On the Situation in Tunisia

A new Tunisian government had essentially been formed by mid-November 2019, and Tunisians have high hopes for it. In October, former professor of law Kais Saied won the presidential election with a landslide victory. The incumbent President was born in 1958 and served as Secretary-General of the Tunisian Association of Constitutional Law. President Saied also served on the committee as a legal expert for the Arab League to amend its charter, and he is a former legal expert for the Arab Institute for Human Rights.

The Muslim democratic Ennahda Party proactively backed the independent candidate’s election campaign, and it later won 54 seats out of the chamber’s 217 in the parliamentary elections, becoming the largest party in legislature. As a result of these changes, Ennahda leader Rachid al-Ghannouchi was elected speaker of the Tunisian parliament, and around the same time his party associates announced that they would also be putting forward a candidate for the post of Prime Minister.

The newly elected President Kais, who is believed to be closely aligned with Ennahda, promises to achieve fair decentralized governance, end corruption and accelerate the country’s economic development.

On November 16, the President tasked former junior agriculture minister Habib Jemli with the formation of a new government. Jemli, an independent, is also believed to be a close friend of Ennahda. In the press however, other candidates were tipped to be the next prime minister, especially the current governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia, Marouane El Abassi, along with former Tunisian Minister of Development Fadhel Abdelkefi.

After the Tunisian Revolution brought an end to the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia endured eight hard years. The country had mainly relied on tourism and built more than 500 excellent coastal hotels, but this sector suffered severe setbacks due to terrorist attacks. The violence in neighboring Libya has done immense damage to Tunisia’s tourism industry, and the terrorist attacks in Tunisia have only exacerbated the situation. Against this backdrop, it is no mere coincidence that over 6 thousand Tunisians have travelled to join the illegal terrorist militants in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (DAESH). These people were qualified, they could not find work in Tunisia, and believed that the fight against the “infidels” in Syria or Iraq was jihad and would bring them happiness (a number of Western political scientists believe that Tunisians were the largest ethnic and national group represented in DAESH).

Since the fall of Ben Ali’s regime, there have been many changes of government and two new presidents elected by universal suffrage; Kais Saied is Tunisia’s third president to be sworn in after the revolution.

There are still many questions that have yet to be answered, but the big one is: will a new president who is closely aligned with the Islamist Ennahda Party be able to lead the Arab world’s most secular society and achieve rapid socio-economic development? The newly formed government cabinet is likely to provide a clear indication of the direction the Republic of Tunisia will be moving in, the first steps the new government takes will be particularly telling, and it will become clear whether Tunisia’s experience, with the democratic coexistence of secular and Islamic forces, is an example which other states in the Muslim world would want to follow.

Tunisians have pinned their hopes for improving the economic situation on the Nawara Development Project to develop a large natural gas field located in the South of the Tataouine Governorate (many Star Wars scenes were filmed there). On November 12 this year, the Tunisian Minister of Industry Slim Feriani said that this field would achieve an estimated daily production capacity of 2.7 million cubic meters by early 2020. This will boost Tunisia’s natural gas output by 50% overnight.
However, Béchir Ben Yahmed, editor-in-chief of the popular African magazine “Jeune Afrique” which he co-founded in Tunisia in 1960, believes that electing Rachid al-Ghannouchi speaker of the Tunisian parliament “will set the country back.” Due to the dominance of Ennahda Party, normal development may not be on the cards for Tunisia over the next few years, as the Tunisian Islamists have shown that they are unable to find a candidate among their own ranks who they could put forward to modernize Tunisia (the state’s debt has only doubled over the last 9 years).

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