected, many members were absent. “In a democratic decisionmaking process, you do not discover and elect the candidate the same day,” maintained a member of Nidaa Tounes who refused to participate in the event. “On top of that, Jarbouï was a senior member of the RCD party with close ties to the Ben Ali family, which is unacceptable to many inside Nidaa Tounes.”

At the moment, the only person holding Nidaa Tounes together is Essebsi. This is a very shaky base, in particular because Essebsi has presidential ambitions. Recently, a strategic decision was made to postpone Nidaa Tounes’s founding congress, most likely until after the elections, to avoid any internal “explosions”—at least for now. The founding congress is likely to determine more clearly who has responsibility within the party and might therefore lead to the isolation of some ideological currents within Nidaa Tounes, such as its leftists, who are currently overrepresented at the leadership level.

If Essebsi were to be elected president or were simply no longer able to lead the party—a possibility given his advanced age (he is eighty-seven years old)—this might create a leadership crisis similar to the one the CPR witnessed when Marzouki left the party. It is in this light that the recent appointment of Mohamed Ennaceur as Nidaa Tounes’s vice president must be understood, although his actual leadership qualities and ability to keep the party united remain to be seen.

Developments in the Rest of the Secular Field

Other secular parties are struggling to counterbalance the emerging polarization of the political sphere between Nidaa Tounes—increasingly criticized for its links to the RCD—and the Ennahda party. The Popular Front is currently considering merging into one single party. Other secular parties are trying to boost their impact by forming coalitions, but often in vain. Leaders from Ettakatol, the Democratic Alliance, the Joumhourî Party, Afek Tounes, and another small secular party, the Echâab movement, have voiced their willingness to cooperate, but such broad initiatives have failed to materialize, despite the fact that these parties have only weak support on their own. According to a poll in February 2014, Ettakatol, the Joumhourî Party, and Afek Tounes each garnered only 2 percent of Tunisians' support, while the CPR had only 1 percent.¹⁹

On a smaller scale, the Joumhourî Party, the Democratic Alliance, and the Echâab movement recently discussed the possibility of creating an alliance.²⁰ This is a positive step, although closer cooperation will only be sustainable if these parties address the underlying tensions that exist among their parties and that led the Democratic Alliance to split from the Joumhourî Party in the past. Afek Tounes and Ettakatol did not participate in these talks. This is partially because Afek Tounes's center-right liberal program sits uneasily with the other parties' center-left positions.

Old rivalries between Ben Jaafar and Chebbi are also likely to once again undermine any close cooperation between Ettakatol and Joumhourî Party. This is in particular the case as the recent appointment of Prime Minister Jomaa signaled to many politicians that the time of the old guard might soon come to an end, and a new generation of politicians may try to take over. A number of senior politicians see the upcoming elections as potentially their last chance of being elected.

The impact of many small, secular parties is further limited due to modest financial resources. Some are still struggling to pay back the debts they incurred during the last electoral campaign. This might push some of them to make a choice and either focus on the presidential or the parliamentary elections as they do not have the means and regional infrastructure to concentrate on two campaigns. The Joumhourî Party, for example, is likely to put all its resources into Chebbi's presidential campaign, while other parties, such as Ettakatol, might decide to focus on the parliamentary elections.

Ben Jaafar's popularity has significantly dropped during his term as president of the Constituent Assembly, but he is not yet willing to give power to Ettakatol's next generation—although this new guard might actually be willing to implement urgently needed structural changes and internal reforms.

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Conclusions

With Tunisia aiming to hold elections before the end of 2014, the old rivalries and leadership struggles of major secular parties are resurfacing. The NSF, which managed to force Ennahda out of power, is slowly breaking apart as disputes between Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front are intensifying. Furthermore, the Union of Tunisia has been significantly weakened by the Jomhouri Party's decision to leave the coalition after having lost many of its senior members to the dominant coalition partner.

Only Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes have the financial means and the regional infrastructure needed to embark upon two extensive electoral campaigns, so the scenario of a coalition between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes is not as far-fetched as it might seem at first sight. Such a scenario, however, has the potential of being far more destabilizing for Nidaa Tounes than for Ennahda, as the experience of the Troika has shown. In particular, Nidaa Tounes's ideological heterogeneity means that the party has been incapable of developing an in-depth platform and is therefore likely to focus its electoral campaign on anti-Islamism. In case of a coalition with Ennahda, however, Nidaa Tounes members could easily feel alienated by their leaders' choice to work with the principal enemy of their electoral campaign.

Indeed, at the moment the vast majority of members in Nidaa Tounes, including senior leaders of the party, insist that a coalition between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes is not an option. Some members even argue that Essebsi is only friendly with Ennahda because he wants to appear compromising and moderate, but that this is solely a strategy designed to avoid antagonizing conservative Muslims. Others, in particular of the RCD clan, are even more assertive and insist that "there are criminals inside Ennahda and we would for sure imprison some of them once we are in power."

Only a small minority within Nidaa Tounes is currently expressing a willingness to form a coalition with Ennahda. This section includes some current deputies within the Constituent Assembly who, for all their objections to political Islam, do not believe that Ennahda is the devil that most secular parties portray it to be. "I am in favor of forming a coalition with Ennahda, working with them is the only way to control the Islamists," maintained a former deputy of Ettakatol who recently joined Nidaa Tounes.

Beyond the potentially destabilizing impact a coalition with Ennahda—the principal enemy of its electoral campaign—might have, Nidaa Tounes is treading on shaky ground as long as it does not manage to tackle frictions between its various ideological currents, in particular between the RCD clan and the rest, and develop an effective party platform. Unless it accomplishes these aims, there will be questions about the party's ability to govern. "Essebsi always says that we have to forget the past, that we all have to unite and stand together against the Islamists," explained a former Nidaa Tounes deputy who was forced to sell his company to the Ben Ali family. "But it is very difficult to forget."

To remain popular despite its internal friction, Nidaa Tounes is trying to establish a party apparatus that penetrates all areas of society, similar to that of the RCD. But this approach, often based on connections and favoritism, is unlikely to be sustainable in a democracy in which many people are longing for more equality and justice.

To ensure that the impact of Nidaa Tounes will be enduring, the party will also have to address its structural challenges, in particular the rivalry between its various ideological currents, as it formulates a long-term party strategy. Nidaa Tounes, like other secular parties, should refrain from campaigning primarily on anti-Islamism and instead develop an elaborate party platform to gain voters. Although Ennahda's support base is not as substantial as it was in 2011, most Tunisians are conservative and are likely to be alienated by a vehemently anti-Islamist approach. This strategy is also likely to antagonize Nidaa Tounes's own secular base in case of a subsequent coalition or close cooperation with Ennahda.

While unlikely to occur yet, the leaders of secular parties would also have to put aside old battles in order to gain in relevance. Most secular parties remain divided, as leaders continue to prioritize their personal ambitions over more unity and collaboration. A strong and lasting coalition that includes the Jomhuri Party, Ettakatol, Afek Tounes, the Echâab movement, and the Democratic Alliance is still unthinkable owing to leadership frictions despite recent initiatives at closer cooperation between some of these parties.

Such an alliance would, however, be crucial, not least because the experience of the NSF has shown that broad unity among all secular parties only works in the short term. To maximize their leverage, secular parties should form several strong coalitions based on ideological affiliations that could then cooperate loosely through the NSF on key issues to further their shared interests.

The existence of such coalitions would also be critical for the democratic process in Tunisia because many citizens do not feel represented by Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes, or the far-left Popular Front. With the current bipolar political constellation, this section of the population risks not casting a vote at all.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, secular parties have to learn how to democratize from within. In postrevolutionary Tunisia, party members are less and less inclined to accept hierarchical structures and to work for leaders who do not seem to be accountable to anyone, including the executive party committees. The experiences of the CPR, Ettakatol, and the Jomhuri Party have shown that party members are willing to accept the decisions of their leadership, even if not taken democratically, only as long as they are perceived as beneficial for the party. Yet as compromise has become key to decisionmaking, even senior party members have become disillusioned by the tendency of their leaders to make decisions in which members did not participate—or, in some cases, even understand. Indeed, many party members agree that of all Tunisian

The leaders of secular parties have to put aside old battles in order to gain in relevance.

parties, Ennahda has the highest level of internal democracy and that, at least in this respect, secular parties have to learn from the Islamists.

The resignation of the Ennahda government, combined with the support secular parties have through business ties and other domestic forces—in particular favorable media coverage and strong ties with the UGTT—means that these parties currently have an unprecedented chance to take power on the political scene. But this momentum will only be sustained if Tunisia’s secular parties manage to tackle the deep structural, leadership, and internal democratic challenges they are facing.

Notes

- 1 This paper uses the term “secularism” in the way it is most often understood in Tunisia—as a broad concept defined essentially in opposition to political Islam, especially the increasing influence of Ennahda and Salafi movements. This does not necessarily implicate a strict separation between state and religion that is, for example, advocated in France.
- 2 Rikke Haugbølle and Francesco Cavatorta, “Will the Real Tunisian Opposition Please Stand Up? Opposition Coordination Failures Under Authoritarian Constraints,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3, 2011, 323–41.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from interviews conducted by the author between October 2013 and March 2014.
- 4 For details see “Tunisia’s Opposition Welcomes President Ben Ali’s Pledge,” BBC News, January 14, 2014.
- 5 For example, an opinion survey conducted shortly after the revolution found that 48 percent of Tunisians preferred politics based on religion. Of the 44 percent of Tunisians preferring secularism, only 27 percent felt strongly about their response. This indicates that most Tunisians recognize the importance of Islam and do not advocate a strict separation between state and religion. For details see the International Republican Institute and Elka Consulting, “Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion,” March 5–18, 2011.
- 6 Issandr El Amrani and Ursula Lindsey, “Tunisia Moves to the Next Stage,” Middle East Research and Information Project, November 8, 2011.
- 7 Tahar Hmila, who succeeded Ayadi as secretary general, founded the party “Departure,” of which he has the only seat in the assembly. His successor, Mohammed Abbou, eventually left the CPR to create the Democratic Current amid divergences over the CPR’s coalition with Ennahda and accusations that the Troika did not do enough to fight corruption. Yet critics assert that both Hmila and Abbou’s resignations at a time when the CPR lost popularity might also be motivated by personal political ambitions. Significantly, Abderraouf Ayadi, who succeeded Marzouki, created the Wafa party together with several other deputies. Wafa sprang from the promise to “get back to the founding principles of the CPR,” especially Marzouki’s promise to bring various revolutionary militants together under a “non-ideological project.” Far from this objective, however, allegations have emerged that Ayadi is supporting the controversial Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution and has held meetings with Hizb ut-Tahrir, which led many of its members to leave the party again.
- 8 This information was retrieved in December 2013 from “Marsad.tn,” a project from al-Bawsala that monitors the Constituent Assembly.
- 9 Most political polls in Tunisia are unreliable due to poor polling methodology, for example, phone surveys, as well as a frequent connection between the owners of polls and political power. This has, for example, led to much higher polling figures among some parties—a method already used by Ben Ali to reinforce political legitimacy and

power. In addition, most Tunisians are still undecided about whom to vote for and their percentage in polls is often proportionally allocated to political parties, which results in disproportionately high voter support.

- 10 International Republican Institute and Elka Consulting, Tunis, “Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion,” February 2014.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Official Statement of the National Salvation Front, published on July 26, 2013.
- 13 Mohamed-Salah Omri, “Trade Unions and the Construction of a Specifically Tunisian Protest Configuration,” *Open Democracy*, September 24, 2013.
- 14 Anne Wolf and Raphael Lefèvre, “The Islamic Politics of Trade Unionism,” *Open Democracy*, May 21, 2012.
- 15 The Destour, also known as the Constitutional Liberal Party, was formed in 1920 to liberate Tunisia from the French Protectorate. A split in 1934 created the Neo-Destour party under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba. The Neo-Destour developed into a popular movement that ultimately forced the termination of the French Protectorate over Tunisia. In 1964, Habib Bourguiba changed the name of the Neo-Destour into the Socialist Destourian Party to reflect the change in socioeconomic policies at that time. In 1988, Ben Ali renamed the party Constitutional Democratic Rally. Nidaa Tounes attempts to reinforce the destourian legacy associated with the fight for Tunisian independence without specifying how the term is nowadays understood within the party.
- 16 To reinforce Nidaa Tounes’s Destourian basis, Omar Shabou, one of the founders of Nidaa Tounes who also launched the popular *Al Maghreb* newspaper, temporarily split from the party to create the Free Destourian Movement. “It was a strategic decision taken in consultation with Essebsi,” explained a senior member of the movement. “The idea was to bring together Destourians who had not yet joined Nidaa Tounes to eventually integrate them into the party.”
- 17 Official resignation letter of the four Nidaa Tounes Sfax members, written on December 8, 2013.
- 18 Aside from Taieb Baccouche, there are at least five other senior members striving for power: Mohsen Marzouk, Faouzi Loumi, Raouf Khamessi, a businessman and former member of the RCD’s central committee, Lazhar Akreimi, a leftist, and Nourredine Ben Ticha, who has political experience in Hama Hammami’s Workers’ Party and is the director of Al Jarida, Tunisia’s second-most widely read all-Arabic news website. Another potentially influential person is Salma Loumi, Faouzi Loumi’s sister, a respected businesswoman who has so far managed to stay out of most conflicts within the party.
- 19 International Republican Institute and Elka Consulting, Tunis, “Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion,” February 2014.
- 20 “Tunisie—Politique: Vers la naissance d’une alliance centriste!?” EspaceManager, April 16, 2014, www.espacemanager.com/tunisie-politique-vers-la-naissance-dune-alliance-centriste.html.

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