

*Viewpoints*  
*No. 71*

# Forming the New Tunisian Government: “Relative Majority” and the Reality Principle

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After peaceful legislative and presidential elections in Tunisia toward the end of 2014, which were lauded on both the national and international levels, the attempt to form a new government reveals the tensions among the various political forces and the difficulties of constructing a democratic system in the country that was the birthplace of the "Arab Spring."

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On January 23, 2015, Prime Minister Habib Essid announced the members of the new Tunisian government after much negotiation with the various political parties. Did Prime Minister Essid intend to give a political lesson to Tunisians, both to those who had been elected to the Assembly of the People’s Representatives (ARP) and to civil society?

The ARP’s situation is worrisome for two reasons. First, 76 percent of the groups in political parties elected to the ARP have not submitted the required financial documents to the appropriate authorities in a timely manner. They therefore run the risk of losing their seats. Second, ARP members are debating the rules and regulations of the parliament as well as the definition of parliamentary opposition. They have been unable to reach an agreement on this last issue; without an agreement, the ARP is unable to vote on approval for a proposed government.

There is conflict within a number of political parties in this context. In Nidaa Tounes, some members of the party, including MP Abdelaziz Kotti, have argued that there has been no exchange of information within the party regarding the formation of the government. Khemaïs Ksila, another Nidaa Tounes MP, reproached some of the party’s cadres for their “family mentality” for favoring members of their own party. Saïd Aïdi – former Minister of Employment and Professional Training in Mohamed al-Ghannouchi’s and Béji Caïd Essebsi’s governments in 2011 – and Lazhar Akremi – a deputy minister in the Ministry of Interior in Béji Caïd Essebsi’s 2011 government – were elected as representatives in the ARP as members of Nidaa Tounes. Akremi resigned his position as spokesman for Nidaa Tounes, and Aïdi and Akremi protested against the exclusion of Nidaa Tounes’ ARP members from ministerial positions in the first proposed government. Both were subsequently nominated to be ministers in Habib Essid’s first proposed government. Additionally, Selma Elloumi Rekik, a businesswoman whose family provided significant support to Nidaa Tounes, sought to leave her elected position in the ARP to become President Béji Caïd Essebsi’s adviser.<sup>1</sup> She was instead nominated to be the Minister of Labor and Professional Training in Essid’s first proposed government.

The ARP includes 68.7 percent men and 31.3 percent women. Women account for almost one-fourth of the members of the first proposed Essid government; there are 9 women (3 ministers and 6 state secretaries) out of a total of 38 members (24 ministers and 14 state secretaries). What was the reaction in Tunisia to the nomination of these women? While the number was received positively, some of the individuals have attracted criticism. One of the proposed women, for example, has been criticized for signing a petition against the *hijab*. The independent women who were named for this government have been criticized for being awarded such high positions despite their critics’ views that these women did not contribute much when they were in charge of ministerial departments in the past. Despite the general support for the creation of a secretariat for the 2011 revolution’s martyrs – the families of whom felt insulted by the welcome at the revolution’s anniversary celebration on January 14, 2015 at the Carthage Presidential Palace – some martyrs’ associations criticized the woman nominated to head the secretariat, saying she is not qualified for this position.

Because Nidaa Tounes only has a relative parliamentary majority, the first proposed government faced a difficult vote. With 109 votes needed for approval, Nidaa Tounes could count only on its own votes and the votes of the Free Patriotic Union (UPL)—86 and 16, respectively—minus the votes of representatives who were nominated for ministerial positions who could no longer be members of parliament. While a small number of votes may have come from other parties, it was unlikely to be enough to approve the first proposed government. Even if the ARP did approve the proposed government, the small number of votes would not give the government the broad support it would need to govern effectively.

Ennahda also faced difficulties. A number of important figures resigned from the party. Several days before the first government was proposed, Rachid al-Ghannouchi (the head of Ennahda, the second strongest party in the ARP after winning 68 seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections), announced he had submitted names of Ennahda members and some independents to be part of the new government. He did this hoping that a consensus might emerge but warned that it might not happen. The first proposed government was in fact not inclusive—Ennahda was not represented and only one party other than Nidaa Tounes was included—and Ennahda faced the question of how to accept their exclusion from the government when they had made a number of important compromises in the past. The compromises made under al-Ghannouchi's leadership when Ennahda headed the Troika government (a coalition of Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic, and Ettakatol) from December 2011 to January 2014 included: agreeing not to vote for the law excluding former members of the Ben Ali regime and his political party from political activity; agreeing not to adopt an age limit on presidential candidates, thus allowing Béji Caïd Essebsi to run for president; and agreeing to leave the government in January 2014 to give way to a government of technocrats.

Ennahda decided not to vote for the first government proposed by Habib Essid, a position also taken by Afek Tounes, the Popular Front, the Congress for the Republic, and Al-Moubadara. A recent cartoon by the artist Imed Ben Hamida illustrated this situation and the difficulties Prime Minister Essid is facing in forming a government.<sup>2</sup> Essid is shown stirring a large pot of the Tunisian dish *lablabi* with one hand; the pot over the fire represents the government. He says to his assistant, "Go see your uncle Béji, tell him to give you some more carbonate,"<sup>3</sup> referring to the difficulty the prime minister faced in getting both the opposition on the left and Nidaa Tounes representatives to accept the idea of an inclusive government of national unity.

Imed Ben Hamida's cartoon reminds us of the consequences of the fears that were instrumentalized during the election campaign, where slogans such as "useful vote" (meaning, "protect Tunisia") and "if you don't vote for Nidaa Tounes, you are voting for Ennahda," were rife. One must remember that all of this occurs at a moment when 55.9 percent of Ennahda supporters and 38.3 percent of Nidaa Tounes supporters are dissatisfied with the current situation in the country.<sup>4</sup> Essid's decision to postpone a vote to approve the proposed government and to renew the dialogue among political parties presented an opportunity for all political parties to agree on parliament's internal rules. It was also an opportunity for all political parties to take into account the reality principle of Tunisia's regional and global environment and its difficult economic predicament. It may also help Tunisia avoid the same problems that affect other countries in the region.

On Monday, February 2, 2015 Habib Essid announced a new government. This new government is likely to have broad support for the parliament's vote of approval because two-thirds of its members were from political parties other than Nidaa Tounes. This will spare Tunisians from a new political crisis.

The new proposed government has 8 women among its 40 members. The eight women include three ministers (Selma Elloumi Rekik was nominated to be Minister of Tourism; Latifa Lakhdar was nominated to be Minister of Culture; and Samira Merai Friâa was nominated to be Minister of Women's Affairs) and five state secretaries (Boutheina Yaghlane, Lamia Zeribi, Amal Azouz, Amel Nafti, and Majdouline Cherni).<sup>5</sup> Afek Tounes has eight members of parliament and will have three ministerial positions. Ennahda has 69 members of parliament and will have 1 minister and 3 state secretaries. How will Rachid al-Ghannouchi respond to this new political situation? Will this proposed government satisfy Ennahda party members?

This new proposal does not satisfy all political parties. The Popular Front has stated that it will not approve the proposed government nor will it approve Nidaa Tounes members, including Taïeb Baccouche (Nidaa Tounes's secretary-general) who was nominated to be Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Popular Front had called for Ennahda's promise not to be included in the government to be respected up until the evening before the new proposal was made. Although we have a government nominated, it does not mean this is going to be the final government.

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*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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<sup>1</sup> Khomais Ksila and Moncef Sellami, arguing over certain position, almost came to blows according to some observers.

<sup>2</sup> Cartoon published 19 January 2015 by the online journal Businessnews (<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/caricatures.php?id=52884>)

<sup>3</sup> Carbonate of soda is used in this popular chickpea-based dish to speed up cooking.

<sup>4</sup> Open Sigma, Press conference, 24 January 2015, Tunis.

<sup>5</sup> Biographies des ministres du gouvernement de Habib Essid, 2 February 2015.

<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/tunisie-biographies-des-ministres-du-gouvernement-de-habib-essid,520,53263,3>

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