

# Preventive Educational Policies Recommended In 2011 Against Islamist Radicalization In Tunisia Post- Revolutionary

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## Summary

We aim, through this study, to highlight the issues of the existing relationship between radicalization and education in Tunisia in 2011. Specifically, we will study the preventive educational measures that the Ministry of Education decided during the first year of the Revolution of January 14, 2011 with the aim of protecting young Tunisians from the danger of Islamist radicalization that it had anticipated. .

It will initially be a question of research into the origins of the radical thought which characterized the political scene in Tunisia following this Revolution. This is a brief overview of the Arab-Muslim intellectual context which was divided for several centuries between Islamists and all those who refused it. We will then explain the way in which this conflict will evolve in the majority of Arab-Muslim countries, including Tunisia after 1956. We will then focus on the prevention project planned by the Ministry of Education post-revolutionary with the aim of intervening as early as possible to confront a process of manipulation and recruitment of Tunisian youth into violent extremism.

**Keywords:** Revolution of January 14, 2011; Radicalization; Islamism; Ministerial commissions: Intercultural education; educational prevention policies

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## I- Introduction

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, in several European countries, political authorities launched vast national action plans which included programs to combat radicalization and religious extremism. The first prevention initiatives emerged in Hamburg, Germany in 2004 following the American intervention in Iraq in 2003. At that time, preventive initiatives mainly consisted of providing training materials (comics, brochures, videos, etc. ) to educational establishments, associations or state institutions (El Difraoui & Uhlmann, 2015). In Denmark, after the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, the liberal-conservative government in place in Copenhagen carried out the first research on the analysis of radicalization processes. Until 2009, preventive measures mainly consisted of awareness-raising work aimed at creating a climate of trust in society (Kühle & Lindekilde 2012). In Great Britain, after the attacks of July 7, 2005 on the London Underground, the issue of extremism gained much importance. It was only in February 2015 that the 'Counter-Terrorism and Security Act', which obliges state institutions (police, prisons, local authorities, schools, universities, etc.) to prevent individuals from engaging in terrorism, was voted for (El Difraoui & Uhlmann 2015). This development was accompanied by a tightening of anti-terrorism legislation.

It is important to point out that, unlike these Western countries which dealt with religious radicalization by opting for a rather security response, France opted for security and educational measures. In fact, after the attacks of January 2015, the Ministry of National Education realized that radicalization appears to be a phenomenon deeply linked to the exploitation of identity conflicts and social fragilities. Its policy of preventing violent radicalization was then based on 4 axes: staff training, prevention, identification, reporting and monitoring of young people in the process of radicalization (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse de la France, 2023). In 2018, he put in place a vast overall mobilization plan for the values of the Republic at school in which "the citizen journey" plays a major role (Donnet, 2020). In accordance with these measures, the Council of Europe announced in the Action Plan on the fight against Islamic radicalization, a set of educational measures which aimed to detect this phenomenon and strengthen social cohesion with the aim of preventing its emergence (Ragazzi, 2018).

If European countries were worried about the rise of Islamism, this concern must be double in the Arab-Muslim countries, the birthplace of this radical thought. Really, these States are obliged to double their efforts by adopting preventive measures and more effective means to guarantee early resistance to this great

scourge. The question that arises here is what these countries can do if these Islamist movements become political partners. Of course, the situation will be more complicated. The example of Tunisia, governed after the Revolution by the Ennahdha movement, is the most significant. Indeed, the Islamists became not only partners, but leaders of the country, after legitimate and democratic elections towards the end of 2011 (Gobe, 2012).

In reality, before the October 2011 elections, the transitional Tunisian government which led the country from January 2011 was almost sure of the Islamists' electoral victory and their accession to power. Likewise, it was almost certain that they will occupy the Interior Ministry, which means they will control the security forces. This stifling situation forced this government to abandon the security approach. All that remained was to adopt educational prevention. He then embarked on a reform project which aims to adopt preventive measures capable of protecting young Tunisians from all forms of religious radicalization. So what were these preventive educational measures recommended before October 2011?

Before the elections, the Ennahdha movement, which was at the head of the political scene, denied, during its electoral campaign, its affiliation with extremist Islamist thought, and refrained from talking about its origins which date back to the Muslim Brotherhood movement. and presented itself as a moderate Tunisian Islamic party. As for the rest of the components of the political scene, the ambient climate of freedom allowed the release of all previously banned forces and parties. This allowed the spread of different dogmatic religious ideologies. Extremism, which took advantage of the new security and socio-political context, therefore succeeded in infiltrating the category of young Tunisians (Torelli *et al.*, 2012). From February 2011, the ideological conflict between Islamists and modernists began to take an acute form, which once again put Tunisia before the turbulent test of Islam's relationship with modernity (Kouttoub, 2017). So what are the origins of religious radicalization and Islamist movements in Tunisia? And how can we explain the origins of the ideological conflict in this country?

## **II- Origins of Islamism and religious radicalization in Tunisia**

At different periods of its history, Arab-Muslim thought has experienced attempts aimed at its revivalism. The dynamic which took place at the rhythm of polemics between traditionalists and renovators, old and new, revolved around the dialectic between faith and reason, religion and politics. The renewal movement which finds its origins in medieval Islamic philosophy and which developed from the 8th century thanks to logic and rationalism, opposed, from the 10th century, the traditionalists who called for a return to the Islam of the origins and refused the temptation of innovation in the interpretation of the Koran (Arnaldez, 1987; Ben Makhlouf, 2018; Corbin, 1964; Diagne, 2010; Quadri, 1947). This conservative religious ideology, heir to the jurist thought of Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, developed especially during the 14th century in Syria with Taqî ad-Dîn Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (Lav, 2012; Hoover, 2016; Michot, 2022). In the 18th century, when Mohammed ben Abdelwahhab known as Ibn Abdelwahhab was able to propagate to the Hijaz his Wahhabi doctrine inspired by *mādhāb*-Hanbalite (Darwish, 2022; Phoenix, 1930; Shukla, 2014; Yaakop & Idris, 2017). The brutal contact with European colonization in Syria, Egypt and the Maghreb countries forced the Muslim intelligentsia to lead a debate on modernity coming from Europe. This debate has taken various names such as Al-Islah (reform), Sahwa (awakening), and *tajdīd* (innovation) (Janjar, 2020). The Arab renaissance movement then reached its peak in Syria with Boutros al-Boustani, in Egypt with Méhémet Ali and in Tunisia with Kheireddine Pasha, Salem Bouhajib, Ibrahim Gabadou, etc., during the era of Ahmed Bey, M'hamed Bey and Mohammed el-Sadik Bey (Timoumi, 2010). It is then agreed to say that, towards the end of the 19th century, the Arab-Muslim reformist spirit tried to answer two major questions, that of the decadence of Muslim nations, and that of their rebirth. This reformism, called at the time An-nadha, developed until the years 1935-1940 thanks mainly to the ideas of Rachid Ridha, but was also structured around two symbols, one nationalist, pan-Islamist, *Jamāl Eddīne al-Afghānī* and the other Azharite theologian, Mohammed Abduh (Dakhli, 2009; Mermier, 2016). In the 1950s, following the decolonization movement of the majority of Arab countries, the Arab reformism movement experienced a new beginning with the birth of the neo-modernists (Thepaut, 2020). These new thinkers appeared in a context different from that of the beginning of the 20th century, that of countries that had become independent but governed by dictatorial regimes. They started from the postulate of the failure of their precedents to create a current of critical revision of the methodological and cognitive foundations of Islamic thought and declared that the desacralization of religious discourse will be the only condition for carrying out a new project of modernity in Islam (Khalidi *et al.*, 1991; Haddad, 2013). It must be clarified here that these new thinkers do not contest the divinity of the Founding Text and do not seek to demonstrate it. Really, they seek to understand it with the tools of modern science. So, Mohamed Arkoun, Mouhammed Iqbel, Abdul karim Sorousch, Fazlur Rahman, Abdelmajid Charfi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd all agreed on the study of the Koran, tradition and Islam according to the requirements of the university academy, seeking a free knowledge created by an individual who expresses and acts in complete freedom (Abed Al-Jabri & Abdel-Nour, 2011; Bosca, 2014; Corm, 2016; Moser, 2017; Weiss & Hanssen, 2018).

Faced with these neo-modernists who approached modernity in a critical manner, the rival current of

Islamism, symbol of archaism and conservatism, imposes itself. It is an ideology whose birth is difficult to date. The majority of historians and political scientists have described it as a 20th century phenomenon which finds its origins in the doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya and that of Ibn Abdelwahhab (Abderraziq, 1994; El Yousfi Alaoui, 2020; Redissi, 2007). This movement crystallized in the 1920s which was obviously a key decade, marked by the abolition of the Caliphate in Istanbul in 1924 and the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Ismailia in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan Al-Bannâ (Alexei, 2020; Ungureanu, 2011). From the thirties, Hassan Al-Bannâ, Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, creator of the Indo-Pakistani party Jama'at i-Islami and later Sayyid Qutb inaugurated a new movement of thought which attempted to define Islam as a system above all political (Azoulay, 2015). During the 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to infiltrate Muslim societies through political and militant action, through collective practice and mass education (Pandian *et al.*, 2020). The political parties they founded had as their essential objective the propagation of the idea of Sharia', the Islamization of society and the seizure of power as a horizon to be achieved (Ait Kabboura & Fadil, 2022; Badar *et al.*, 2017; Corm, 2017; Ghalioun, 2009; Hoveyda, 2005; Kirmanj, 2008; Mordacq, 2018). From the 1970s, the situation of the war in Afghanistan made the idea of the transition to violence formulated by Sayyid Qutb, with 'Abdu'Allâh Yûsuf Muşţafâ 'Azzâm, the driving force of Islamism (Baczko & Dorronsoro, 2017; McGregor, 2003). Salafism-jihadism thus appears as a synthesis between the most conservative Saudi Wahhabism and a mystique of armed struggle which was formed during the first Afghan war (Chaudet, 2008; Guidère, 2015; Kepel, 2003). Since the 1990s, more and more Islamist actors have claimed their membership (Hegghammer, 2010). In fact, hostile to religious action limited to da'wa (preaching) and social works, Salafist-jihadists place armed jihad at the heart of religious belief (Zelin, 2014). Using prophetic traditions, they exalt this practice, although strictly codified by doctrine, to give it a status equivalent to that of the other pillars of religion (Balci & Chaudet 2014; Hafez, 2009; Hegghammer, 2011; Ibrahimî & Akbarzadeh, 2020; Roy, 2015, 2016).

In Tunisia, in 1956, Bourguiba definitively separated the Zitouna mosque from the university, thus putting an end to twelve centuries of religious education (Mullin, 2017). At the beginning of the 1970s, Tunisia made secularization and the liberation of women its operational tool to make up for the civilizational delay that characterized the entire Arab-Muslim world (Hibou, 2009; Ouanada, 2017; Salem, 2010; Sraieb, 1999). This approach sparked the exacerbation of the nascent Islamist group founded by Rached Gannouchi, Abdelfateh Mourou and Hmida Ennaifer (Ben Kahla, 2002) and called the Jama'aa Islamiyya. Actually, this group which later transformed into a political party called Ennahdha, was the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (Allani, 2009). Indeed, the crisis between the State and this Islamist party continued to worsen during the two eras of Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Achour, 1999; Hermassi, 1989). This often conflicting political duality transformed into real repression during the 1990s. It was fraught with political and socio-cultural consequences (Al-Ahnaf, 1989; Allani, 2009; Hermassi, 1989).

After the Revolution of January 14, 2011, the Ennahdha party has established itself as the major player on the Tunisian political scene (Nachi, 2016). In fact, once Ben Ali fled, the institutions governed by the 1959 constitution continued to function. The former prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, is reappointed by interim president Fouad Mebazaa. On January 17, he formed a first government whose objective was the continuity of the State and the organization of early presidential elections within six months (Morin, 2012). When the new government was announced, demonstrations and marches were organized throughout Tunisia because of the appointment of eight ministers from Ben Ali's party. Despite the reshuffles he made after ten days, Ghannouchi's second government only lasted from January 27, 2011 to February 27, 2011 (Chouikha & Gobe, 2011). At the moment, popular and union pressure was aimed at deeper change. The continued violence therefore led to the appointment of a new government led by Béji Caïd Essebsi. It was composed mainly of technocrats whose primary mission was security, the economy and the organization of the elections in October 2011 (Gobe, 2012).

In the first months following the Revolution, protest movements, strikes and sit-ins became recurrent and contributed to the disorganization of the economy (Aubin de La Messuzière, 2018). The fall of the Ben Ali regime was also the cause of a real explosion in the political landscape in Tunisia. In fact, in a few weeks, more than 100 parties were legalized (Ferjani, 2012). Furthermore, with the dismantling of the RCD political party and the inability of the left to unite its ranks, the Islamists appeared to be the only structured and organized force and the most ready to meet the challenges of the transition. In reality, however, the Islamists played no role in triggering the events of December 2010; it was the Ennahdha party, enjoying great popularity, which established itself, after a few months, as the leading political force of the country (Mokhefi, 2015). At that time, alongside the legalization of the Ennahdha party, that of Ansar-Sharia also began to impose itself on the political scene as a reference for religious radicalism, social activism and "Islam-revolutionary" integrity (Merone *et al.*, 2018). Likewise, religious associations have become new spaces of expression for a heterogeneous Islamic public. Thus, it can be argued that before the elections of October 2011, the ambiguous and very fragmented political field was polarized around the Islamist current with its multiple tendencies embodying the heirs of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and the jihadists and the modernist current which

brings together the tendencies of the radical left, the ramifications of pan-Arab nationalism, the socialists, the liberals, the Bourguibists and the heirs of the RCD (Wolf, 2013).

At the beginning of September, the situation was far from stabilized and a curfew was declared in the south of the country (Gobe, 2012). In short, during 2011, the situation in Tunisia was more vague than ever. In fact, in a context marked by the rise of Islamist and jihadist currents (Ferjani, 2012), Tunisia was obliged to resolve a chaos of problems: combat corruption, guarantee freedom of the press and the liberalization of women, ensure individual and collective freedoms, enhance the economy, resolve the unemployment problem, etc. Above all, it was called upon to guarantee democracy in order to chart the path to a better future for future generations.

### **III- Preventive educational measures against radicalization and religious extremism recommended by the Ministry of Education in Tunisia during 2011**

If democracy is a dear and precious wish for Tunisians, it will only be realized for them if the School succeeds in disseminating the political, civic and heritage culture capable of preparing citizens to be more conscious than today. This is because School can only be truly democratic if it succeeds in presenting to future generations the best in human thought. In fact, in societies which guarantee freedoms, School has always been the essential instrument for the construction of national unity and adherence to democratic political structures.

So, in 2011, in Tunisia, in a confusing revolutionary situation, it once again became essential to train conscious, open and rational young Tunisians. Thus, it was necessary for the Tunisian School to play its role as a laboratory for education in citizenship, interculturality and individual and collective freedoms with the aim of guaranteeing better living together with a democratic reference. It was in the face of this difficult challenge that the post-revolutionary Tunisian School faced itself (Baccouche, 2011a).

In reality, the ministry of education of the Caid Essebsi government (March 9, 2011-October 23, 2011) was aware of the danger of religious extremism which will invade the country following the elections of October 2011. Consequently, it had decided to recommend preventive measures with the aim of protecting young Tunisians. In order to meet this challenge, he embarked on a reform process. It was intended that the lines of this reform would be working frameworks for the next decision-makers in the field of national education. First of all, he had forged the directives of an educational policy aimed at the installation of a new ambitious Tunisian School of democracy, citizenship and human rights: "We intend to make the School a real and non-virtual space of freedom and openness, inspired in its mission by humanist ideals and universal principles of freedom, tolerance, democracy and social justice. (Baccouche, 2011b). In reality, the ministry was aware that the establishment and stabilization of the democratic process requires the creation of generations capable of questioning with rigor and rationality the reality of human facts and their meanings. He therefore refused to allow learners to simply recite what was learned without having assimilated the noble values which underlie the principles instilled in them. Consequently, he launched the project of creating a youth armed with critical thinking and free thought (Baccouche, 2011c). However, "merely teaching the fundamental principles of citizenship without practicing free thought is a weakness of the education system [...]. Hence, the need to develop free thinking and critical thinking." (Baccouche, 2011c). While believing in the importance of its mission in the phenomenon of democratic transition, the ministry promised to assume its full responsibility. Based on these principles, the ministry takes charge of reconsidering curricula and educational programs so that they are adapted to the minds of young people and ensure that they understand their objectives and contribute to their achievement: "Also Schools must rethink their strategies, programs and teaching practices." (Baccouche, 2011b). To this end, due attention must be given to education for citizenship and human rights, democratic practice and participation in public affairs. In this regard, it seems that this ministry was well aware that the crisis in the human and social sciences in the country was among the essential causes of the phenomenon of radicalization of young Tunisians which broke out suddenly in 2011. Let us recall here, that for fear of the role that these disciplines could play in awakening critical thinking, freedom of expression and political awareness among Tunisian citizens, the Ben Ali regime unfortunately decided to marginalize their coefficients and reduce their contents (Farjallah, 2005). For these reasons, the ministry announced that it is necessary to revalue the teaching of history, geography, philosophy, civic education and religious education: "With regard to programs and educational practices, the School must aim, in addition to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, that of "soft skills", behaviors, attitudes essential for life in community. [...]. Civic education is a privileged "pedagogical place", it is the same for religious education, the teaching of history, geography, languages, translation, philosophy whose contribution is fundamental in the rooting of universal values." (Baccouche, 2011b). Quickly, the plan for the implementation of this Reform was defined and announced in a conference held by ALESCO in May 2011. The ministry called for reforming the education system by mobilizing all national energies and expertise for the development of concrete programs which take into account the specificities of society and which raise education to the level of local and global quality standards within a global framework not excluding any element of the education system (Elannabi, 2011). He then revealed that he

will call on specialists and experts in the field of education. Being aware that it must act before the elections of October 2011, the ministry quickly moved to realization of a reform project. In September 2011, he announced the formation of nine commissions whose work focused on teacher training, curricula and textbooks, support and remedial courses, exams and the continuous assessment system, school time, school life, academic guidance, administrative management and the integration of new information technologies in teaching (TAP, 2011). The results of their work were presented by Minister Taïeb Baccouche during a press briefing held at the ministry's headquarters at the end of October 2011. He indicated that the commissions, whose work began in September, analyzed the situation and identified problems to arrive at specific suggestions.

With the aim of ensuring quality training for the teaching staff, the training commission proposed the founding of a faculty of education which houses special licenses for the training of primary and secondary teachers and the adoption clear references in the recruitment of teachers. Regarding continuing education, she recommended the creation of continuing education departments in most university establishments as well as the adoption of certification and alignment with international standards. She also called for the generalization of the culture of evaluation, starting with the real needs of teachers (Rapport de la Commission de la Formation, 2011). Moreover, the recommendations of the commission which worked on the programs and manuals concerned the revision of educational programs and teaching methods while mentioning the predominance of the quantitative aspect in these programs and school textbooks as well as the low level of students' achievements, the difficulties of communication, writing and problem solving, this in addition to the lack of general culture among them. The commission suggested the promulgation of a reference framework for the Tunisian school textbook and the publication of a set of manuals intended for teachers. (Rapport de la Commission des Programmes et Manuels Scolaires, 2011). In reality, the conclusions made by the private lessons, support and remedial lessons committee were not far from those deduced by the programs and manuals committee. In fact, she noticed that school programs and textbooks have resulted in "brain clogging" and difficulties in analysis and synthesis among Tunisian students. As a result, private lessons have become widespread at all levels of education, including primary school. In order to resolve this problem, the commission suggested the reduction of programs and textbooks, in addition it called for strengthening the support courses organized in schools and fighting against random private lessons while calling for the application of the Tunisian law and the updating of the reference decree published in 1988 relating to remedial courses (Rapport de la Commission des Cours Particuliers, 2011). Not far from these measures, the commission for the integration of new technologies in teaching called for the equipment of specialized laboratories and to exploit them in the promotion of language teaching and to strengthen the role of the educational technology center in the development and integration of ICT in Tunisian education (Rapport de la Commission des Intégrations des TIC dans l'Enseignement, 2011).

For its part, the examinations and continuous assessment committee suggested several measures with the aim of transform the examination system from a mechanism of exclusion into a means of excellence and objective evaluation. Its recommendations focused in particular on balanced evaluation between trimesters, the elimination of the blocked week, the cancellation of the measure of counting 25% of the annual average in the baccalaureate exam, the institution of an exam compulsory at the level of the 6th year and the 9th year of basic education and a new distribution of study periods and vacations (Rapport de la Commission des Examens et du Contrôle Continu, 2011). On the subject of school time, the specialized commission considered that the question of school periods and schedules represents a problem which involves economic interests and certain aspects of social life. Indeed, with the aim of making school time more compatible with the needs of society, it proposed the adoption of the five-day-a-week system and the continuous session regime. It also suggested reducing the number of daily lesson sessions (4 sessions/day for primary education and 6 sessions/day for secondary education) and reducing their duration (45 minutes instead of one hour for each class session) while insisting on the use of students' rest days for culture, travel, leisure and sport. In order to respect the specificity of each region, this commission asked that the regions be given the freedom to choose the appropriate school timetable model (Rapport de la Commission du Temps Scolaire, 2011). In accordance with these recommendations, the commission for the promotion of school life proposed the creation of suitable spaces and the acquisition of the equipment necessary for the various activities relating to school life. She also suggested the establishment of student councils and the revitalization of the role of parents, associations and components of civil society, within the framework of school councils. These measures aimed to instill in students new values of openness, citizenship and participation in common life (Rapport de la Commission de la Vie Scolaire, 2011).

As for the issue of educational guidance which has direct repercussions on the country's economy and the employability of young people, the members of the commission noted the ambiguity of the system and the mechanism put in place which does not do not meet the requirements of the job market and do not guarantee a good future for young Tunisians. As a result, they demanded to revise the structure of the education cycles. They also called for protecting the school guidance system through reference texts published by a higher authority (Rapport de la Commission de l'Orientation Scolaire, 2011). In this regard, the commission proposed

the introduction of the culture of guidance in official programs, the recruitment of competent executives to work in the establishments concerned, personalized support for students, the participation of parents and teachers in the education of students in guidance and especially the protection of the guidance system through reference texts published by a higher authority, such as the higher education council. On the other hand, with the aim of bringing more dynamism to regional directorates and educational establishments, the restructuring and administrative management commission suggested the creation of a private education directorate and a directorate of cultural, social and sporting activities. She also called for the revitalization and consolidation of the autonomy of administrative and financial decisions of regional directorates and educational establishments (Rapport de la Commission de la Gestion Administrative, 2011).

#### **IV- Conclusion**

We can conclude from this study that Tunisia, compared to other countries that have adopted educational measures to prevent the threat of religious extremism, has been a pioneer in this area. While Denmark and England adopted an approach until 2009 that was more security than educational, Tunisia opted in 2011 for a purely educational approach. In fact, the post-revolutionary Ministry of Education quickly mobilized to fight against the danger of radicalization by putting in place the foundations of an educational reform whose essential objective is the supervision of suitable solutions to the problems of low student achievement and graduate unemployment. The recommendations resulting from the work of the nine commissions that the ministry had formed were urgent at all levels. At that time, the ministry believed that in order to successfully reform the education system and ensure quality training for future generations, it would be appropriate to initiate a major debate around this issue and to involve all stakeholders. .

It should be noted that, during the last decade, the successive ministries of education in Tunisia tried to develop the axes issued by that of 2011. In reality, they had tried to display very ambitious objectives which took starting from the work of the commissions of September-October 2011. But, a faulty operationalization of these same objectives remains the major fault of all the reforms carried out until now in the education system. Often, the reform was caught between several factors: union demands, the budgetary and bureaucratic constraints of the Ministry of Education and political tensions around education as a social project. In the midst of all these tensions, reforming the Tunisian education system without calling on experts and academics in the humanities, educational sciences and didactics of the disciplines will at best be a compromise between unions very attached to the interests of their members, political parties keen to get their hands on Tunisian society and a sclerotic ministerial administration. The result of such a compromise will only be a reshuffle without any overall vision of the meaning of the reform.

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