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Position Paper

The Tunisian Troika: Regaining Initiative with a New Deadline

Al Jazeera Center for Studies



Al Jazeera Center for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies-en@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/>

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Tuesday, 23 October 2012, marked one year since the election of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in Tunisia - a deadline that was initially set to allow for the drafting of a new constitution that will lead to the establishment of a new, freely and fairly elected government at the end of this period. However, to date the NCA has not completed its work. This has sparked controversy between the opposition, which believes that the assembly's electoral legitimacy has expired, and the ruling powers, who deny such claims on the grounds that the NCA is an independent body.

Political factions are debating how this time line has been affected by the new balance of power in Tunisian politics. Forces from the left have joined forces of the old regime, while the ruling coalition, the Troika, consisting of An-Nahda party, the Congress party and At-Takattol ("The Bloc"), is being confronted on one hand, by a wing that insists on ousting all supporters of the old regime as soon as possible, and on the other, by different groups which prefer a slow and gradual transition. Each side, the ruling coalition and the opposition, or within the ruling coalition itself, had been trying to seize the opportunity to achieve gains that can empower their position by either having access to, or remaining in power, by the time this one year deadline was reached.

Political alignments

Observers of the situation in Tunisia hold that the disagreement regarding whether October, 23 has indeed marked the end of the transitional government, is based on original disputes over the presidency, as well as the revolution. Political parties that question the expired legitimacy of the existing institutions are almost the same voices that believed the NCA should be solely concerned with drafting a new constitution and as a result these forces had attempted to limit its powers. These are the same voices aligned with the old regime, supported by the leftist groups which fought against the former regime but were defeated in the elections. However, the majority of leftists have sided against limiting the NCA's powers. Debating this issue is purely political, even if has appeared a somewhat legal debate, since opposing the government which emanated from the NCA but not the assembly itself is what has brought forces of the old regime together with those of the left in the October 23- battle.

Many forces that support the ruling Troika (An-Nahda, the Congress, and At-Takattol) believe that the government's poor performance and mistakes have resulted in the current alignment of the leftist powers with those of the old regime. And although the government which is headed by the Secretary General of An-Nahda party, Hamadi Al-Jebali, is seeking to put things in order and introduce reforms to appease Tunisians in order to hinder any attempts of exploiting the social protests, the government seems to be powerless. This is mainly due to the fact that supporters of the old regime dominate the [state] administration, while the opposition has the upper hand over civil society and media - where little coverage is given to highlight the achievements of the government and more time is dedicated to attacking the latter.

Currently, the conflict is almost exclusive to forces that won the elections and those which were defeated, as well as supporters of the current government and those of the former government (Kaid al-Sabaysi's) - which many consider a revival of the regime against which the revolution erupted. This means that the conflict revolves around either the revolution or elections, making powers which face the Troika united solely by their opposition of An-Nahda movement. Within the ranks of Troika supporters, another conflict is emerging, putting face to face the government and whoever supports it, in spite of its mistakes and shortcomings. Many of its supporters expected that this government would truly cleanse the [state] administration and media institutions from residues of the old regime. These supporters blame the government for adopting a hesitant approach and, worse, that this process has sometimes depended on supporters of the old system who continue to dominate in a number of government functions.

The Troika government has found itself facing a number of pressures, some of which are attributed to its loose grip on power where many of the decisions it has made have not been implemented on the ground, especially with a security establishment that has lost

much of its effectiveness and consolidation, and an administration that is still controlled by supporters of the old regime. Other pressures have emerged due to the government's hesitation in adopting a strict policy towards followers of the old regime, and this has placed the government's supporters in a very tricky position. Additionally, the slow coordination among components of the Troika – and the obvious competition which has long prevailed among its factions – has driven the coalition to succumb to these pressures in response to political developments. This has made all the Troika's initiatives not only untimely, but also issued in circumstances that are just too tense.

Political work plan

As October 23 approached, the Troika – which has been holding a marathon of meetings since late September – launched a political initiative, a road map for the upcoming stage in Tunisia's political transition, something previously determined by the statement of the higher coordination committee of the ruling coalition on 13 September 2012. This came three days before the national dialogue conference which was sponsored by the Tunisian Public Labour Union and was, thus, considered as an attempt to undermine outcomes of this conference. Additionally, the two main parties within the Troika have boycotted the said conference and caused embarrassment to its organizers. Although the Congress for the Republic Party (President Marzouki) and An-Nahda Movement Party (head of the government) did not participate because they did not want to hold dialogue with supporters of the old regime who were invited to attend the conference, they were also sceptical about the legitimacy of the institutions [which would expire] by October 23. The objection [to participate] seems in fact more closely connected to items of the agenda which were put forward by organizers of the conference and a number of participants. The conference agenda stated that one of the conference objectives was to establish a dialogue council that discusses all issues and this was considered by the Congress and An-Nahda parties as an attempt to snatch the powers away from the elected, legitimate institutions – especially the NCA.

In fact, the Troika initiative, which took centre stage at the conference even with the absence of the main Troika parties, became a landmark event in the ongoing political debate. In addition to setting clear dates for the elections, the initiative formed a qualitative leap in the internal procedures of the ruling coalition reflecting a decent amount of compromise which the Troika is willing to make in order to overcome points of disagreement. This is especially true for those related to the nature of the developing political system since all were in favour of a bicameral system. The Troika chose to abandon the parliamentary system after it found itself the only advocate of this system in the political scene in Tunisia. Pressures faced by An-Nahda party, its shortcomings in the past months and the protests against it (due to the incident of the attack on the US embassy in particular) have driven it to reconsider its proposal of establishing a parliamentary system. This will reflect positively on further strengthening the bonds of the Troika coalition and will also facilitate the process of drafting the constitution and achieve, by avoiding the holding of a referendum, a huge gain over time. At the same time, the other parties, which have been confused by the road map proposed in the Troika initiative, have not hidden their desire to postpone the elections, as per the proposal, to 23 June 2013, the fall of the year after the date they were originally pushing for, for earlier elections.

Regardless of the debate over October 23, and over initiatives proposed by other sides, the Troika's proposal and the dialogue conference organised by the Labour Union have eased the concerns of a large portion of Tunisian public opinion thereby undermining the importance of October 23, as it was any ordinary day. Not only did the initiative set a date for elections, the Troika also expressed its commitment to activate the three higher commissions of elections, media and judiciary as one of the main demands which the opposition raised during the past period, and it also suggested that Kamel Al-Jendoubi head the elections committee again, originally an opposition candidate [for elections]. Moreover, the Troika expressed its willingness to respond positively to the decisions of the dialogue conference, although it maintained a certain distance towards the conference agenda.

Conflict on positions

Unfortunately, avoiding any October 23 protest action or incidents are not merely dependent on the decisions of political players. Violations might have occurred that would have jeopardized all attempts to calm down the situation, such as what happened in the city of Tataouine on Thursday 18 October, where a peaceful march turned to an act of violence that claimed the life of an opposition member. As expected, this incident was the focus of many media reports which made the movement of Nida'a Tunis, which the Troika is seeking to sideline, look like the victim. Some figures from this movement went as far as holding the ruling coalition responsible for the Tataouine incident. From this standpoint, An-Nahda's quest to organise festive activities on October 23 marking the anniversary of the first free elections in the country could have led to a security breakdown or might be used as a pretext to fabricate other incidents, especially with rumours circulating about supporters of the old regime's intentions to create a state of chaos across the country. The Tataouine incident is an indicator that confrontations between supporters of the two sides might spin out of control.

Hence, some believe that the rising voices of the old regime supporters during this period do not only aim to question the legitimacy of the elected institutions which have broken away from the old regime itself, but also to intensify the media's presence and draw foreign attention to Nida'a Tunis movement – whose members' hopes of returning to power might be shattered with the passing of a law which would oust all Ben Ali's regime officials [from the government]. This means that Nida'a Tunis has instead decided to attack, while seeking, through the media which it largely dominates, to look like the victim. The problem is that the more Nida'a Tunis tends to surface, the more the Troika supporters who oppose the old regime, will blame the government for its "soft" accountability and weak measures of fighting corruption and for being the reason why old regime supporters are becoming as audacious as they are today.

In parallel with these pressures, An-Nahda allies, especially the Congress party, are taking advantage of the situation in order to push the movement for more concessions within the incoming political regime. This is also because decision making has been monopolized by the head of the government during recent months. Theoretically, this will drive An-Nahda to present concessions to other political formations and this will, in turn, help achieve the aspired calm in the country. However the latter would have to improve its performance in order to convince supporters (and the public) that it will be more loyal to the objectives of the revolution in fighting corruption.

The Troika and supporters of the old regime are not the only opposing forces in the political scene. There is a range of small leftist and nationalist parties that have recently formed the 'Popular Front' coalition. Although almost no one expects that this eleven-party coalition might have any electoral breakthrough in the near future, the ability of some parties within this front to stir the pot is something that previous experience has proven extremely dangerous. And even though representatives in this front are known for their implacable opposition to the old regime, they have found a meeting point with Nida'a Tunis in terms of their opposition to the Troika, especially An-Nahda movement.

Indeed, some sources are debating whether certain preparations are under way by parties such as the 'National Democrats' to stir up unrest in some areas, and this is what the internal forces are preparing to face. Some claim that replacing the most senior security official in the country four days before October 23 reflects the ministry's readiness to counter any security breakdown.

Regaining the initiative

The various initiatives proposed by the Troika and the Labour Union have managed to reassure the public who had feared wide scale security unrest in the coming period. It is also expected that the three presidencies, of the Republic, the government and the NCA, would play a role in bringing together these initiatives which were proposed over the past week. But on the other hand, there are political interests that make certain powers

more inclined toward stirring unrest. In the same context, some factions such as Nida'a Tunis fear that any legal proceedings might hinder their activities in the coming period. This includes a security upheaval followed by the issuing of the 'political isolation act' which is proposed by the Congress for the Republic Party. Consequently, these political initiatives and the major security measures undertaken have minimised chances of any security threat escalating and has kept the initiative in the hands of the NCA to resolve any of these political disagreements.

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