



# A Constant Deadlock:

## Failure of Initiatives to Resolve the Current Tunisian Political Crisis

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In early July 2021, a number of political parties and civil society organizations formed what is known as the Referendum Front, calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Parliament, as well as conducting early elections. Meanwhile, the Ennahda government called for the formation of a political government headed by Al-Mashishi, which reflects the attempts of the concerned parties to resolve the current crisis.

Such conflicting statements coincided with the Fitch announcing on July 8, 2021 reducing Tunisia's sovereign rating from "B" to "B-" with further negative prospects. This is the ninth reduction since 2011. The Governor of the Central Bank emphasized that the reduction is caused by political instability and politicians hindering subsidy and wages reform.

### An escalating crisis

The call of the Democratic Current and the people came amid sharp escalations in the Tunisian political crisis that has been going on for over seven months, which can be detailed as follows:

**1- A political and constitutional crisis:** The country has been incapable of addressing the severe political crisis, which erupted last January. Accordingly, the state institutions are crippled and unable to manage the country's affairs and implement the necessary economic reforms, due to their preoccupation with

disputes and political conflicts.

The current Al-Mashishi government is also suffering from the crisis of vacant ministerial seats, in light of Saeed's objection to Al-Mashishi's selection of 11 ministers on the ground of their involvement in financial and administrative corruption cases.

On the other hand, Saeed refused to pass the amendments of a draft law for forming the Constitutional Court, leading to postponing its formation until the present time. This is the entity that could have settled the conflict over competencies between Saeed and Al-Mashishi.

Additionally, President Saeed is criticizing the government and Parliament recently, due to their failure to manage the country's affairs and offer effective solutions for its multiple crises.

**2- Parliamentary disputes:** The current parliament suffers from on-going conflicts between secular and

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civil parties, led by the Free Constitutional Party, and the Islamist-oriented parties led by the Ennahda Movement and the Dignity Coalition. This was evident in the assaults against Abir Moussa, head of the Free Constitutional Party bloc, by representatives from the Dignity Coalition during one of the plenary sessions of Parliament on July 30. The session was devoted to discussing various issues, including the government's agreement with the Qatar Fund for Development to open an office in Tunisia.

Secular political parties are calling for an end to what they described as the hegemony of the Ennahda movement over the current parliament and over the Al-Mashishi government, on the grounds that solving the current political crisis lies in terminating the dependence of the current government on the Parliament headed by Rached Ghannouchi, Secretary-General of the Ennahda Movement.

**3- Failure of the national dialogue initiatives:** So far, none of the recent national initiatives put forward have succeeded to foster a national dialogue with all political and social parties. The most recent initiative was the call of President Qais Saeed.

The main reason behind this was Saeed's demand to discuss reforming the existing political system and the electoral law, which was rejected by some parties, led by the Ennahda Movement, claiming that this is an attempt to foster monocracy and abort the current democratic experiment.

**4. The aggravation of economic conditions:**

The country is witnessing a significant economic deterioration. This is obviously evident in the lack of liquidity needed to pay off sovereign debts by the end of July, when the government must repay two loans, each worth USD 500 million.

The Tunisian government has failed to achieve any tangible progress in negotiations with the IMF to obtain a USD 4 billion loan. Furthermore, in light of the distressed economic conditions, the country will face the risk of defaulting on foreign debts and a further decline in the country's credit rating, with the absence of an economic reform program and the declining revenues of key economic sectors such as tourism due to the COVID-19 crisis.

## Settlement proposals

Under the ongoing unresolved political crisis, some political forces proposed solutions for resolving the current situation, most notably:

**1-Ennahda's call for a political government:** In early July, the Shura Council of the Ennahda Movement called for the formation of a political government that is capable of addressing the Tunisian political crisis, while retaining Al-Mashishi as prime minister. This proposal was rejected even from parties like the National Reform Bloc (18 parliament members), one of the closest allies to the Ennahda movement allies.

Ennahda seems to have been seeking to intensify its movements, and to lure its affiliated parties into negotiations over the composition of the next



government. This re-ignited the disputes between Saeed and Al-Mashishi, as the former insisted on establishing a technocratic government, which Al-Mashishi opposed, and he further allied with the Ennahda to confront the President.

**2- A partisan demand for early elections:** A group of leftist political parties led by the Tunisia Project Movement (TPM) and the Al-Watan Party, as well as several civil society organizations such as the Bardo sit-in coordination and the Tunisian League for Citizenship, and some Tunisian political figures announced the formation of what is known as “the Referendum Front” on June 28, 2021. This comes with the aim of holding a popular referendum over the issue of reforming the existing political system and amending the electoral law to. They further call for the organization of early presidential and parliamentary elections, which is consistent with President Qais Saeed’s proposal.

## Multiple challenges:

The two proposed initiatives to resolve the current political crisis indicate a few observations, which can be summarized as follows:

**1- The recreation of the same crisis:** The initiative of the Referendum Front is consistent with the President’s direction. Thus, it constitutes a partisan and popular support for Saeed’s directions to end the crisis. The Democratic Current Party and the Tunisian General Labour Union also advocate for a similar approach. On the other hand, Ennahda’s call for a political government constitutes an insistence on the same proposition that it had previously put forward to resolve the current crisis. This reflects the absence of consensus between Saeed and Ennahda over resolving the current crisis.

## 2- The Continuing government deadlock:

The political crisis continues to overshadow the performance of the government, which has become incapable of facing the political, economic and health challenges in the country. The government is unable to implement the necessary economic reforms to salvage the country out of the economic crisis, as well as the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in the country, together with the delay in vaccinating citizens (1.9 million citizens out of 11 million citizens). This portends the continuing economic repercussions of COVID-19.

**3- Constitutional Obstacles to an Early Referendum:** According to some legal opinions, the initiative of the Referendum Front contradicts the stipulations of the Tunisian constitution. Some constitutional jurists believe that the referendum called by the Front is no more than a consultative referendum, and thus will not have any legal value, particularly since the national constitution does not include a specific mechanism for conducting such type of referendum.

On the other hand, the Constitutional Court has not yet been formed. This hinders holding a popular referendum, since this requires the presence of a constitutional court to supervise the referendum process.

In conclusion, the previous facts suggest that the political crisis will continue, especially within the absence of national consensus between the parties on how to resolve the crisis. Despite that the crisis initiated some political movements within the Tunisian society, such movements remain insufficient and incapable of resolving the crisis. Within the parliament, the dominant political parties, particularly Ennahda, reject calls to hold early parliamentary elections, for fear of losing more parliamentary seats, and leading to further escalation of the current crisis.

## ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.