

Political consensus and economic reforms in Tunisia

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Abstract

This article explores the role of political consensus in Tunisia in slowing reforms, following the political crisis that followed President Kais Saied's decision to dismiss the Prime Minister and suspend parliament. It argues that the political consensus created by the 2016 Carthage agreement led to a slowing of economic reforms and triggered a political crisis. The article then considers the necessary preconditions for policymakers to make future political consensus an opportunity to endorse economic reforms that enforce accountability and advance a policy agenda that goes beyond the interests of the ruling coalition.

Tunisia was at one time hailed as a beacon of the Arab Spring model for democracy. This changed when a government crisis occurred, as manifested in the decision by President Kais Saied to dismiss the Prime Minister, Hichem Mechichi, and suspend parliament. This triggered a constitutional crisis and challenged the very mechanics of the country's democratic processes. The core driver of the crisis was the failure of the government to deliver on the economic front. Economic reforms had not gained sufficient pace in restructuring the economy, increasing productivity, and eliminating economic barriers. The four governments elected since 2014 have been embroiled in conflict with the rival political parties, and this has been one of the major barriers to accelerating economic reforms. The political consensus of 2016, the Carthage Agreement, achieved government unity and brought together the main political actors and aimed to reduce political conflicts, accelerate reforms, and implement proper political discourse with all stakeholders. In practice, the success of such reforms primarily depends on the government's capacity to establish a reform agenda that can be passed by parliament¹.

Although there has been some success in introducing reforms, political conflicts continue to disrupt the government's ability to ratify reforms with a comfortable majority. Shifting political alliances create fragmentation within parliamentary blocs and increase the incentives for deputies to defect to other blocs. At the same time, political conflicts hinder the executive's ability to coordinate with the legislative branch and civil society. Conflicts also reduce opportunities to build partnerships with different stakeholders based on transparency and accountability. The values of good governance should have increased the political tempo for reform, instead the system has encouraged social strife and thus impeded the pace².

Ten years after the Tunisian revolution, the economic situation is poor and worsening. From 2011, economic growth declined, and the political, institutional, and social shocks led to increases in public spending and a deterioration in fiscal balances. The fiscal deficit averaged 5 percent of the GDP between 2013 and 2019, and external debt increased from 57 percent to 85.5 percent of GDP over the same period³. This growing dependence on external funds reflected the fact that public and private consumption absorbed almost 89 percent of the wealth created, with

¹ McCarthy (2019).

² Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi (2021).

³ IMF (2021), article IV.

national saving much lower than investment, leaving an investment gap of 10 percent of GDP in 2019.

Public spending steadily increased since 2011 because of these macroeconomic imbalances. The public sector wage bill absorbed 17 percent of GDP in 2019⁴, and Government transfers to SOEs have annually amounted to 7-8 percent of GDP in recent years. This affected national debt sustainability as SOE loans, guaranteed by the government, made up 15 percent of GDP in 2019⁵. Further, the social security system was underfunded and the deficit, including the stock of arrears and cash needs, accounted for more than 5 percent of GDP. Increasing life expectancy and the weak cash flow position of many SOEs is likely to make things worse⁶.

As the public deficit increased after 2011, international rating agencies downgraded the country's credit rating, limiting the possibilities for raising funds on international markets. Resource mobilization became an exercise in attempting to close annual budgetary gaps across governments. The increasing dependence on external financing faced political opposition as the increased public debt was seen as burdening future generations. This further weakened the government mandate for reform and encouraged a focus on internal sources of financing—carrying a significant risk of inflation⁷.

This article considers the political economy of policy reform in Tunisia. It analyses the role of political consensus in slowing reform and the transition process and sheds light on the mechanisms by which this has occurred. The next section reviews the role of consensus in transition and is followed by a consideration of how consensus improved preconditions for the political transition. This article then discusses how consensus failed to enhance preconditions for economic transition and goes on to offer recommendations and concluding remarks.

Consensus and political reform of the economy

The literature on political transition and reform highlights the obstacles that can face economic reforms in countries making the transition to democracy⁸. Initial economic conditions are seen to be essential for shaping social pacts and compensating losers who cannot implement reform plans—two methods are identified for analyzing the reform setting, namely normative political economy and positive analysis. The normative political economy of reform underlines that the design of reform packages via adequate sequencing and compensating transfers is the key to creating broad support for reforms⁹. Positive analysis underlines the importance of social and political initial conditions in understanding the rent-seeking and game power actions undertaken by different actors. Determinants identified from positive analysis include the number of veto players, the level of separation of powers, the nature of the political regime, whether presidential or parliamentary, and the structure of the legislature¹⁰. Recent work on the

Following the Revolution, Tunisians are still waiting to translate political success into economic gains that reflect the 2010 protesters' economic and social aspirations. The Carthage agreement has failed to build a political momentum to advance economic reforms. The president is increasingly resorting to emergency powers to overcome the paralysis of democratic institutions. To overcome this, any new agreement needs first to consider compensation channels and to reform sequencing, bargaining power distribution, and mechanisms of coordination and follow-up.

4 IMF (2021), article IV.

5 IMF (2021), article IV.

6 IMF (2021), article IV.

7 IMF (2021) executive Boards concludes 2021: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2021/044/article-A001-en.xml>

8 Haggard and Kaufman (2018).

9 Roland (2002); Black, Kraakman and Tarassova (2000); Alesina and Drazen (1991); Acemoglu and Robinson (2001); Dewatripont and Roland (1992); Wei (1999); Dewatripont and Roland (1995).

10 Roland (2002); Sonin (1999); Putnam (1992); Black, Kraakman and Tarassova (2000); Alexeev (1999); Polishchuk (1999).

public management of reform, highlights the role of historical legacies and administrative cultures in conducting reform¹¹ and the consequences of the interaction between the political elite and the powerful actors in administrative institutions¹². It emphasizes the role of policy entrepreneurs and political leaders in implementing reforms, shifting reform agendas and setting policies¹³. Other studies have concluded that the governance style might better explain reform outcomes than the institutional setting¹⁴. Political-bureaucratic actors can form tight coalitions and adopt specific strategies within administrative institutions to gain political benefit and maximize their self-interests by engaging in public management reform¹⁵. Both political and electoral systems shape the capacity of the state to advance reforms. How these systems shape institutional efficiency and enhance their ability to articulate changes is important in driving new reform. Generally, consensual democracies are more supportive of cooperative action¹⁶ and coordinated production policies¹⁷ than majoritarian systems. Other work has emphasized the importance of the electoral system in enhancing government efficiency and its role in shaping the path of political and economic policies¹⁸.

Looking at the Tunisian case, the political reform success is often attributed to the political actors' consensus strategy that helped overcome the risk of destroying a nascent transitional process that was already weakened by conflictual objectives between Islamic and secular parties. Unfortunately, the economic reform agenda did not follow the same path and did not benefit from consensus. On the contrary, economic conditions have worsened for a large part of the population.

Scholars recognize the existence of constitutional incoherence that embraces a mix between majoritarian and consensual political systems. Further, the electoral system cannot generate a clear majority, placing an additional burden on political actors to comply with a consensual strategy essential to enact policies¹⁹. As a result, voting reforms with the majority depend primarily on finding compromises between the antagonist's political parties, which may delay the reform agenda. At the same time, frequent movements of deputies between blocs in the parliament and instability among coalitions make it difficult to build needed consensus around reforms. Other work investigated the role of power distribution among actors to advance reform and changes²⁰. It shows that an inclusive process gives actors more incentive to participate (contestability) and comply with agreements. Moreover, consensual institutions favor a consensual policy-making style compared to majoritarian institutions²¹.

In Tunisia the inclusion of actors in the political process was not insufficient. The process of consensus, signed on July 13, 2016, marked a power sharing between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, several political formations, and civil society organizations²². However, this did not consolidate the democratic process and failed to produce significant concessions in order to advance major reforms. The consensus did not help overcome the political conflicts at the legislative level. Evidence of the delaying of important legislation can be seen in existing votes²³. The literature on

11 Metcalfe and Richards (1990); Clark (2000).

12 Peters and Savoie (1996, 1998).

13 Moon 1995; Aberbach and Christensen (2001); Barzelay (2001); Goldfinch and Hart (2003).

14 Christensen and Lægveid (2001).

15 Vigoda-Gadot and Vigoda-Gadot (2003); Bovens *et al.* (2002).

16 Huber and Stephens (2000); Iversen and Stevens (2008); Manow, (2001a); Martin and Swank (2008).

17 Arsenault (2017).

18 Cusack *et al.* (2007); Iversen and Stevens (2008); Katzenstein (1985); Korpi (2006); Martin and Swank (2008).

19 Iversen and Stevens (2008).

20 World Development Report (2017).

21 Bovens *et al.* (2002); Nagel (1998).

22 MacCarthy (2019).

23 Kubinec and Grewal (2018).

politics, moreover, underlines to what level power-sharing could undermine democratic institutions and their consolidation through a loss of representation and accountability²⁴ and the rise of a politics of collusion²⁵. There is a serious question as to whether consensus in Tunisia triggered a process of collusion politics²⁶.

Reform implementation depends primarily on the social, economic and political preconditions prevailing in time of changes. Empirical work regarding the political economy of reform in the Middle East is scarce, specifically, the experience of countries involved in the “Arab spring”. This article now considers why consensus helped transition to achieve a political shift but not economic reform.

Consensus and political transition

The process of consensus building significantly shaped Tunisia’s successful political transition. The resulting pact between two rival groups, the Islamists and pro-revolution leagues on the one hand, and secular parties, on the other, was made against all expectations. It was disconnected from the political conflict dynamics resulting from the 2014 election process, such as the committee for transitional justice and the committee of constitutionality of laws. The process aimed to overcome a serious deterioration in political life and build a broad coalition to vote for the constitution. Furthermore, it helped establish key political institutions needed to complete the political transition. As a result, the legislative assembly voted for the constitution and, additionally, many other political reforms were passed in areas such as transitional justice, electoral law, legal immunity, and the parliament’s internal policy.

Political consensus has the advantage that obstacles can be overcome by compensating emerging actors politically. The consensus between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes in 2016 paved the way for power sharing by compensating militants from the two parties. This took the form of massive hiring of them by the administration and security forces²⁷. Many known figures from the two parties were appointed to high level positions, with both parties aggressively disputing the number of ministers and governors allocated to each party. Another form of political compensation was to gain their allies the possibility of being elected to the parliament, this included corrupt entrepreneurs, traffickers and radical Islamic figures. In the same vein, old regime figures supported by Nidaa Tounes benefited from a loophole from being banned from political life. Further, the sequencing of political reforms helped rivals to prioritize easy agreements and delay difficult reforms. For example, while the constitutional court and electoral law have yet to be validated, an agreement was reached immediately to pass the first chapter of the 1959 Islamic Constitution²⁸, and vote on transitional justice laws²⁹.

The consensus also permitted the two parties to privilege their self-interests and the interests of their allies by capturing the regulatory body and benefiting from rent-seeking behavior. High-ranking figures from Ennahda, were subject to judicial inquiries about the sources of their wealth and enrichment. Nidaa Tounes also proposed economic amnesty legislation and was accused of encouraging those who exploited their power to accumulate more wealth. There are still outstanding charges relating to the political elite and government officials abusing power, engaging in illegal activities, and activities presenting conflicts of interest³⁰.

24 Jung and Shapiro (1995); Kriger (2012).

25 Cheeseman and Tendi (2010).

26 Cheeseman and Tendi (2010).

27 Q. Hanlon, Security Sector Reform in Tunisia. A Year after the Jasmine Revolution (United States Institute for Peace, Special Report No.304, 2012). <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR304.pdf>.

28 This article states that Islam is part of the country's identity, its people, their history, and culture, but it is not a state religion to be used as an apparatus of government.

29 Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi,. (2021, p11).

30 Yerkes and Muasher (2017).

Consensus and economic transition

Tunisians are still waiting to translate political success into economic gains that reflect the 2010 protesters' economic and social aspirations. At first, there was a particular interest in advancing the political transition by accelerating political reforms and guaranteeing a smooth power transition. Consequently, the delay in advancing economic reforms contributed to a severe deterioration of the economy, as seen by the economic indicators in Table 1. Between 2010 and 2020, the economic growth rate declined from 3 to -7 percent, foreign debt increased from 40 to 83 percent, investment fell from 24 to 18 percent of GDP, and the unemployment rate increased from 13 to 16 percent.

As we have seen, the literature on political and economic transitions

shows that structural and deep reforms are the most difficult to implement, as they need political coalitions for ratification. Such reforms cover, for example, banking sector law, pensions, and state owned enterprises (SOE). These reforms are important as they constitute a condition for obtaining IMF loans and the government has no other realistic means of funding its fiscal budget. The revolutionary movement has, however, made it difficult for the government to ratify some of these policies, such as privatizing SOEs and removing subsidies.

Civil society played a significant role in shaping economic and social policies post-revolution. The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA) were considered partners; as such, they influenced decision-making by, for example, vetoing reforms that might negatively affect the interests of groups they represent. These civil organizations played a significant role in getting social and economic clauses included in the Carthage Agreement, for which they obtained a Nobel Prize. The UGTT represents civil servants and defends middle-class interests, while the UTICA represents groups of investors and entrepreneurs. After the revolution, other interest groups also became influencers, though without the capacity to veto, such as the Union of Agriculture (UTAP) and groups of unemployed youth.

Consensus and power distribution and bargaining

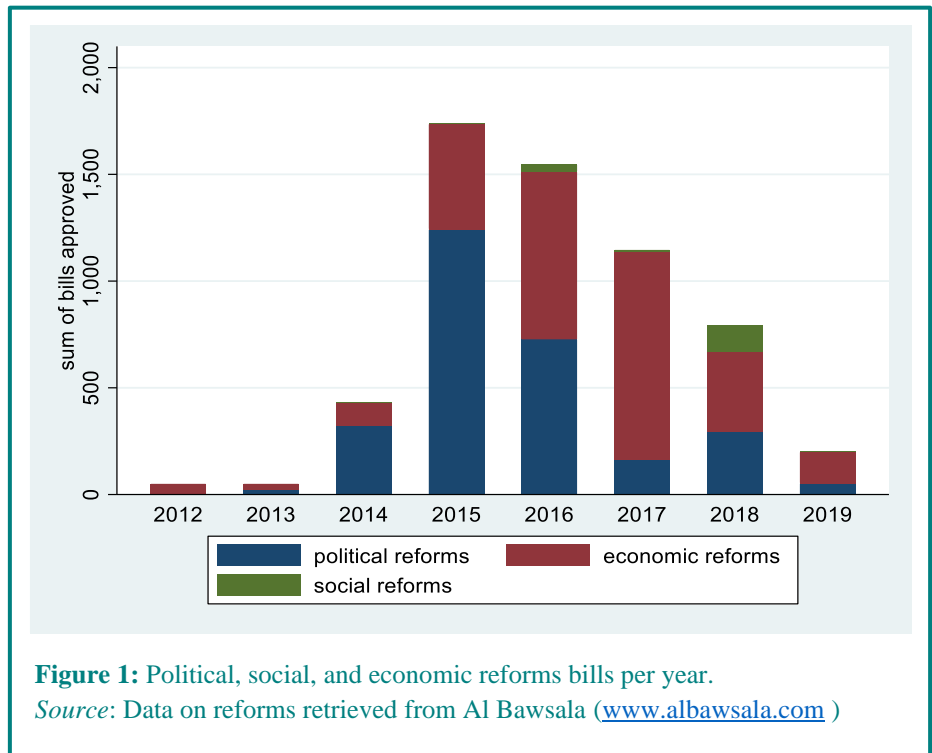
The distribution of power among actors following the consensus provided more weight to social institutions (in particular, UGTT and UTICA) than to political leaders. These organizations succeeded in placing their members within ministries, thereby gaining significant bargaining power within government. Additionally, the turnover within the government, resulting from an unstable coalition in parliament, did not give rulers adequate time to formulate a complete vision and plan reforms—which affected their negotiating power and their ability to provide leadership in bringing about changes.

Table 1: Deterioration of economic indicators after the 2010 revolution.

<i>Economic indicators</i>	<i>Status in 2010</i>	<i>Status in 2016</i>	<i>Status in 2020 (Pandemic)</i>
Growth (%)	3%	1.10%	-7.30%
Public deficit (%GDP)	1%	5.70%	7.50%
Foreign debt (%GDP)	40%	55%	83.50%
Tourists (millions)	6.9	4.3	0.4
Exchange rate DT/Eur	1.4	2.2	3.2
Investment (%GDP)	24%	19%	18.50%
Unemployment (%)	13%	15.50%	16.20%
Employment creation (thousand)	78,000	-12,000	27,000

Source: National bureau of statistics INS, Tunisia: www.ins.tn

Despite its role in accelerating political reforms, the consensus failed to build the stable political coalition needed to boost the economic reform agenda. As a result, economic reform implementation followed a slow path³¹. The progress on the passing economic reforms declined after the consensus, but many political leaders still believed in, and called for, a consensual agreement to advance them³². Figure 1, shows that from 2016 (the year the Carthage agreement was signed) to 2017, the number of economic reform bills submitted to the parliament did increase considerably, but then rapidly declined.



One likely problem is the failure of the compensation process to offer any specific measures to compensate losers, especially the middle classes. Fiscal policy fell short in meeting redistribution pressure from the previous regime’s victims and losers. Proposed reform policies, such as pension reform, reducing the size of the public sector, and subsidies reduction, primarily affected the middle class. At the same time government-connected entrepreneurs and investors in the informal sectors had high rates of tax evasion, leading to a sentiment of injustice and inequality. The middle class, however, had the capacity to veto the reform process given its connections with civil society organizations such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT)³³. In addition, a social movement opposing structural adjustment reforms was developed, manifested by an increasing number of protests and banditry throughout the country.

The sequencing of reforms did nothing to help broaden political support for the most popular reforms such as open sky; the situation being even worse for reforms to dismantle monopolistic structures, such as port services, tobacco, and distribution. The hegemony of family businesses that dominated some activities impeded competition and innovation spillovers. There was no clear economic reform vision, nor sufficient resources. Despite efforts made to improve the coordination of reforms, there was no comprehensive methodology for prioritizing reforms based on their nature, size, contribution to state resources, job creation, and their trade-offs between long-term and short-term benefits.

Finally, for a variety of reasons, the consensus’ main political leadership failed to advance economic and social reform. The coordination processes established inside the parliament and the government failed to generate wider social discussion and failed to reduce uncertainty about the risks of long-term changes. The political alliance formed

31 For example, the progress rate of economic and institutional reforms amounted to 82 percent. Likewise, social reforms represented 13 percent of the total number of reforms, with a validation progress rate of 75 percent.

32 <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Society/13431225-ugtt-initiative-to>

33 Brumberg and Salem (2020, p114).

by Essebsi and Ghannouchi, as well as civil society organizations, were assembled to debate political reforms rather than economic ones³⁴.

Advancing economic reforms in Tunisia

Currently in Tunisia, the political elites are calling for a consensus on the main economic reforms³⁵. Their aim is to build a stable political coalition able to accelerate reform voting within parliament and enhance government implementation capacity. From a political economy perspective, such an agreement would need to include essential precautions for reform policy design.

First, economic consensus should strongly address the issue of subsidies eligibility and trade-offs. However, resources were used to compensate victims and losers from the Ben Ali era, and this has affected the current government's ability to compensate those who lose due to the proposed economic reforms.³⁶ It will be beneficial to broaden the base of representation in the discussion and gain public support from those who benefited from the transition, specifically people in vulnerable socioeconomic strata. It is also important to find unique mechanisms to support the middle class, as its members are the main losers in the economic transition³⁷. There are multiple ways to compensate the middle class, such as reducing taxation, targeting fiscal allocation, and compensating with in-kind transfers. It is necessary to study the implications of each step in the scenario and build trust between parties to help reduce the risk of uncertainty that each scenario presents for different stakeholders.

Second, unlike the political consensus, the economic consensus should create different processes of coordination and follow-up. In addition, policy scenarios should be based on transparent evaluation approaches that guide building and policies for reforms. The most important question is how to consult with different stakeholders while avoiding complicated procedures and lengthy processes. This can be quite technical, and specific skills for evaluation of public policies are needed. Many similar projects have been undertaken by the prime minister's office and are based on multidisciplinary task forces that prepare a vision-based transparent approach with clear KPIs in terms of cost and benefit evaluation.

Unfortunately, the current political deadlock affects the likelihood of preparing a new generation of leaders. The leaders responsible for reform implementation should have a good understanding of reform objectives, and the leadership skills to stimulate social dialogue with different partners. The consensus will be an opportunity to rebuild confidence in political leaders and give the government an opportunity to restructure the executive branch to increase efficiency in reform implementation.

Finally, how will sequencing and vision provide credibility in terms of achieving and meeting stakeholders' expectations in the long-term and short-term? Usually, it is more urgent to start with reforms that compensate the big losers to instill confidence and gain support. The consensus must rank the different steps, explain the rationality of the reform sequence, and give various stakeholders assurances to engage in the reform road map. For example, redrafting investment law requires prior reflection and an accompanying commitment to tax reform. Therefore, if investment law reform is a priority, then tax reform is also a priority given the importance of financial incentives for investment. Reforms of an institutional, regulatory, and orderly nature take priority given their nature. The role of institutions (and the regulatory environment) is fundamental to adopting, implementing, and translating sound policies into positive results. In the absence of such reforms, even sound policies do not have a chance of achieving

34 Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi,. (2021, p.17).

35 <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Society/13431225-ugtt-initiative-to>

36 According to the Tunisian National Bureau of statistics. The troika between 2011 and 2015 accepted a massive recruitment into the public sector. As a result, salaries rose by 23.18 percent during this period. Most of these recruitments concerned political prisoners.

37 Jouini *et al.* (2018).

the desired goals in the short, medium, or long-term perspectives.

Conclusion

The Carthage agreement has failed to build a political momentum to advance economic reforms. Unlike political reforms, this agreement failed to guarantee a targeted compensation process for potential socioeconomic groups of losers. It failed to set up a clear road map and vision-based transparent approach to sequence economic reforms based on contribution to state resources, job creation, and long-term versus short-term benefits. Finally, it eradicated leadership from the negotiation of economic reforms and the prioritization of the legislative agenda.

After six years, the increasing risk of the political transition being undermined, and the increasing paralysis of democratic institutions have encouraged president Kais Saied to resort to emergency powers under article 80 of the constitution. The current discussion to bring together different actors and advance economic reforms does, however, have the potential to create a new political leadership.

For the success of these negotiations, a number of obstacles need to be addressed. First, compensation subsidies to the middle class are a priority and mechanisms and programs to target losers from these strata will ease discussion about painful reforms particularly with social organizations. Second, sequencing should prioritize reforms that helps compensation mechanism to happen with respect to rationality of reform sequencing order. Third, any agreement should facilitate restructuring the executive branch toward enhancing implementation capacity. Finally, salient socioeconomic groups who benefited from compensation since 2011 should be part of these negotiation in order to gather political support for the new reform setting.

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