

RAFIK HARIRI CENTER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

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AND **LARA TALVERDIAN**

Tunisia: From Elected Government to Effective Governance

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Introduction

Home of the Jasmine Revolution and the so-called Arab Spring, Tunisia is undergoing a transition that over the last four-and-a-half years has been nothing short of a roller coaster. The year 2013 saw two high-profile assassinations and intensified political polarization in Tunisia. A national dialogue, launched in the fall of that year, culminated in a peaceful transfer of power¹ and the adoption of a progressive constitution. In 2014, Tunisians successfully held parliamentary and presidential elections, ushering in their first fully elected government at the start of 2015.

After parliamentary and presidential elections in the fall of 2014, a new coalition government was approved in February 2015, comprising the secularist Nidaa Tounes, the Islamist Ennahda, and two smaller parties—Afek Tounes and the Free Patriotic Union (UPL). On the heels of these great strides, Tunisians face the challenges of governing. The diversified stakeholder landscape and competing policy priorities in the field of security and economic reforms are heavy lifts that will require strategic planning, consensus building, and assistance from the international community. The delicate political situation in Tunisia begs the question: what will it take for the country to transform elections and government formation into effective, productive governance?

Intertwined Challenges

Security. Tunisia's volatile regional neighborhood has contributed to the country's growing insecurity. There are low-intensity but persistent clashes between the army and jihadists along the border with Algeria, in the

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Mount Chaambi region. The situation is exacerbated by fears of spillover from growing lawlessness and intensifying conflict next door in Libya. Hundreds of thousands of Libyans have sought refuge in Tunisia,² and the largely unmonitored borders allow for unhindered movement of weapons, drugs, and extremists. Following the March 2015 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, it was reported that the assailants had received training in Libya,³ underscoring the fact that instability in Tunisia's immediate neighborhood can eventually have a direct impact on the capital.

Economy. The country's economic indicators since the 2011 revolution have not been promising. Foreign direct

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¹ The initial interim government was formed by the Troika, led by the Islamist Ennahda party and two smaller, secularist parties– Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic. The transfer of power was from the Troika to a technocratic government led by interim Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa.

² According to the Tunisian government, there are as many as 1.5 million Libyans in Tunisia, though other studies place the figure in the 300,000-400,000 range. The challenge in assessing the exact numbers is due in part to the fact that Libyans do not require visas to enter Tunisia. For more in-depth analyses on the Libyan crisis and its humanitarian impacts, see Brookings Doha Center, "Uprooted, Unprotected: Libya's Displacement Crisis," event transcript, Doha, Qatar, April 21, 2015, http://www.brookings. edu/~/media/events/2015/04/21-libya-displacement-crisis/ libya-transcript.pdf; and Brookings Institution, "An Overlooked Crisis: Humanitarian Consequences of the Conflict in Libya," event transcript, Washington, DC, April 24, 2015, http://www. brookings.edu/~/media/events/2015/04/24-libyacrisis/20150424_libya_humanitarian_transcript.pdf.

^{3 &}quot;Tunis Gunmen Trained with Libyan Militia, Says Security Chief," Guardian, March 20, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/ world/2015/mar/20/tunis-gunmen-trained-libyan-militiasecurity-chief-bardo-museum.

investment has dried up,⁴ and tourism has dwindled.⁵ Ongoing construction and development projects in Tunis and the outskirts, as well as crowded cafes and shops, convey a sense of movement and normalcy. However, this is not indicative of what is happening in much of the rest of the country, particularly in the neglected interior regions that rely heavily on black market trade. Intermittent efforts to shut down the border with Libya, in order to tighten security and prevent harmful elements from penetrating the Tunisian state, have spurred unrest, as communities that depend on the cross-border smuggling of fuel and other goods to survive find their livelihoods under threat.

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The oft-cited fact that Tunisians make up the largest number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq⁶ particularly highlights the probable linkages between the lack of economic opportunity and radicalization in the country. Tunisia boasts an educated middle class, but there are too few prospects to channel knowledge into productive work, creating a pool of idle potential recruits for whom the porous terrain of neighboring Libya provides a transit point. It remains to be seen whether the Tunisian government can muster the strength to undertake the necessary measures to address these challenges.

From National Dialogue to Coalition Government

In 2013, Tunisia was shaken by the assassinations of two prominent secular opposition leaders: Chokri Belaid in February and Mohamed Brahmi in June. Radical Islamists were suspected and detained. The violent shakeups occurred during the interim government period in which the Troika ruled Tunisia and agitated a public that had grown increasingly frustrated with Ennahda's leadership. The party was already facing harsh criticism for failing to do more to reign in its fringe elements. The assassinations prompted hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets in protest of Ennahda's governance, and the National Constituent Assembly suspended its work, escalating polarization and bringing the country's societal divisions to the fore.

The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts (commonly known by its acronym UTICA) threw their weight behind the demonstrators but strategically positioned themselves as arbiters of a national dialogue. Feeling the heat, Ennahda agreed to enter into negotiations with the opposition.⁷ The talks led to a peaceful transfer of power and the appointment of a technocratic government led by Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa beginning in January 2014. Under this interim leadership, the NCA completed its work on the constitution, adopting one of the most progressive of its kind in the Arab world, especially with respect to gender equality and personal freedoms. The country also held national elections in the fall of 2014, ushering in a parliament and Beji Caid Essebsi⁸ as its first democratically elected President.

Understanding the delicate balance of power that exists today in Tunisia requires a look back at the dynamics at play during the election cycle, marked by an overall competitive but civil climate, throughout which notions of a homogeneous Tunisian polity were cast aside. Essebsi established his winning secular, centrist Nidaa Tounes party by bringing in a range of demographics from leftist activists, to businessmen, to former regime personnel. The goal was to act as a counterweight to Ennahda, which, due to its considerable grassroots network, still managed to secure the second largest number of seats in parliament after Nidaa.⁹

9 Nidaa Tounes won eighty-six seats, Ennahda sixty-nine.

⁴ Although government figures indicate that foreign direct investment (FDI) rose in the first quarter of 2015, year after year, the latest World Bank figures (with data available through 2013) indicate that net FDI flows declined to \$1 billion in 2013, compared to \$1.7 billion in 2012. See "Foreign Direct Investment in Tunisia Rises in First Quarter," Reuters, May 4, 2015, http://www.reuters. com/article/2015/05/04/tunisia-investmentidUSL5N0XV1M020150504, and the DataBank online platform of the World Bank, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/ reports/tableview.aspx.

⁵ Total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in 2014 was 15.2 percent, and both sectors supported 6.8 percent of total employment (practically no change from 2013). See World Travel & Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism, Economic Impact 2015: Tunisia*, London, http://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/ economic%20impact%20research/countries%202015/ tunisia2015.pdf.

⁶ Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, January 26, 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreignfighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpassesafghanistan-conflict-1980s/.

⁷ Around this time, Egypt experienced tumult with the military ousting then-President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some observers cited these developments as providing a wake-up call to Tunisia's Islamists, who, seeing the crackdown on the Brotherhood in Egypt, obligingly committed to dialogue in order to remain active within the political sphere.
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⁸ Beji Caid Essebsi served as an official under the first President of the Tunisian Republic, Habib Bourguiba.

When it came to the presidential rounds, personality politics took precedence over platforms and visions for the country—with Essebsi galvanizing the urban, secular vote and many Islamists throwing their support behind Moncef Marzouki, longtime human rights activist and interim President under the Troika, who touted his support for the impoverished, neglected interior regions.

Upon Essebsi taking the presidency and Nidaa securing both branches of government, the party was positioned to form the cabinet, but subsequent negotiations revealed that its victory at the polls did not translate into political dominance. Prime Minister Habib Essid's first proposal of a cabinet included only one other party, the secularist UPL. The move embodied a winner-take-all approach, perhaps intentionally to appease hardliners within Nidaa who wanted the party to go at it alone. It failed because the two parties did not have enough seats in parliament to reach a majority.¹⁰ Indeed, the proposal was criticized not only by Ennahda, but also by the leftist Popular Front and liberal Afek Tounes, which indicated they would not vote in favor of the government. Essid came back with an alternative cabinet composition, extending symbolic (albeit not too prominent) roles for Ennahda.¹¹ Particularly for Ennahda, exchanging the role of opposition for a handful of junior posts was pragmatic, presumably to ensure it would not be entirely marginalized from the political process.

Symbolic but Fragile Coalition

With a substantively weak platform holding Nidaa's constituencies together, and vehemently anti-Islamist elements within its ranks disagreeing with the move to join forces with Ennahda, the party is beginning to experience dissent and fragmentation.¹² Similarly, certain elements within Ennahda decry their party's involvement with the coalition, prompting leadership to explain the rationale behind the move. With anti-Islamism on the rise throughout the region, and the subsequent conflation of Islamists with terrorists, the party treads carefully between compromise to ensure its inclusion in the political sphere and maintaining enough distance from Nidaa so as not to upset its more conservative ranks. Nidaa is arguably pursuing the same strategy. Some observers remark that the national unity government

12 Based on authors' interviews conducted in Tunis, April 2015.

has essentially placed the two distinctive major parties in the same corner in the eyes of the public, blurring their differences.¹³ In such a case, given its weaker party foundations, Nidaa could have more to lose if it does not prove its mettle in governance.

Observers hailed the coalition government as a marked indication of Tunisia's commitment to consensus building. It has certainly helped to alleviate polarization, but as the pressures of governing become a reality, the sensitive balance of power within the national unity government is being tested. The two major parties are facing strains within their ranks, making negotiations between the parties more difficult. Although there is agreement on economic policy and other areas, it remains to be seen whether the grand compromise can be as good for governance as it was politically for the parties.

Possible Trajectories

Given the sensitivities involved in bridging the divide and distrust to forge consensus about how to address the competing and interlinked security and economic challenges, the current climate in Tunisia could be conducive to either a regression to authoritarianism or a weak state.¹⁴ Tunisians are aware of the risks of both of these possible trajectories.

Regression to authoritarianism. Some powerful figures, including former regime elements—many of whom are also part of Nidaa—could use the cover of insecurity to curb political and human rights, which would arguably lead to more marginalization, frustration, and extremism. This would be a repeat of the Tunisian landscape in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when authorities used the civil war in Algeria and threat of unrest spilling over as an excuse to clamp down on dissent and enforce a more authoritarian system.

A weak state. Efforts to balance consensus building and keep hardline elements within the parties in check could lead to political paralysis, rendering the state too weak to govern and hindering the government's ability to advance reforms, deliver public services, and face the rising threat of criminality. In such a situation, Tunisia would embody all of the trappings of a democracy—regular, free, and fair elections; open channels of communication between government and civil society; access to information; and the freedom to advocate. However, such engagement would not translate into any impact or tangible progress, as political considerations would result in little to no movement in the passage of critical policies, precisely because of the weakness of state institutions.

¹⁰ Karim Mezran and Lara Talverdian, "Three Lessons Drawn from Tunisia's Cabinet Formation Process," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, February 4, 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ menasource/three-lessons-drawn-from-tunisia-s-cabinetformation-process.

¹¹ Ennahda was allotted the ministry of employment and vocational training, as well as three secretary of state posts. See Monica Marks, "Tunisia Opts for an Inclusive New Government," *Monkey Cage* (blog), *Washington Post*, February 3, 2015, http://www. washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/03/ tunisia-opts-for-an-inclusive-new-government/.

¹³ Ibid. 14 Ibid.

Recent developments and debates in Tunisia reflect subtle inclinations toward both trajectories—either toward authoritarianism or a weak state. For example, a draft bill that protects security personnel has stirred outcry from journalist associations and human rights organizations. The measure delineates penalties for assaults on members of the armed forces and their families and also states that they will not be subject to punishment in the case of injury or death of an individual while they are in the line of duty.¹⁵ The controversial draft, at the parliament for review since the spring of 2015, is also riddled with vague phrases and includes provisions of jail sentences for people who defame the armed forces.¹⁶

Tunisians also note that the government resists undertaking or exploring various policy programs and initiatives using the pretext of security. As one example, activists who call for decentralization and want to engage in the drafting and development of the law that will guide municipal elections, slated for the fall of 2015, say that their government interlocutors claim that localities are not ready to govern themselves and that the central government needs to be strong due to security concerns.¹⁷ This tendency to use security challenges as an excuse to postpone or avoid managing the political or civic agenda could undercut the democratic process.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND DEBATES IN TUNISIA REFLECT SUBTLE INCLINATIONS TOWARD BOTH TRAJECTORIES—EITHER TOWARD AUTHORITARIANISM OR A WEAK STATE.

Separately, negotiations between the government and UGTT have resulted in a hike in public sector wages,¹⁸ counter to recommendations from the international financial institutions that the country reduce public spending. The salary increase, the second of its kind in less than two years, indicates that the government is thus far unable to leverage its legitimacy in an effort to

constructively push back against parochial interests to serve Tunisia's overall, long-term well-being.

Lessons

Both examples provide lessons beyond the immediate time frame: one, that there is a robust civil society in Tunisia that can, if supported, provide a considerable check on authorities; and two, that the government ought to co-opt various stakeholders and launch a public information campaign to win support for difficult economic measures.

As of June, the outcome of the bill designed to protect security personnel remains undetermined. However, the presence of a healthy debate in Tunisia among civil society actors about security concerns and the need for security sector reform, amid other issues, is an informal but necessary oversight mechanism that can help to push back against elements within the state inclined toward authoritarianism. The extent of their impact for the foreseeable future may be limited to raising awareness about the potential rollback of human and political rights. The media sector, which lacks capacity and rarely conducts investigative reporting for fear of losing access, is unable to play a supportive role in this regard, as much news coverage consists of reprinting government press releases without additional insights to prompt critical thinking about the reported developments. Although there is vibrant debate and engagement by individuals and organizations, their efforts so far are nascent and disparate, lacking cohesion that would allow for more influence.

There is fear that the state is too weak to implement changes called for by citizens. For that reason, it is also important for the government to overcome political sensitivities surrounding the coalition to capitalize on its legitimacy as a product of the democratic process and conduct a robust public outreach campaign. Such an effort would involve drawing diverse—and often competing—stakeholders into the policy discussion to demonstrate inclusiveness and transparency, thereby further cementing the government's credibility and providing the necessary momentum to campaign for public buy-in to what will, at times, be painful economic measures in the short term.

In the particular case of the UGTT, despite its strong base of an estimated five hundred thousand members, there is growing frustration among the general public over its pursuit of parochial interests.¹⁹ This was especially the case when the UGTT pursued strikes for educators to receive higher salaries immediately after the shocking attack on the Bardo Museum. UGTT's success in obtaining

¹⁵ Emna Guizani, "New Law to Ban Attacks on Armed Forces Sparks Outcry," *Tunisia Live*, April 22, 2015, http://www.tunisia-live. net/2015/04/22/new-law-to-ban-attacks-on-armed-forcessparks-outcry/.

¹⁶ Asma Ghribi, "A New Law Sends an Ominous Signal in Tunisia," Democracy Lab (blog), Foreign Policy, May 5, 2015, https:// foreignpolicy. com/2015/05/05/a-new-law-sends-an-ominous-signal-in-tunisia-

arab-spring-bardo-tunis/.

¹⁷ Based on authors' interviews conducted in Tunis, April 2015. 18 "Tunisia Agrees Public Sector Wage Hike after Union Talks-

¹⁸ Tunisia Agrees Public Sector Wage Hike arter Union Tarks-Officials," Reuters, April 29, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/ article/2015/04/29/tunisia-economy-idUSL5N0XQ72B20150429.

¹⁹ Based on authors' interviews conducted in Tunis, April 2015.

its demands from a government too weak to push back against union pressure means an increase in the state's expenditures, to the detriment of investments for the nation's collective growth and prosperity. Others have also carefully noted the nuance of the situation–UGTT's agenda is advancing in the absence of the government's initiation of a more comprehensive dialogue and agenda about the economy that includes the unions, so they may express their concerns and grievances.²⁰ Ultimately, it is the state that must muster the strength to tackle governance issues.

Despite the country's complicated political and social landscape, it is critical that the debates, frictions, and power struggles are happening within a democratic process. Today, competing interest groups are free to voice their opinions; the challenge is to ensure that the process delivers results that secure citizens' rights, improve livelihoods, and restore stability. If tangible progress is not made—either due to a return to authoritarianism or a weak state—special interest groups will pursue their narrow agendas at the expense of collective well-being. Political apathy could increase, as well as the risk that marginalized demographics resort to criminality to acquire deliverables. In a destructive cycle, security and the economy could further deteriorate.

Moving Forward

The nascent democracy is in a geostrategic location, straddling a volatile Middle East and a stone's throw away from Europe. The pluralistic model suits Tunisia's context and national characteristics, and its experience cannot be easily replicated elsewhere in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the North African country can serve as a long-term partner for its neighbors and international actors looking to stabilize a tumultuous region. As Essebsi recently noted, Tunisia can be a model for the region if the United States and the international community do their part to support the country; otherwise, it will remain the exception.²¹ If this is to be realized in the long term, it will require a strategic, multi-pronged partnership that moves beyond security cooperation.

Given the fragile, albeit still promising, political situation in Tunisia, the recommendations below are intended to help consolidate Tunisia's democratic gains and to address fundamental issues of sustained public engagement and transparency that are important to ensuring the long-term success of the country's security and economic reforms. DESPITE THE COUNTRY'S COMPLICATED POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPE, IT IS CRITICAL THAT THE DEBATES, FRICTIONS, AND POWER STRUGGLES ARE HAPPENING WITHIN A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.

Recommendations for Tunisia's Leadership

Establish streamlined channels of communication with stakeholders. This would mean appointing points of contact and responsibility within each relevant ministry to convene briefings on a regular basis to hear from unions, student groups, and civil society organizations. This would go a long way toward helping address questions of transparency and provide an additional tool for oversight beyond the parliament's jurisdiction. And by coopting all of these elements into a dialogue, each stakeholder would feel less marginalized and less inclined to force through a parochial agenda, as the inclusion of other entities would provide a check.

Launch a public information and outreach campaign. The government should develop a communications strategy whereby, building off of its engagement with stakeholders, it delivers messages to citizens about its policy priorities, the opportunities at hand, and an honest assessment of the challenges. It is important for the government to sustain the credibility resulting from a democratic election by adhering to democracy's best practices. Such an effort would demonstrate transparency, keep citizens engaged, and, where necessary, help to earn public support for measures easily dismissed as unpopular.

Maintain an open-door policy. Parallel to the communication efforts of the cabinet, as the parliamentary committees navigate their oversight responsibilities, they should make it a regular practice to have an open-door policy for civil society. This would help to ensure that they hear about concerns and support for various legislation so that bills are not crafted in isolation, but rather draw upon others' expertise and take into consideration all viewpoints. Tunisia can leverage its participation in the Open Government Partnership²² to acquire technical

²⁰ Based on authors' interviews conducted in Tunis, April 2015.

²¹ President Beji Caid Essebsi, "Beyond Security: Why a US-Tunisian Strategic Partnership Matters," address at the US Institute of Peace on May 20, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oc8KFd_N3c.

²² The Open Government Partnership is an international, multilateral initiative that supports both government and civil society with the aim of promoting the quality of governance around the world. Tunisia is the second Arab country to participate. See www. opengovpartnership.org.

assistance to help bolster the parliament's capacity to conduct oversight.

Explore and aggressively pursue public-private partnerships (PPPs). A draft law to regulate PPPs is currently in parliament. The reviewing committee should ramp up its conversations with the private sector to identify ways to improve the bill's provisions and find areas where private industry and public institutions can complement efforts to more effectively deliver goods and services to Tunisians. With expertise and technical assistance from the international financial institutions, signing PPPs could help free up the government's limited capacity. This too will require sustained, strategic communication to break down the barriers, such as risk aversion and mistrust, between the public and private sectors.

Recommendations for the United States and the Wider International Community

Consider placing conditions on security assistance.

Countering violent extremism and terrorism will undoubtedly remain priorities for Tunisia and its partners, but it is important that they do not result in a purely securitized relationship. To ensure that these concerns are addressed but do not come at the expense of other matters, Tunisia's allies should explore conditions on assistance. This could include bolstering security sector reform efforts, such as taking steps to institutionalize human rights considerations within the police and national security apparatus. The announcement in August 2014 that Tunisia would be among the US interagency Security Governance Initiative and the subsequent consultative missions to explore how best to assist Tunisia hold much promise in this regard.

Establish partnerships for technical assistance in

the areas of decentralization and local governance. Municipal elections in Tunisia will be the next big milestone, as the country takes steps toward decentralization. The move has the potential to allow regions far from Tunis to take ownership of their own developmental and budgetary matters. Tunisia's partners can help create networks of local cities around the world and Tunisian municipalities to lend technical expertise and share lessons learned in decentralized systems. The practice exists to a limited extent,²³ but bolstering it would create tremendous opportunities for more people-to-people engagement and maximize Tunisians' chances of learning best practices for after the elections. *Support investigative journalism trainings.* Tunisia does not have a culture of investigative journalism. Much reporting involves reposting or reprinting ministry press statements. In the interest of improving access to information, raising public awareness, and fulfilling the Tunisian government's promise of greater transparency, it is important to help build a cadre of investigative journalists. Efforts akin to those of the International Center for Journalists,²⁴ which brings Tunisian journalism students to the United States for hands-on experience, exemplify programs that ought to be dramatically enhanced for maximum impact.

Bolster partnerships between international and Tunisian institutions of higher education and vocational training. Tunisia has an educated population, but there is a disproportionately large number of students pursuing humanities degrees and a deficit in technical and scientific subjects. Tunisia has a dynamic information and communications technology (ICT) sector, which accounts for 7 percent of GDP and holds a great deal of potential for growth.²⁵ Especially as the country strives to digitize public services,²⁶ and if investors are to set up shop in Tunisia, there needs to be a pool of candidates with the same quality of skills as found elsewhere in the world. It is important to precisely identify the discrepancy and establish educational partnerships to make the labor force more competitive.

Coordinate assistance to minimize duplication of efforts and maximize impact. Many foreign officials have visited Tunis, and Essebsi has begun to make stops in Washington, Paris, and other major capitals. These trips result in announcements of various assistance packages. It is important that the United States, European countries, and the United Nations coordinate their efforts, identifying where their respective strengths lie and working to complement each other in the interest of building up a pluralistic, prosperous Tunisia.

²³ See this description as an example of Germany's efforts with North African countries: Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Network of German Municipalities with Partnerships in North Africa," http://www.service-eine-welt.de/ en/northafrica/northafrica-start.html.

²⁴ See International Center for Journalists, "Training the Next Generation of Tunisian Media Professionals," http://www.icfj.org/ our-work/training-next-generation-tunisian-mediaprofessionals-1.

²⁵ Pierre-Marie Mateo, "Tunisia Offers 'Many Advantages' for ICT Sector Firms," *L'Atelier*, October 31, 2013, http://www.atelier.net/ en/trends/articles/tunisia-offers-many-advantages-ict-sectorfirms_424932.

^{26 &}quot;Digital Tunisia 2018' Strategic Plan Approved," Tunis Afrique Presse, May 22, 2015, http://allafrica.com/stories/201505250436.html.

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