

GLOBAL CHALLENGES
POWER SHARINGINNOVATIONS FOR
SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES**A YEAR OF CALM:
TUNISIA'S INDEPENDENT GOVERNMENT, 2014–2015**

Robert Joyce drafted this case based on interviews conducted in Tunis, Tunisia, in February 2016. Case published in March 2016.

This series highlights the governance challenges inherent in power-sharing arrangements, profiles adaptations that eased those challenges, and offers ideas about adaptations.

SYNOPSIS

In August 2013, two and a half years after a citizen uprising ousted a long-ruling dictator, Tunisia was at a tipping point. Following the assassination of a secularist politician—the second such killing that year—opposition parties demanded the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and the resignation of the interim government, a coalition led by the Islamist Ennahda party. Work on a new constitution stopped amid dueling street protests between the two blocs. In October, four civil society organizations intervened and mediated political talks between the two sides. Under the terms of the resulting deal, the assembly agreed to resume its work and to appoint a new prime minister to run the government. They chose a compromise candidate, Mehdi Jomaa, an incumbent minister of industry with proven managerial experience and no known political allegiances. Jomaa and his cabinet of businesspeople, civil servants, professors, and judges led the country to peaceful, credible elections in October 2014. His government walked a narrow line as it tried to lead government operations without an electoral mandate and to bridge the interests of the civil society mediators, Ennahda, and the secular parties. By the time he left power, Jomaa was one of the country's most popular leaders, and in 2015 the civil society leaders who had mediated the political talks won the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in crafting Tunisia's distinctive effort to navigate tensions and avoid political violence.

INTRODUCTION

On a July morning in 2013, Mohamed Brahmi, an opposition member of Tunisia's constituent assembly, left his home to go to work. On the street, an assassin on the back of a motorcycle opened fire. His murder, the second killing of an opposition politician in six months, marked a turning point in Tunisia's democratic transition.

The country had been in turbulence since January 2011, when Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, an autocrat who had ruled since 1987, stepped down amid widespread citizen protests backed by Tunisia's powerful labor union. In October 2011, after two interim governments had struggled to meet citizens' demands, Tunisians voted for a constituent assembly to act as a temporary parliament and draft a new constitution.

Ennahda, an Islamist political party, won a plurality of seats and led a coalition government on an interim basis. By late July 2013, public discontent with delays in delivering the constitution (although it was nearly done by that time), tensions over the role of religion in politics, and outrage over the two political assassinations had reignited protests.

Opposition assembly members formed a bloc called the National Salvation Front, boycotted the chamber, and appealed for the cabinet to resign and the assembly to dissolve. Progress on the constitution stalled. The Tunisian General Labor Union announced a general strike that grounded the country's economy for a day in the wake of the killing.¹ During August and September, opposition demonstrations dueled with Ennahda rallies for control of Tunis's streets.

Amid the turmoil, four civil society groups intervened to find a way out of the impasse: the labor union; the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Artisans—a kind of employers' association; the national Bar Association; and the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights. Later known as the Quartet, the four were well established within the country and had mediated among political leaders since the uprising began.

By October, the Quartet's shuttle talks among the political parties had made progress on a possible resolution of the conflict. The constitution had been near completion before Brahmi's assassination. Tensions instead centered on the fair conduct of future elections. Ennahda, the National Salvation Front opposition bloc, and the mediators signed a roadmap agreement that left the assembly in place to finish the constitution, set elections for late 2014, and stipulated that the current government would resign in favor of a cabinet led by an independent prime minister.²

Party leaders and mediators preferred an independent leader, as opposed to a shared government, because of a lack of trust between the two political sides and because of what some saw as successful precedent.

"We did not want to go back to political polarization, and a power-sharing government involves political polarization," said Abdessattar Ben Moussa, head of the human rights league, one of the mediating groups.

Also, some participants in the political talks saw the second interim government, led by former minister and parliamentary leader Beji Caid Essebsi, as an example to emulate. Essebsi had been a consensus choice for prime minister in 2011, but later founded the Nidaa Tounes party, which in 2013 led the opposition.

The road map agreement looked like a breakthrough, but difficult decisions remained.

THE CHALLENGE

After the deal was signed, the civil society groups continued to mediate talks among the 21 parties in the assembly as part of what was called “national dialogue.” The process, especially choosing the prime minister, proved to be a balancing act. The Ennahda-led coalition would step down only after a replacement government was in place.

The nominee for prime minister had to be independent and, along with the rest of the new cabinet, would be prohibited from running in the upcoming elections.

Given Tunisia’s political history, it would be difficult to find someone who was not tainted by involvement in the previous regime and yet was independent of the various current political parties, many of which were opposition movements under the dictatorship. Each side suspected the other would use the position to influence elections. Further, because the assembly had to approve the nominee, it was important that the candidate be popular not only with party leaders but with the rank and file as well.

Once selected, the new prime minister would face a number of additional tasks. High on the list would be the choice of a cabinet and the setting of priorities. For practical reasons, the road map left the size and makeup of the cabinet to the appointed prime minister. As with prior governments since 2011, the new prime minister along with the cabinet that that prime minister selected had to be confirmed as a team in an up or down vote. The prime minister could include politicians in the cabinet, but the understanding was that most of the nominees would be technocrats or be specialists in their respective fields.

The road map required the appointed government to hold elections by the end of 2014. It also called on the new prime minister to work on improving and stabilizing both the economy and security. However, it left the specifics of those two tasks to the new cabinet.

Because the government was unelected and would last for only one year, no one expected major policy initiatives from the appointed government. But the recent deterioration of public security as well as the country’s economic decline demanded action.³

The recent political assassinations had highlighted an increasing security threat. In addition to the targeted killings, Tunisia’s military and interior security forces had been combating militants along its borders with Algeria

and Libya.⁴ In August 2013, the military had begun a bombing campaign in the western mountains against armed groups that were believed to be a combination of Islamist extremists and criminal smugglers.⁵

The economic situation was precarious. The country's unemployment rate was close to 16% and gross domestic product (GDP) growth had slowed.⁶ In an attempt to address social discontent by increasing public spending, Tunisia's post-2011 uprising governments had run unsustainable deficits: 4.5% of GDP in 2013. Total government debt was 44% of GDP—lower than the debts of Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco but higher than Algeria's.⁷ Further, international lenders had signaled an unwillingness to continue to lend to Tunisia amid the country's political instability.

To combat security and economic challenges and prepare the country for elections, the members of the new cabinet would have to collaborate closely. Given the unique circumstances, however, they would have no experience in working together and could have different ideas on how to best govern the country. The new cabinet would inherit structures and practices to facilitate coordination, but it had flexibility to adapt the system and improve on it.

Accountability presented another potential challenge. Both the assembly and the public would demand progress toward elections and steady management of the country's affairs. The prohibition on the cabinet ministers' right to run in coming elections meant it was more likely that each would focus on the task at hand rather than enhance personal political stock, but it also removed an important performance incentive. The new prime minister would need a method for monitoring each minister's contribution and for taking action if progress slowed.

The assembly, as well as continued national dialogue talks, would serve to keep the government accountable to its road map commitments. To interact with the assembly and political leaders, the new prime minister would have to develop strong communication strategies. The independence of the new leader meant that he or she would have no political party to lean on for support. The government would have to rely on clear explanations to defend its actions. And as the months of protests had showed, the public's patience had worn thin.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

The national dialogue talks had reached agreement on a few principles that would guide the new cabinet. First, its leader, a new interim prime minister, should emerge from a consensus among the parties, mediated by the four civil society groups. The president would convey the name to the assembly for approval. Within two weeks of the appointment, the prime minister would present a cabinet, and the assembly would approve or disapprove the whole list or slate—in the same process Tunisia's two prior governments since 2011 had gone through. Adoption required a majority

vote. The number of positions in the cabinet was at the discretion of the prime minister.

After taking office, the government would act under the same provisional regulations that had been in force since the 2011 elections. The government would have to submit a budget and any major reforms to the assembly for approval. However, given the limited time frame and unique purpose of the independent cabinet, political leaders did not expect major initiatives. Instead, the road map specified that the government work on ensuring elections took place on time and in a secure, credible environment by countering Tunisia's security threats and improving the economy. But those mandates, except for elections, were broad. It was up to a new government to thread the needle between acting beyond its mandate and doing too little to respond to the nation's challenges.

The assembly would be the new prime minister's main mechanism of accountability. Under the existing rules, the assembly could, with a simple majority vote, expel the prime minister or any member of the prime minister's cabinet. Likewise, the assembly could compel a minister to appear for questioning broadcast live on national television. Although the leaders of the political parties represented in the assembly would choose the new prime minister, assembly members had in the past defied party leaders' wishes.

National dialogue would also continue. The talks centered mainly on the rules and conditions for upcoming elections, reflecting the priority of the political leaders, but they also served as a possible outlet to air frustrations with the new prime minister, who would be expected to attend.

After the signing of the road map agreement in October, the dialogue participants worked on identifying possible candidates for the prime minister position and choosing among them. They agreed to use a consensus decision rule, which required everyone's approval.

Mediators first suggested that each of the 21 parties present at the talks suggest names.⁸ By late October, the group had a list of 17 possibilities—among them, older, well-respected politicians, public finance officials, security officials, and judicial figures.⁹ Eventually, after consensus-seeking discussions failed to settle on one candidate, mediators asked party representatives to veto the names on the list that were unacceptable to them. "The meetings were long, and by the end, we were exhausted; so we said this should be settled," Ben Moussa of the human rights league said. "So we said, whoever you object to, we'll eliminate [from consideration]."

After each party exercised its veto, the participants and mediators were left with a handful of leading candidates. Three candidates emerged as favorites—all of them popular political figures from before Ben Ali's time—but they were quickly cast aside in part because of their ages, which ranged from 79 to 92. Progress was slow.

In December, Mehdi Jomaa, minister of industry and energy, emerged as a possible nominee. Jomaa, a 51-year-old engineer and former executive at

Total, a French energy company, had no party affiliation. When the parties voted again, Jomaa's name attracted 11 votes, beating a former interim finance minister, who received 9. One opposition party did not vote.¹⁰

Given the close result, even a "sufficient consensus" appeared remote. Eventually, Nidaa Tounes and the leftist Popular Front party, the most powerful groups in the opposition, agreed to allow Jomaa's name to go forward. "We decided unanimity was impossible to have," said Kais Sellami, who was on the executive board of the employers' association.

Nidaa Tounes representative Mustapha Ben Ahmed said his party and others accepted the result because "there was no other alternative and no other mechanism, and the trust crisis was very acute." Besides, Ben Ahmed said, the party did not consider Jomaa to be a threat. "He [Jomaa] was not a prominent or well-known politician, nor did he enjoy sufficient popularity to take decisions outside of the road map."

On December 14, the secretary-general of the labor union announced the parties' decision.

"The choice was hard, but it was the only choice," said Ben Moussa. "If we had failed in selecting a prime minister, everything would have been over, there would have been a vacuum, and a civil war would have followed . . . we said to the parties, 'if you don't accept the outcome of dialogue and remain at war, after the country becomes a wreck, you will come back and find nothing to rule.'"

Ben Ahmed suggested that Nidaa Tounes, like Ennahda, was influenced by events elsewhere in the region. "Fear dominated all the members of the national dialogue. [We were afraid of] sliding into what was happening in Libya, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen. That scenario drove everyone to making compromises."

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Because Jomaa was not as well-known as other candidates, his selection as prime minister designate surprised many. He had left Tunisia in the late 1980s to pursue further education in engineering and business. For 25 years, he had worked at Hutchinson Aerospace & Industry, part of the Total group, rising to a senior management position. In early 2013, Jomaa joined the government as minister of industry and energy as part of a new group of technocrats brought in to end the political crisis after an earlier, February 2013 assassination of a secular politician.¹¹ He did not have prior experience in politics, although his brother and sometime adviser Ghazi Jomaa was an ambassador.

In December, the dialogue settled on Jomaa as its choice. And in early January 2014, President Mohamed Moncef Marzouki, who held a mainly ceremonial role, formally charged Jomaa with forming a government. But Jomaa would not be prime minister until he presented his plan and his cabinet to the assembly for approval.

As soon as dialogue participants announced Jomaa as their choice, he began to set his policy priorities and recruit his cabinet. He knew elections would have to occur by the end of the year, giving him about a year in office.

In the opening weeks, Jomaa relied on a small team of staff members—all of them people he knew well—and the team expanded as Jomaa recruited new ministers.

Setting priorities

Jomaa had to act quickly to develop a plan for his government. “I was aware that the economic situation was very difficult,” he said. “The way the economy had been led was not good. I was aware that we needed transformation. We needed reforms. I wanted to take advantage of my term in office to start.”

Jomaa met with dozens of political leaders, civil society members, businesspeople, and finance and banking experts. He said the meetings had several purposes. First, he wanted to introduce himself to the country’s elite. Although Jomaa had served in his predecessor’s cabinet, he had lived outside Tunisia for 25 years and was unknown to most civil society members and politicians. Second, he sought to reassure people that he intended to follow the road map agreement—especially with regard to ensuring elections. Finally, Jomaa sought a clear sense of what was important to the diverse political and social leaders whose support he would need.

“I met something like 50 people—political and social personalities,” Jomaa said, describing the days and weeks following his nomination. He said they gave him a clear sense of expectations.

Conducting elections by the end of 2014 in a secure, stable environment was the politicians’ top concern. “The most important condition was that the prime minister continue the democratic transition and not disrupt it,” said Abdelhamid Jlassi, a vice president of Ennahda.

Jomaa and aides from the ministry of industry compiled notes from the meetings into a document Jomaa later gave his cabinet members, according to Hakim Ben Hammouda, who became Jomaa’s finance minister.

Ben Hammouda said the combination of limited time and Jomaa’s restricted mandate as an unelected prime minister made a full-fledged platform or short-term strategy document unnecessary. Instead, Jomaa and his advisers focused on writing the speech he would make to the National Constituent Assembly when presenting his cabinet and his plan for government.

Tawfik Jelassi, who became minister of higher education and information technology, said the nationally televised address represented an important moment for Jomaa. “The whole country was going to get to know him,” he said.

Jomaa and his small team worked through most of January on multiple drafts of the speech while recruiting cabinet members. When he spoke to the

assembly at month's end, he followed the broad outlines of the road map agreement, focusing on elections, security, and the economy. Jomaa's first priority, he said, was to ensure a secure environment for elections, which he pledged would be on time, fair, and transparent.

On the economy, he said public spending in the years since the revolution had been too high and that he would have to cut the budget—in addition to making public institutions more efficient, developing interior regions, and creating jobs.

To clarify and measure progress on the goals Jomaa presented to the country, IWatch, a non-governmental transparency organization affiliated with Transparency International, launched what it called the "Jomaa Meter." The meter used what the organization said were 29 promises (later expanded to 32) Jomaa made in his address to the assembly and in later remarks.

Regarding elections, IWatch listed six pledges, including reviewing appointments made by the previous Ennahda-led governments, organizing polls, strengthening civil society, and maintaining distance between his government and all political parties.

IWatch listed four security goals, including keeping Tunisia safe for elections, protecting electoral candidates, and investigating the two political assassinations.

On the economy, Jomaa said that public spending in the years since the revolution had been too high and that he would have to cut the budget and make public institutions more efficient. IWatch listed 22 economic targets ranging from the broad—fighting poverty and creating jobs—to the specific—passing a supplementary budget.

Picking a cabinet

To identify potential ministers, Jomaa said he sought recommendations from politicians, civil society members, businesspeople, and government officials. He and his advisers vetted the names, seeking to avoid politicians or candidates any specific group might object to. They also considered possible candidates from among people who led organizations and had technical expertise, with a special emphasis on educational qualifications, management skills, and ability to work as a team. Jomaa said he interviewed 300 people to fill about 30 positions.¹²

In most parliamentary governments, a new prime minister draws on ministers from his or her political party or coalition. Because he was not a leader of a political party and had not been elected, Jomaa had to recruit differently. Officially, the national dialogue had set no firm rules. "We advised him to focus on independent personalities," Ben Moussa said.

Jomaa said the mediators sought to influence some of his choices. "They'll tell you they don't want to interfere, but they push."

To pick a cabinet, Jomaa used some of the same methods he had learned in the private sector. "I was used to recruiting," he said. "I had been in charge

of companies in the United States, China, Germany, Spain, Great Britain, France, and Tunisia. I was used to working with people I don't know and in an environment I don't know.

"I looked between the lines in the [curriculum vitae]. The personality is important as well," Jomaa said. "It's a small team, but I was expecting a lot from them."

In late January, he announced his selections for 21 ministers and seven secretaries of state, who worked on specific topics and reported to a minister. Jomaa combined portfolios to cut two positions from his predecessor's government when he thought one of his ministers could handle two roles. For example, because Jelassi had a career in technology and had been a dean of a university business management program, he took on both higher education and information technology.

The group Jomaa selected was a mix of career civil servants, judges, scholars, and Tunisians who had worked abroad in the private sector and nongovernmental organizations. His finance minister, Ben Hammouda, had most recently served as an adviser at the African Development Bank. His minister of defense, Ghazi Jeribi, had been an administrative court judge. Jomaa appointed Nidhal Ouerfelli, who had worked with him at the ministry of industry, his economic coordination minister.

Jomaa decided to keep Lotfi Ben Jeddou as minister of interior, a post that controlled security and coordinated with the country's provinces and municipalities. Ben Jeddou was the only holdover from the previous cabinet besides Jomaa himself. Although the choice to retain an Ennahda pick in an important ministry raised some complaints, Jomaa argued that Tunisia's tenuous security situation required continuity in the position. Later he explained that there was an important security operation in play at the time he had to announce his cabinet appointments. (Days after Jomaa took office, police killed seven suspected militants, including the man wanted for both 2013 political assassinations.¹³)

Accepting a cabinet post in Jomaa's short-term government was not an easy decision. Most nominees barely knew the newly designated prime minister. Several had been working abroad, and positions in government often paid less than those in the private sector. Personal and family considerations also figured into the decision in the wake of two major political assassinations. Jomaa could empathize. He was married and had five children who remained in France for most of his time in government.

After they agreed to join the government, the nominees received a set of objectives Jomaa and his staff had devised. The minister of employment, for example, was to reduce unemployment by one percentage point, he said. The finance minister was to propose changes to policies related to taxes, tariffs, and subsidies. After taking office, the ministers worked on developing or refining their own objectives and action plans, in coordination with the prime minister and their peers.

Securing assembly approval

Before Jomaa announced his cabinet nominations—and even before the assembly had voted on whether to approve him as prime minister—he raised the ire of some legislators by demanding greater job security for his ministers. The provisional rules for the interim government and National Constituent Assembly, which were devised after 2011, stipulated that the assembly could expel an individual minister with a simple majority vote. Aware of the body's sometimes mercurial mood, Jomaa wanted the requirement raised to two-thirds.¹⁴

Jomaa said he suspected his move caught the politicians off guard. The elected officials thought that it was such an honor to be the prime minister that the person who held the job would accept whatever demands the assembly or the parties made, he said. He said he was different. "I didn't want the prestige." He did not hesitate to bargain hard for changes he considered important.

The assembly did not respond well to what some members saw as a challenge to its prerogative. Mehrezia Labidi, deputy speaker of the assembly and an Ennahda representative, recalled assembly members asking, "What does it say when we need only a simple majority to vote this government in, but to withdraw confidence, we need two-thirds?"

"For two days it was hard," Jomaa said. "[I faced] pressure from the politicians, from the national dialogue, from the Quartet," which either wanted to make it easier for the assembly to exert control and check the executive branch—or simply wanted to move the process along.

In the end, Jomaa got most of what he wanted, as a compromise agreement set 60% as the required vote to expel a minister.

After this initial skirmish, the assembly moved to the contentious decision on whether to approve Jomaa and his proposed cabinet.

Labidi worked to ensure the assembly would approve Jomaa's government—in keeping with the agreement the party had made in national dialogue. "I had an assembly with 65 or 70 [of 216] ready to vote in favor, but the rest, the majority, were reluctant. They were looking for reasons not to vote for this government."

Opposition parties did not want to accept Jomaa's decision to retain Ben Jeddou, who had served as interior minister in the previous, Ennahda-led coalition government.

To ease tensions, Jomaa appointed Ridha Sfar to serve as deputy minister of security. Sfar had had a long career in the ministry of interior and had worked with Arab governments on improving security policies. He reported both to interior minister Ben Jeddou and to Jomaa. Given Sfar's credibility, the appointment made Ben Jeddou more palatable to the opposition parties.

Delegates from many parties also objected to Jomaa's tourism minister, Amel Karboul, who had indicated she had traveled to Israel, a political third rail in Tunisia and most Arab countries. Jomaa refused her offer to step aside,¹⁵ unwilling to bow to pressure.

In the end, the assembly members present approved Jomaa's proposed government on January 29 by a vote of 149 to 20 out of 216; 24 members abstained.¹⁶

Labidi recalled that members were aware of the pressure coming from international lenders to approve a new government and move ahead with the transition process. "We had a very difficult situation in the country," Labidi said. "If we didn't vote for the [new] government, it would have been very bad . . . , especially since the [International Monetary Fund, (IMF)] the World Bank, Europe, and the United States all said, 'No new government, no funds.'"

Cabinet coordination and monitoring

When Jomaa and his cabinet members took office, few of them had worked together before. To help his team members get to know one another and create an environment that encouraged collaboration, Jomaa created opportunities for informal interaction.

"Sometimes I wanted to speak to my team," Jomaa said. "Not as the council of ministers, but as my team. I separated it. I didn't speak to them in the same way."

Karboul, who had started a management consulting firm before taking the tourism post, organized dinners and weekend meetings. The group spent one weekend on a military compound with soldiers.

"We had to get to know one other because we had come from the four corners of the world," said Hedi Larbi, minister of infrastructure, housing, and sustainable development.

At a formal level, Jomaa had inherited a cabinet coordination system long in place in Tunisia. There were three types of formal meetings among ministers, each of them designed to achieve a slightly different function.

First were meetings among ministers who wanted to check in with one another on the status of particular projects or to ask for assistance or advice from colleagues. Jomaa did not attend these interministerial gatherings, which were led by either Ouerfelli, who as economic coordination minister often served as Jomaa's stand-in, or Ridha Abdelhafidh, the secretary general of the government and the top ranked civil servant in the prime minister's office.

When specific goals or policy choices had significant political, budgetary, or social implications, Jomaa chaired "restricted" meetings of the specific ministers involved.

Finally, the full cabinet convened about once a month and for roughly two hours at a time. They focused on top-level policy decisions, legislative proposals, and major strategic matters.

Outsiders provided grist for decision-making. For example, the governor of the Central Bank attended some of the meetings on economic reform, and managers of public companies or agencies might attend sessions relevant to their sectors.

The prime minister's office split the responsibilities often associated with a chief of staff among three people, who acted as a steering committee. One, the secretary general of the government, handled staffing, budgetary, and bureaucratic matters within the prime minister's office. A second, the cabinet director, led a team of handpicked advisors to the prime minister. They and the minister of economic coordination set agendas for the roughly 15 inter-ministerial and restricted cabinet meetings that took place each week. The three also monitored the progress of ministers in achieving the goals Jomaa had set out.

Each minister submitted monthly reports that described progress and any actions taken during the previous 30 days, mentioned problems or obstacles, and outlined plans for moving forward. Jomaa's steering committee reviewed the reports and met with people involved to discuss obstacles and find solutions.

Informal connections also played an important role in the success of the cabinet. Karboul said that although formal meetings anchored collaboration, many smaller issues could be resolved with a quick phone call, SMS message, or email to a colleague.

"I wouldn't hesitate to pick up the phone and call my colleague, the minister," said Larbi, minister of infrastructure, housing, and sustainable development. "The coordination was really seamless."

Disagreements were inevitable. When the three-person steering group in his office could not resolve an issue, the group involved the prime minister himself. Jomaa said he made sure his weeks were never fully booked so that he could allow for flexibility and emergency meetings.

Jomaa encouraged his cabinet members to debate with one other. "Jomaa opened the space to questioning," said Larbi. "It was really a debate . . . On a number of occasions, in the mind of the minister bringing up the issue, it was a done deal. But it wasn't, and that minister would have to go back and do some homework."

For example, there was considerable disagreement about fiscal policy with regard to the extent of subsidy cuts and tax collection and the speed of institutional change within public administration.

Jomaa kept the differences of opinion within bounds. "It's interesting when you have two different schools of thought, but you have to prevent its being two different clans," he said.

Improving security coordination

Ensuring safe elections required a strong security presence. Tunisia's constitution split control of the military between the president and the prime

minister. The president set broad strategic aims and made high-level appointments, drawing on the prime minister's advice, and the prime minister handled operational responsibilities.

To address persistent threats from militant attacks and create a shared sense of ownership on security concerns, Jomaa organized a crisis or security task force that brought together the ministers of defense, interior, justice, and foreign affairs. Other ministers attended to discuss specific issues, and senior ministry officials attended to provide technical expertise.

Sfar said the task force created "a horizontal culture of decision making" that helped reduce a silo mentality in which ministries often failed to communicate with one another on sensitive security issues. The group met as needed, usually at least once or twice a month, said Ghazi Jeribi. Jomaa presided over each meeting.

Before each meeting, the ministers of defense and interior along with their top staff members met to set the agenda and to consolidate their recommendations. Jomaa and his ministers also worked to improve coordination within ministries. For example, within the ministry of interior, commanders of the national police force, civil protection forces, and national guard began to meet to consolidate their strategies and ongoing operations, Sfar said. He also said the interior ministry also set up a center for intelligence analysis to process information from the national police, national guard, military, and customs agents.

Finally, at the field level, the ministries of defense and interior developed a unified command structure for border and rural regions and placed it under the leadership of a military commander so as to improve local defenses against militant attacks and enhance operational coordination.

As elections approached, task force meetings focused on protecting polling locations. Police and military forces stepped up raids on militant targets in the weeks before the October elections. On the day of legislative elections, police and security forces deployed more than 80,000 personnel around the country to protect voters.¹⁷

Preparing the country for elections

From the moment of Jomaa's appointment in late January, his first priority was to ensure elections would take place by the end of 2014. In addition to security, the government was responsible for providing administrative support to the Independent High Authority for Elections (L'Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections, or ISIE), usually in the form of space to work and logistical arrangements for polling places. The elections authority was responsible for managing and planning the elections.

A major part of Jomaa's responsibility for building credible elections was to remove problematic public officials appointed under the Ennahda-led coalition government. In national dialogue talks, Ennahda had agreed that the new independent government would review political appointees, which

included regional governors and civil servants. Opposition parties had accused Ennahda of packing the civil service with political allies in an effort to use their positions to their advantage in polls.

In February, barely a month into office, Jomaa replaced 18 of 24 governors the Ennahda-led government had appointed.¹⁸ During his year in office, Jomaa also replaced civil servants throughout the administration and drew up new guidelines on the neutrality of public employees.

Anouar Ben Khelifa, Jomaa's secretary of state for governance, said the government made decisions on whether or not to replace an appointee based on that individual's performance. "Everyone has a right to have a political preference, but it shouldn't be mixed with official duties," he said. Ben Khelifa said each minister made personnel decisions for his or her ministry rather than on a centralized basis.

Ennahda did not object to the reviews and dismissals. Ennahda vice president Jlassi said the party understood that the moves were necessary to ensure credible elections, which constituted the party's main objective. Jlassi explained that the party knew that giving in might cost it support among hard-liners but that leaders hoped it would also win moderates' trust. At the time, the party was urging Jomaa to review each candidate based on the candidate's qualifications rather than potential political leanings.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

At the start of his mandate, Jomaa enjoyed the support or tacit approval of Tunisia's most-powerful political parties and their representatives in the assembly. But the honeymoon did not last.

Some assembly members objected to the concept of an unelected government altogether, said Lobna Jeribi (no relation to the defense minister), an assembly member with Ettakatol, formerly part of the ruling Ennahda coalition. Jomaa and his ministers also were vulnerable to criticism on policy issues. The political inexperience of his team, along with the difficult decisions he had to make on the economy—especially regarding international loans and subsidy cuts—were liabilities.

Jomaa faced resistance to the subsidy cuts and international loans he said were necessary to keep Tunisia's economy afloat. In early March, he announced his intention to seek up to \$2.5 billion in loans and his plan to freeze public hiring.¹⁹ In May, the government announced cuts to fuel, bread, and sugar subsidies.²⁰

To mitigate objections from the Popular Front, Jomaa launched what he called economic national dialogue. The talks brought together party representatives, businesspeople, and government officials to discuss how to grow the economy and best reduce public spending without hurting the poor. Lobna Jeribi, who represented Ettakatol at the talks and was on the finance committee, said the talks were opportunities for assembly members to come to agreement with the government.

To build broader support for his economic agenda, Jomaa dispatched Ben Hammouda, his finance minister, to radio and TV shows as well as opinion pages. Ben Hammouda also regularly met with the assembly's finance committee to work on tax, banking, and customs laws the government had proposed. Labidi of Ennahda said the finance minister's communication skills helped ease opposition.

Ben Hammouda worked with his own staff to improve communication skills and better prepare them to explain the ministry's policies to assembly members and the public. He said he told them, "The time of Ben Ali is over. Now we need to explain our work."

At the same time, Jomaa faced criticism from some leaders of the UGTT labor union, which sought higher wages for its public and private sector members. Jomaa told union leaders that the public deficit was too high to consider public sector wage increases, and the UGTT agreed to shelve the discussion for the time being, according to Jomaa and a union leader.

Tunisia already had a high level of public debt. Despite the budget cuts, public debt continued to rise to 50% of GDP in 2014 from 44% in 2013, according to IMF figures.²¹ Without the time to carry out structural changes, Jomaa's cabinet ministers had to defend reliance on loans to support government activity.

"The reality is that you have a large fiscal deficit," said Larbi, the former World Bank official and minister of infrastructure, housing, and sustainable development. "You need to pay salaries and other expenses at the end of the month, and if you don't have money there is no way other than to borrow money." Loans from multilateral organizations like the IMF and the World Bank had lower interest rates than rates from private lenders, but repayment still placed a heavy burden on future governments.

To generate economic activity, the government wanted to increase tourism, but the assembly soon demonstrated that not all visitors would be welcome in Tunisia. In April 2014, 81 assembly members filed a motion of no-confidence against Karboul, the tourism minister, and Sfar, the deputy minister for security, whose portfolio included tourist visas. The motion claimed that the two ministers had allowed Israelis to perform an annual pilgrimage to a Tunisian synagogue,²² a move that the assembly members said represented an unauthorized and extremely unpopular move toward normalizing relations between the countries. The assembly members, including Ennahda representatives, demanded that Karboul and Sfar appear for questioning.

Jomaa sought to defuse the situation. In publicized statements, he explained that the policy meant only to boost the economy and did not reflect any decision involving relations with Israel.²³ The assembly members withdrew their motion after lampooning Karboul and Sfar in front of television cameras.

ASSESSING RESULTS

Jomaa's ministers, political party leaders, and the civil society mediators agreed that the most important metric to judge the success of the prime minister's government was the credibility and timeliness of the October 2014 elections. "It wasn't expected of him or of his government to find solutions to Tunisia's problems," Labidi said.

International and domestic observers credited Jomaa's government with providing a stable environment for the vote. The U.S.-based Carter Center, in its final report on the 2014–15 legislative and presidential elections, said, "The campaign environment remained relatively calm for all three elections in spite of persistent security threats."²⁴

Nidaa Tounes won the October parliamentary polls, with 38% of the vote; Ennahda came in second, with 28%. In February 2015, the two parties joined with two smaller parties to form a so-called national unity government. The decision to unite came after Nidaa Tounes had tried and failed to form a government without Ennahda.

Sfar said the successful election would have been impossible without improved coordination among security forces. "The fact that the elections were peaceful doesn't mean the terrorists didn't try," he said.

Tunisia's general security situation and economy also stabilized under Jomaa's government—although meaningful gains were limited. Of the 32 promises IWATCH tallied, it credited Jomaa with achieving 9 of them, with another 12 in progress. Jomaa scored best on elections and security and worst on the economy—where, the organization said, Jomaa fell short on a number of reforms.

While attacks on security forces continued during Jomaa's time in office, the country was spared from more political killings or large-scale attacks on civilians. In October, Jomaa told Reuters news service that security forces had arrested 1,500 militant suspects in 2014 in an effort to prevent violence during that month's voting.²⁵

The government's economic policies, combined with the road map, and progress on a new constitution helped rekindle donor confidence in Tunisia. The IMF, the World Bank, the US government, and the European Union all made or continued to dispense loans and guarantees to Tunisia. The money enabled the government to continue to work smoothly, without which elections or security would have been impossible.

The government passed a supplementary budget with the assembly in 2014 and worked with the new parliament to pass the 2015 budget.²⁶ The ministry of finance also submitted draft laws on tax collection reform, public bank recapitalization, and customs reform.

Reflecting IWATCH's findings, citizen confidence in the economy remained low. One poll toward the end of Jomaa's term found that 80% of respondents considered the economy very bad or somewhat bad.²⁷ GDP growth was similar in 2014 to the previous year, as was unemployment. The

public deficit, however, shrank to 3.4% of GDP in 2014 from 4.5% in 2013, according to IMF figures.²⁸

Politicians and observers said they did not expect significant progress on policy reforms from the Jomaa government. “The Jomaa’s government’s goal was elections,” said assembly member Lobna Jeribi. “All the socioeconomic roles and reforms were pluses. The context was difficult.”

Jomaa’s team worked well together despite coming from a variety of backgrounds. Ministers in Jomaa’s government had a stronger sense of camaraderie, Secretary General Abdelhafidh said, citing the numerous team-building exercises. Although the new post of economic coordination minister helped improve collaboration, the position was abolished by Jomaa’s successor.

Finally, Jomaa and the civil society mediators who mediated national dialogue talks enjoyed wide domestic support and international praise. Jomaa himself was very popular, even if economic performance during his term was not. In October 2014, a poll by the US Pew Research Center found 81% of Tunisians had a positive view of the prime minister.²⁹

In October 2015, the four civil society mediator organizations—the Quartet—won the Nobel Peace Prize for “decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.”

REFLECTIONS

Using a caretaker government as a way to get out of a political stalemate in a democratic system created a paradox for Tunisia. On the one hand, the independent government helped prevent a descent into violence and ensured elections. On the other hand, the government was antidemocratic in key respects—most notably in the way in which the prime minister was selected.

The Quartet of civil society groups facilitated the replacement of ministers either from or selected by popularly elected members of political parties with unelected, relatively unknown technocrats. Coming at a time when political and civil society leaders were working to build public trust in democracy, the potential ramifications were worrisome.

A poll by Pew Research Center in October 2014 indicated the public’s faith in elected government declined during Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa’s brief term. The same poll that gave Jomaa a high approval rating also showed that a troubling 59% of respondents thought the country “should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve our country’s problems”—up 19% in one year. Only 38% of respondents said the same thing about a “democratic form of government”—down 15% in the same period.³⁰

Meherzia Labidi, deputy speaker of the National Constituent Assembly and a leader of the ruling Ennahda party, pointed to the irony: “People voted for political parties and then let a guy who wasn’t elected at all run the country.”

The Norwegian Nobel committee glossed over the apparent contradiction. The committee said it hoped that the 2015 Peace Prize awarded to the Quartet would “contribute towards safeguarding democracy,” judging the government and the process that had created it important for sustaining openness and participation.

Of course, stalled economic progress and public disappointment following the 2011 uprising go a long way toward explaining discontent. Also, the national dialogue process and the installation of Jomaa’s government had not been entirely antidemocratic. Jomaa had been a minister. And most important, the elected constituent assembly had voted to approve the new government. Keeping the assembly in place to finish the constitution and then check the government’s authority turned out to be a key element of the solution.

Installed without an electoral mandate, Jomaa still was subject to institutional checks and balances—possibly to an even greater degree than most governments. Without a political party affiliation, he had to treat nearly every assembly member as an opposition politician whose support he had to win. He also had to listen to political and civil society leaders because he continued to depend on their negotiating skills to ease tensions at critical times. It was important for him to avoid being seen as serving any one particular interest and that he maintain his independence. Jomaa said the key was to “be flexible but keep in mind that you will be accountable.”

The mediators, for their part, did not see any paradox between national dialogue and democracy. “We considered that we could be the voice of the citizens,” said Kais Sellami of the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Artisans.

The incentive to act came partly in response to violence in the surrounding region. After two political assassinations in less than one year, months of protests, and deadlock at the National Constituent Assembly, the mediators—and political leaders—thought their country could dissolve into conflict.

“We didn’t want violence,” said Lobna Jeribi, an assembly representative and member of Ettakatol, which was part of the governing coalition. “The timing here was important because we saw what happened when the Islamists were not in a coalition and what led to the Egyptian scenario.” (In early July 2013, the Egyptian army overthrew President Mohamed Morsi, an Islamist, as citizens protested against his rule.)

Context also influenced the way the decision to use a caretaker government emerged. Unlike some of the other countries that have installed this type of interim government, Tunisia had a strong and active civil society. And the more centralized structure of its labor and business federations helped those groups play the roles they did.

The Tunisian General Labor Union (l’Union générale tunisienne du travail, or UGTT) in particular had a long history of political activism

stretching back before Tunisia's independence and giving the group credibility.³¹ The union "had an important role in the opposition during the dictatorship. It was the only counterpower," said Lobna Jeribi. "The specificity of this democratic transition is the power of the union."

The close-knit community of Tunisia's political elite and the—mostly—shared experience of opposing the successive dictatorships of Habib Bourguiba (1957-87) and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) also helped facilitate dialogue. Hakim Ben Hammouda, who served as Jomaa's finance minister, explained that he knew many of Tunisia's political leaders from his years as a pro-democracy activist. Leftists and Islamists collaborated during those demonstrations and often suffered similar punishments. In 2010-11, the sides came together again to oust Ben Ali.

A similar sense of shared purpose existed among Tunisian expats and exiles who returned to their country. "Mehdi Jomaa, [then independent prime minister], and I belong to the same generation, and both of us were in France. We came to Tunisia convinced that we could be useful to our country," said Labidi. "That link was important in building trust between him and me, and I can tell you we kept that mutual esteem throughout his mandate."

At its core, the creation of Jomaa's independent caretaker government depended on the willingness of the governing coalition, led by the Islamist Ennahda party, to step aside. Although the party initially resisted, its leaders, many of whom had been jailed, tortured, and forced into exile, decided to play a long game. By ceding power at the time, they reasoned, they could preserve elections as a national institution and position themselves to win in the future.

"A political transition is no time to govern with a relative majority of 51%; it's a time for consensus," said Rached Ghannouchi, an Ennahda leader who was jailed and forced into exile, in an article published by the Guardian newspaper. "Power must be shared out to prevent a putsch, to defuse any idea of despotism and backtracking. It doesn't matter whether Ennahda comes first or second in the elections—what matters is that when I leave power I won't go to prison or into exile."³²

"To build democracy, we have sometimes to step away from democracy to reconcile ourselves," said Labidi, who also had lived in exile.

Even after losing the 2014 elections to its opponent—then coalition partner—Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda's leadership did not regret the choice to step down. "In politics there are no guarantees. At the end of the day, we got the country to elections," said Abdelhamid Jlassi, Ennahda's vice president. "In the context of 2013, given the results we got, I think Ennahda's stance was right."

TIMELINE

- Dec-10** Protests start in Tunisia's interior
- Jan-11** Autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali departs Tunisia
- Feb-11** Beji Caid Essebsi is appointed prime minister
- Oct-11** National Constituent Assembly elections are held
- Dec-11** Ennahda-led coalition government takes office
- Oct-12** Assembly's self-imposed one-year deadline expires
- Feb-13** Leftist leader Chokri Belaid is assassinated
- Mar-13** First Ennahda prime minister Hamidi Jebali steps down, and Ali Laarayedh takes office
- Jul-13** Leftist assembly member Mohamed Brahmi is assassinated
- Oct-13** Mediators and political party leaders sign road map agreement
- Jan-14** Assembly passes constitution, and independent prime minister Mehdi Jomaa takes office
- Oct to Dec-14** Parliamentary and presidential elections are held
- Feb-15** New elected government takes office, and Jomaa's cabinet steps down

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