

December 2014

## The Tunisian Elections 2014 and Societal Polarization

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The Tunisian elections in late 2014 have caught the attention of the world. The importance of this achievement should not be underestimated in an Arab context marked by frustrated revolutions in Syria, Libya and Yemen, where chaos and violence have replaced state- and democracy-building, and by revisionism in Egypt where the military recovered the reins of power, even by election. In this fragile context, the Tunisian elections are taking place in relative stability and a remarkably transparent way. For Tunisians, as well as for the wider Arab region, the elections show the results of a changing political map in favour of the national modernist forces that had lost the election in 2011.

What changed between 2011 and 2014? It is clear that Tunisia's political landscape changed dramatically with the first elections after the revolution in 2011, with an increase in polarization, which some believe has been contrived. The polarization is between the forces of modernity and traditional, or conservative, forces with the Islamist Ennahda movement at their head. However, a comparison of the recent elections and those of 2011 clearly shows that this polarization was not political but was one of community. In such a context, describing the success of the Nidaa Tounes party as a return of the old regime is a result of electoral propaganda rather than of serious analysis. In undergoing a revolution, Tunisia has seen the creation of a dynamic political life that makes it difficult for the old order to return, even if some of its members come to power again. In this context, the recent elections in Tunisia show that the main problems that determined the choices of most voters are no longer the same as in 2011. The key word for the 2011 elections after the revolution was Islam, leaving until 2014 the problem of developing a different political awareness in Tunisia.

The results of the legislative elections and first round of presidential elections in Tunisia in late 2014 were completely different from those of the constituent assembly elections in 2011. The results reflect a major transformation, in the political arena and in public opinion, resulting from the many political events and politicians that voters had seen throughout the three-year transitional period. These elections are significant not only because they determine the shape of the parliament for the next five years, but also because they reflect the social, political and psychological reality of Tunisians. The depth of change has prompted different analyses from those who interpret the results as a return to the old regime, which is an obvious and literal political interpretation of the results, and those who perceive the results as a political transformation that reflects the extent of social change in Tunisia. The success of the recently established Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia) party, which won a plurality of parliamentary seats and first place in the first round of the presidential election, can be explained in light of the contradiction between two political and cultural models of the state and society: the model of the modern nation state or the model of political Islam .

## **Interpretation of the Results**

The adoption of the principle of voluntary voter registration reduced voter turnout compared with the 2011 elections. More than four million people voted in 2011, while 3.5 million voted in the 2014 legislative elections, and voter turnout fell by a further 300,000 votes in the first round of the presidential elections. The participation rate in 2011 was around 70%, falling to 68% in the 2014 legislative elections, and to 64% in the first round of the presidential elections. This may be explained by the obstacles to the registration process this year because it was held during the summer and was limited to a short period of time. Participation rates varied widely between domestic and expatriate voters, among whom the participation rate was only 30%, in the best cases, due to the lack of voting locations for the Tunisian community spread across the world .

The low turnout also reflected low motivation among young people. Many young people stated that they had lost confidence and hopes of seeing an improvement in conditions of employment. In addition, setbacks beset the transitional period and distorted the process of political change. The failure of youth to engage in the electoral process is a reflection of the overwhelming frustration felt by Tunisians during the transitional phase .

The first striking aspect of these elections is the phenomenon of polarization; this was confirmed by strong voting based on two major societal and political approaches. Polarization was apparent in the first round of the presidential elections, albeit under different banners as we will see. The Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda movements dominated, winning more than 2,200,000 votes during the legislative elections, more than two-thirds of the total. This occurred at the expense of other parties such as the Popular Front, a coalition of leftist and Arab Nationalist supporters, the Afek Tounes party (Tunisian Aspiration) that represents an elite liberal trend, and the Union patriotique libre (UPL, Free Patriotic Union), whose name is linked to its founder and president, a businessman who emerged after the revolution: Slim Riahi. The third and final group includes a variety of parties, including those allied with the

Ennahda movement in the framework of the transitional troika government. This group includes the Congress for the Republic headed by Moncef Marzouki and the Ettakatol party (The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties) headed by Mustapha Ben Jafar, who is also Head of the Constituent Assembly Council. The Congress for the Republic won less than 70,000 votes (four seats), while Ettakatol won less than 30,000 votes and failed to obtain any seats. This was a disastrous result for these parties compared with their results in the constituent assembly elections in 2011. This disappointed group also includes long-established parties that had opposed the troika, but won only one seat (such as the Republican Party, headed by the well-known Ahmed Najib Chebbi), or none at all (such as the Democratic Pole, an ally of Nidaa Tounes .(

For the first round of the presidential elections, the results were similar to those of the legislative elections, with the same polarization, even if under different banners. The first question that poses itself from a political and sociological point of view is the interpretation of the votes received by candidate Moncef Marzouki. His party (Congress for the Republic) received only two percent of the votes in the legislative elections; public opinion polls had given him only seven percent of the potential vote three months prior to the presidential election. This is why we need to go further in our analysis and understanding of social mobilization. As the Ennahda movement did not present its own candidate – Ennahda represents politically and socially conservative elements – Marzouki found some room within the conservative sphere, especially as he represented part of the governing troika. Thus, he made use of the electoral apparatus of Ennahda, such as the observers, and also benefited from the support of extremist Islamic parties such as the Al-Tahreer party, which boycotted the legislative elections. The conservative Islamic parties acted more effectively following their poor results in the legislative elections, confirming the same societal polarization between modern nationalism and conservative Islam .

The distribution of seats in the next parliament is determined by the nature of the electoral system: variable proportional representation with the country split into 27 domestic and 6 international multi-member constituencies. This system makes it very difficult for any party or political force to win a majority of the seats of the parliament and allows small parties to survive if they attain a minimum level. In this context, Nidaa Tounes won 86 seats, which qualified it to form the government. The Ennahda movement won 69 seats, which meant that it had lost 17 seats compared with the 2011 constituent assembly elections. The parties after Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda won eight and 16 seats respectively. Although these two parties did not do badly, they failed to win a position among the major political forces. Yet, in the absence of an absolute majority, these parties remain crucial to the formation of the next government coalition. In this parliamentary scenario, the President initiated a plan to amend and balance the distribution of powers, making this an important factor for both sides of the polarized society. This explains the close results between the two candidates, Beji Caid Essebsi of Nidaa Tounes and Moncef Marzouki of Congress for the Republic .

## **The meaning and lesson behind the political transformations**

How should we interpret the different results, whether in the legislative or the presidential elections? The results of the elections confirm, as stated above, that there is polarization between the Nidaa Tounes party with its presidential candidate Beji Caid Essebsi and the Ennahda movement that supported Marzouki. This divide is not random. On the contrary, it directs us to the nature of the historical phase in Tunisia and the considerations influencing Tunisians following the revolution. From the nature of the discourse and the ideological principles of these two parties, we can say that polarization exists between Nidaa Tounes, which represents, according to its leading figures, modern national civil trends in Tunisia, while the Ennahda movement represents the Islamic approach. We see two models that seem to contradict each other: political Islam views standard Islam as a project for governance and identity, whereas the other model is based on the concept of a modern nation state with positive law or man-made laws. On this basis, polarization emerged between the supporters of an Islamic identity formulated by political Islamist parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and supporters of a national identity that values a Tunisian Islam inspired by modernization .

In this sense, the victory of Nidaa Tounes and Essebsi is a victory for the Tunisian identity that has a vision for the state and society at the expense of political Islam. Although Marzouki presents himself as a moderate secularist, most of his voters belong to the conservative wing - a fundamental component in Tunisian society. The victory also represents a change from the dilemma of Islam, the key word in the 2011 elections, to a new dilemma: that of the state. This change may be understood through the difficulties that faced the Islamic Ennahda movement in dealing with three crucial elements: the governance of the state, the issue of violence, and the crisis of national identity. Ennahda misinterpreted the Tunisian state as a personal adventure of Habib Bourguiba, the country's first president, and believed that it was possible to dominate and alter it. Thus, while in power, Ennahda tried to control the wheels of the state through a series of partisan appointments that created strong friction inside the Tunisian administration. In addition, there was an absence of a clear political program that could be relied on to run state and public affairs and overcome the deadlock witnessed within the state .

As for violence, a large proportion of public opinion blamed Ennahda for the spread of terrorism because it took a lenient stance towards Jihadist Salafist members, encouraged young Tunisians to travel to Syria, and endorsed the actions of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution, which exercised violence against artists, intellectuals and even against the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT). The issue of identity took the form of a cold war between the proponents of political Islam and a large sector of Tunisians. The gap deepened between the two sides because of the activities of several preachers from other Arab countries who promoted an alternative and alien religious discourse, whether on the issue of women or jihad. In this context, we witnessed a strong return to symbols of Tunisian identity such as the Tunisian flag, photos of former president Bourguiba, and the citing of holy figures such as Sidi Mahrez, Sidi Bou Said and Saida

Manoubia, as a sign of affiliation to local Sufi Islam. These figures had a strong presence in the presidential campaign of Essebsi .

The focus of the Tunisian elections changed from Islam to the state, and from political Islam to national identity. This is a transformation of political culture; it is also a shift from the utopian outlook of political Islam as a religion to a type of reasoning that distinguishes between politics, especially in the national context, and Islam as a general ethical and cultural identity. This polarization between two models of society, combined with the election results, merely reflected the desire of the majority of Tunisian voters to dispense with a model of the ruling culture. There was a cautious desire to reinstate the foundations of Tunisian national identity and the state, which had been weakening since January 14, 2011. The desire to eliminate the political Islam model provoked voters to vote in large numbers for a strong party capable of taking control; in this case, it was the Nidaa Tounes party with its slogan of “le vote utile” (the useful vote). This trend towards the useful vote focused on Nidaa Tounes as an alternative, and other traditional parties paid a high price. These included parties that supported the Ennahda movement in the context of the troika government, such as the Congress for the Republic, which won only four seats, and the Ettakatol party, which will be absent from the next parliament. Losers also included parties that opposed the rule of the Ennahda movement but were victims of the useful vote because many of their supporters voted for Nidaa Tounes: these parties included the Al Massar (Social Democratic Path) and the Republican party. The same trend was repeated in the first round of the presidential elections where traditional personalities such as Mustapha Ben Jafar and Ahmed Najib Chebbi were unable to pass the one percent threshold .

The sole political survivors of polarization and the useful vote were parties that enjoyed some special feature in their intellectual approaches and policies. A case in point is the Popular Front, which attracted a significant number of students, intellectuals and the middle class. The Afek Tounes Party attracted trade union members and young people. The same can be said of the presidential candidate of the Popular Front, Hama Hammami, who came in third place. The UPL belonging to businessman Slim Riahi, who came fourth in the presidential elections, has a random geographical distribution of voters, which confirms that this party is temporary and populist without meaningful social distribution and without any ideological or intellectual grounds. The success of this party indicates that the populist trend represented by the masses in the past still exists. As a result, we do not rule out that the party will disband within the forthcoming parliamentary term .

It should be stated in this context that some parties and individuals are considered to belong to the former regime. Such individuals gathered in parties and lists to form the Destourien movement (Mouvement Destourien), headed by Hamed Karoui, a former prime minister during the reign of Ben Ali, and Kamel Morjane, a former foreign minister. These combined lists won only four seats and their presidential candidate obtained a very small number of votes. This is proof that Tunisian voters had their say on the former regime and the party of Ben Ali, the Democratic Constitutional Rally, and now aspire to move beyond the corruption of that era. Therefore, despite the presence of several figures from the Democratic Constitutional Rally in the party, strong support for Nidaa Tounes in the elections must not be interpreted superficially as support for a new party that is merely an extension of the Rally.

The fact is that Nidaa Tounes has emerged in new circumstances created by the revolution, which granted freedoms and a legal system that make it difficult to revive the former regime .

## **Social and Geographical Distribution**

Sectarian distribution was apparent in the recent Tunisian elections. A social and geographical classification of the candidates by origin enables us to draw an electoral map of Tunisia that confirms the sectarian factor, especially in the presidential elections. It is clear that the electoral base of the Ennahda movement is concentrated mainly in southern Tunisia, primarily in the southeast. To exploit this advantage, Moncef Marzouki presented his southern roots as a card in his electoral campaign. We can explain this in several ways: if we consider the Islamic party as representing conservatism in Tunisian society, the southern regions are well known for their social conservatism, resulting from the influence of traditional social structures such as the tribe. We might add the unique feature that this area is close to Libya, making the region open to influence by the Libyan media during the reign of Gaddafi. The media at that time was conservative, especially in social aspects. Immigration also played a role because weak economic structures in these deprived regions made immigration and the border economy major resources, directing attention externally rather than to internal national problems .

We should reiterate that the origins of the candidates played a significant role in the votes for the Ennahda movement. The majority of the leaders of the Islamic party came originally from the southeast, including Rashid Al-Ghannushi, the founder of the movement, Ali Larayedh, the former prime minister, Habib Khedher, the former general secretary of the constitution, and Houcine Jaziri, the former secretary of state on immigration during the troika government. The concentration of Ennahda leaders from that region is certain to have played a role in winning votes at the expense of the other parties. This factor is applicable to Moncef Marzouki in the presidential elections as he won the support of conservative parties. The considerable impact of the candidate's background was confirmed in the presidential elections when the candidate of the left, Hama Hamami, won first place in his home province of Siliana while Hechmi Hamdi won first place in his home province of Sidi Bouzid .

Compared with the strong conservatism in the south, the second part of Tunisia comprises the coastal strip cities up to Bizerte and the rural northwestern regions. These major urban areas voted extensively for Nidaa Tounes and its presidential candidate, illustrating the link between this traditional urban region, its lifestyle and the modern state with the choices made by voters. The traditional urban concentrations and urban lifestyle triumphed over conservatism, or maybe produced another type of conservatism. The urban cultural structure played a role, it seems, in ending the symbolic battle between Tunisian Islam and political Islam. It is well known that Tunisian Islamic jurisprudence started historically in the cities and was linked with the political decision-making center in Tunis. Following the revolution, this Islam found itself competing with forces of political Islam, whether Jihadist Islam or electoral Islam. At the same time, the Popular Front (leftists and Arab nationalists) found that these cities constituted a vital electoral base that enabled it to win one seat in almost every constituency. Compared with the movement in a modern direction, the Ennahda movement

lost several seats, which may signal that it has moved away from its conservative sphere and its geographical base .

In the third region, which includes the central western region and the provinces that underwent major mobilization during the revolution, such as Sidi Bouzid, Gaserine and Siliana, we noted a type of balance between the two major parties, plus a remarkable rise in support for the Popular Front. Yet more votes were in favor of Moncef Marzouki during the presidential elections, possibly linked to the fact that the eyes of those from the interior regions, Essebsi remains a figure who represents the major coastal cities .

## **Conclusion**

In general, Tunisian voters were not out to punish Ennahda for its failures. Instead, the people rejected a model that demonstrated limited potential during the troika era, headed by the Ennahda movement, and voters were seeking to return to the model of a Tunisian national state. If the voting was to punish Ennahda, it would not have had any impact on parties that opposed Ennahda throughout its rule. This electoral experience provides another important lesson about the shift away from utopian populist trends that characterized the 2011 elections towards greater political rationalism and realism, as demonstrated in the useful vote. The final election results have not given any party a decisive victory, as the close results between the first two presidential candidates make clear. Therefore, it will be difficult to find a formula for political stability during the next parliamentary term. Contrary to the troika alliance from the first elections, built as an alliance of the winners against the minority, today there is no alternative but to form an impartial partnership based on an agreed program with a common political outlook.

### **About the author**

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