

## What's Next for Tunisia?

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Tunisia's uprising enters its second week since Zine el-Abidine Ben-Ali's departure, but its direction has become unclear. Will Mohamed Ghannouchi's government stay in power, or will it become a short-lived episode in the old regime's demise?

The uncertainty reflects the fact that the uprising is a true people's movement. Tunisians agreed that Ben-Ali had to go. But no coherent opposition force has emerged to pose key demands and drive events.

Instead, a void opened up, into which stepped the self-described technocrats of the old regime who formed a government and offered their own reading of events. They readily confess that Ben-Ali's rule was undemocratic, but suggest that this can be changed and that they are the best-placed to do it.

The protesters, trade unions and opposition figures see things differently. In their eyes, the state is so flawed after decades of dictatorship that it needs to be dismantled and rebuilt rather than fixed, but not by the people who undermined and abused it in the first place.

However, their message is neither loud nor clear. The trade unions have flip-flopped by first agreeing to government representation and then withdrawing their ministers. Until now, no widely agreed list of demands has emerged that would provide a roadmap up to and beyond elections. Consequently, the various opposition forces seem disoriented, if not divided. While most Tunisians would be happy to see the old regime go completely, they are also afraid that things could get out of hand.

The lack of drive by the opposition forces has weakened the protest movement's sense of purpose. While all are demanding democratic presidential and parliamentary elections, the way to get there has not been outlined. Thorny challenges involved in untangling the country's constitutional makeup need to be resolved if a drift into anarchy is to be avoided.

Most importantly, the chicken-and-egg problem of transition needs to be resolved: Should reforms to create the context for genuinely democratic elections come first, or should elections be held quickly, even though the country's current laws are not fit for the purpose? The risk with the first route is that the opposition could lose momentum and give the old Parliament and other institutions too much of a role in the transition. The risk with the alternative is that the elections would be undermined by an undemocratic framework.

The specific Tunisian context must also be considered: The Poles had Lech Walesa and Solidarity, and the South Africans had Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, but Tunisia's opposition has no leading politician or party. This may be one reason why it seems to be looking at a timeframe of six months for elections, rather than six weeks. The opposition needs time to engage with the electorate.

Another difficulty concerns timing. According to the Constitution, the presidential election should be held by March 15. If the Constitution is ignored, it may imply that the legal framework has been abandoned,

which could create a legal and political vacuum. A woman cannot be a little bit pregnant and a constitution cannot be ignored just a little bit. Unfortunately the Constitution also stipulates that it cannot be amended in the interim period, though it does contain a provision on postponing elections “because of imminent danger.”

Finally, the opposition movement has not said much about the sequencing of elections. Even if the Constitution is overruled it may make sense to start with the presidential election, which can be organized more easily. A democratically elected president would then provide the legitimacy necessary to stabilize and consolidate the transition. However, in such a scenario there is a risk that as the only legitimately elected person in the country, the new president could turn into the next dictator.

There are no obvious answers to these difficult questions. But the various opposition forces need to address them urgently, otherwise the political space will be filled by others. A political vacuum also risks compelling the army into action. If the strength of the people’s movement is not channeled into political negotiations, its broad-based character is in danger of becoming a liability. It is time for the opposition forces to find a consensus on their demands and to make them — loud and clear.