

# Briefing

## Tunisia President's gamble for power collapses at the last hurdle

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It is no secret that Tunisia's President Kais Saied harbours ambitions to alter the political system in Tunisia and restore the powers of the Presidency. Saied has successfully channelled popular discontent against a deeply divided Parliament, side-lining the political parties in talks on forming a government and imposing his own candidate on political parties terrified of the prospect of early elections amidst polls that predict a defeat for all. However, just when Saied appeared on the verge of successfully centralising power and becoming the de facto executive authority in Tunisia, he spectacularly fell out with his candidate for Prime Minister and now finds himself on the verge of being isolated in the Presidential palace for the rest of his political term.

This briefing looks at the dynamics surrounding the sudden turn of events.

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President Saied's most powerful leverage over the political parties is his ability to channel popular anger towards them. He continues to lead in the polls and the prevalent perception continues to be one that blames the political parties for the failing economy and relentless political crises that have not abated since the revolution of 2011. In practical terms, Saied has manifested this leverage by threatening the prospect of early elections which would force the political parties to face an increasingly hostile electorate likely to collectively punish them, reducing the seat quota within parliament that the political parties exerted all efforts to secure in the last election.

These were the dynamics behind Fakh Fakh's government that despite causing widespread disgruntlement among Tunisian lawmakers, it was eventually agreed on to prevent the President dissolving the Parliament and calling early elections. However, the motivations behind the agreement were clear, resulting in predictions that the government would not last the year.

When news emerged of possible corruption by Fakh Fakh, Ennahda moved quickly to reassert itself over the government. Reports suggested that Fakh Fakh was offered a choice: surrender the government in de facto terms by incorporating Ennahda allies – namely Qalb Tunis (Fakh Fakh would be allowed to remain as prime minister), or face the full investigative process and become mired in a corruption scandal.

As the parliamentary investigative committee appeared closer to concluding that there was enough evidence for the matter to be referred to the attorney general, Ennahda announced that they would commence discussions over the formation of a new government and would seek a vote of no confidence in Fakh Fakh's government.

The president was initially defiant, outright rejecting the notion of new discussions over the government. It is no secret in Tunisia that the president is deeply unhappy with Ennahda's leader Ghannouchi, implicitly accusing him of undermining the presidency and seeking to run state affairs on his own.

Moreover, other parties in Parliament such as Taysir al-Dimoqrati (who preside over three important ministries including education), denounced what they perceived as an attempt by Ennahda to take control of the government. The leader of the trade unions, Nouredine Tabboubi, came out in support of the president and his prime minister, calling for calm or early elections.

Ennahda proceeded to build a coalition of parties to secure the required 109 votes to topple Fakh Fakh's government. However, on the afternoon that the motion of no confidence was handed in, the president announced that the prime minister had already handed in his resignation that morning.

The president's announcement regarding Fakh Fakh's resignation created a constitutional crisis that would result in a shifting of power away from Parliament to the presidency. Under the constitution, Parliament has priority in forming a government if the previous one is toppled by a vote of no confidence. However, if the prime minister resigns, then the onus is

on the president to choose. In other words, the timing of the resignation would dictate who would be in the driving seat in establishing the next government.

The question that was asked by the political parties and analysts was: If Fakh Fakh had resigned that morning, why was such an important news item not announced? Why did the president withhold the information until the motion of no confidence was handed in?

The suggestion is that Fakh Fakh had not actually resigned that morning, and that the president had announced his resignation without consulting him so as to retain the authority over designating the new prime minister.

Herein, Ennahda found itself in a quandary. Although the beleaguered Fakh Fakh had been the president's choice, the latter's popularity appeared unaffected. If anything, President Kais Saied's popularity (according to the polls) appears to have improved.

Ennahda, however, have seen their popularity fall by comparison. In other words, Ennahda would not be able to summon the popular support for an attack on the president whereby they would accuse him of lying and demand proof of his claim that Fakh Fakh had resigned. Instead, they would more likely be accused by the Tunisian public of launching a power grab for their own interests and suffer accordingly.

This was precisely how other political parties in Parliament such as Taysar al-Dimoqrati perceived it. Taysar's leader, Mohamed Abou, appeared willing to jeopardize his own reputation for being firm on corruption by entertaining the prospect of Fakh Fakh continuing in power, to prevent Ennahda from becoming the dominant force.

Ennahda decided not to challenge Saied and instead sought to build a coalition of parties to rally behind a candidate that they would recommend to the president. If he refused, then he could theoretically be accused of going against the people's will that is reflected through Parliament.

Ennahda reportedly succeeded in securing a bloc of 125 MPs that was prepared to support their candidate, Fadil Abdelkafi. Meanwhile, the president demonstrated his disdain for the political parties by insisting that suggestions be sent via letter, instead of engaging in face-to-face meetings with party leaders as is custom, implying he already had a candidate in mind.

The political parties underestimated Kais Saied's growing confidence. Saied ignored all candidates recommended by Parliament and opted for his own man, Hisham al-Mishishi. The message was clear for all: either Parliament follows the will of the president or face the people in early elections and be condemned. The polls suggest President Saied's popularity is soaring as he pushes back against what is seen by many Tunisians as an impotent Parliament that has brought little benefit since 2011.

Moreover, the polls show that all political parties will lose seats in the early election except that of the former regime which is apparently becoming more popular as it publicly antagonizes Ennahda and accuses them of usurping the state. More worrying for the political parties is that these polls do not take into consideration the prospect of the president fielding his own candidates in any elections, which may well eclipse the current front runners.

Cornered, and faced with the prospect of an assertive President in de facto control, the political parties resigned themselves to the prospect of voting for the government and waiting for an opportunity to arise.

That opportunity came sooner than expected. After Al-Mishishi announced his government, the proposed candidate for the ministry of culture announced on social media that he would not take up his post. Al-Mishishi replaced him. However, the President summoned the proposed candidate and convinced him to take up his post which the President announced accordingly. Al-Mishishi protested, insisting he would stick by his replacement. The President pressured the Al-Mishishi to change course with the President's inner circle bewildered at Al-Mishishi's stance given he was supposed to be the President's proxy.

Al-Mishishi refused to cede to the President and met with the political parties calling on them to support his government. The President then invited the leaders of the main political blocs and asked them to vote against Al-Mishishi's government offering assurances he would not call early elections and would consult them on the next candidate. The parties sided with Al-Mishishi, evoking rage from the President as Saied announced a conspiracy "with the Zionists and colonial powers" had taken place and that the "truth would come out eventually".

These rapid developments have completely upended the dynamics, restoring the power of a Parliament where Nahda and its allies have a workable majority of more than 109, causing despair to its opponents in Tayyar al-Dimoqrati whose leader Mohamed Abou announced he would retire from politics. However, polls suggest Saied continues to enjoy popular support while the political parties continue to struggle amidst widespread discontent over a struggling economy and rife social inequality. Yet, the parties have been spared an election for now.

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