March 2015

Analysis of Tunisia's presidential election: the 'behind the scenes' political struggle

Hamadi Redissi and Hafedh Chekir *

The results of the second round of presidential elections reflected the current agenda: the conflict between two political parties and the widening chasm between north and south. The question is how will the new president, who represents all Tunisians, be able to bridge the divide between different social elements and regions of the country? Will he be able to dispel peoples' fear that Nidaa Tounes might become too hawkish?

On December 22, 2014, the Independent High Authority for Elections in Tunisia announced the preliminary results of the second round of the presidential elections; they showed that Beji Caid Essebsi had won 1,731,529 votes, (55.7% of the vote), compared to Moncef Marzouki's 1,378,513, (44.3%). The first round saw a competition between 27 candidates and resulted in Essebsi coming in first with 39.5%, followed by Marzouki with 33.4 %. Though the difference between the two leading candidates was 11 percentage points in the second round, it was only 6 percentage points in the first. In both cases, the difference between them appears great in comparison to presidential election results in many Western countries. In the Arab world, people have become used to presidential elections lacking real competition and seeing the winner scoring exceedingly high percentages.

The presidential elections deepened the divisions in public opinion that first appeared during the legislative elections,[1] divisions that risk destabilising social cohesion if not addressed by the new president. This is especially true given the political strength that the president enjoys with a legislative majority for his Nidaa Tounes party, the support of several candidates eliminated in the first round, and the backing of political stakeholders that did not field candidates of their own (like Afaq and al Masar).

Background

To a certain extent, the presidential elections were an extension of the legislative elections that gave rise to at least three new phenomena that altered the entire political scene. The first was the Troika's loss of its majority. While the Ennahda Movement retained a considerable presence by winning 69 seats (compared to 87 in the 2011 elections), the Congress for the

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[1] See Hafedh Chekir, "The legislative elections in Tunisia: The start of a new phase or continuation of trench warfare," Arab Reform Initiative, December 2014.

* Hamadi Redissi is a professor of Public Law and Political Science at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tunis Al-Manar. Hafedh Chekir is a researcher at the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique (OTTD).

Republic won only 4 seats (compared to 29 previously), and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties collapsed and exited the parliamentary scene. The second was the emergence of the newly formed Nidaa Tounes as the most popular party, dominating the scene with a majority (86 seats). The third phenomenon was the entrance of the left-leaning Popular Front into parliament as a fourth-ranked force, separated by only one seat from the liberal-leaning Free Patriotic Union (15 vs. 16 seats). Occupying the leadership positions of three of the four top parties in the legislative elections were candidates for the presidential elections that followed: Essebsi, leader of Nidaa Tounes, Hamma Hammami, the Popular Front's representative and Slim Riahi, leader of the Free Patriotic Union.

One of the paradoxes is that the presidential elections attracted unprecedented attention despite the limited prerogatives of the position of president of the republic. Legislators wanted the country's system to be a rational parliamentary system that grants the head of government the power "to determine the state's general policy, and ensure its execution" (Articles 91 and subsequent relevant articles of the constitution). The constitution also rendered the head of government (the prime minister) accountable to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (the legislature), which has the right to grant or withdraw its confidence in him. In turn, the president of the republic "is responsible for representing the state. He/she is responsible for determining the general state policies in the areas of defence, foreign relations and national security..." He/she is also responsible for appointments of senior positions, in consultation with the head of government, alongside other responsibilities(such as declaring war, concluding peace, ratifying conventions, awarding medals, granting special amnesty and appointing the Mufti), as outlined in Articles 77 and subsequent relevant articles.

The presidential office thus maintains its aura in the popular imagination, which explains the high number of candidates, 77 in total, though the body that supervises the elections accepted only 27 of them. These had fulfilled the requirements, namely a recommendation by 10 deputies from the Constitutional Council or 10,000 citizens (of whom 5,000 hail from 10 different constituencies). Among the 27 candidates were 11 heads of parties, three former ministers under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, nine former opposition figures, among whom one was a woman (a judge and human rights activist), and nine with no previous political experience. Among them were also seven lawyers, three doctors and five businessmen; from the point of view of age, seven were no more than 50 and two were over 74 years old.

The above list did not include any candidates from the Ennahda Movement which, from the very beginning of the legislative and presidential election processes, advocated for a consensus candidate through contacts with other parties. The Movement was so serious in its quest that it refused to endorse the candidacy of its own former secretary general, Hamadi Jebali, who was forced to withdraw his candidacy and quit the Movement. Based on that, in its meeting of November 20, the Shura Council announced that Ennahda "chose to give its members and supporters the freedom to choose the person they deem most fit to lead the democratic process in Tunisia." In the second round, and in the wake of a series of tumultuous meetings, the Movement maintained its neutrality and reiterated its supporters' freedom of choice.

Candidate	Legislative elections		Presidential elections (first round)		Difference
	Votes for parties that backed candidate in presidential election	% of vote	Votes for candidate	% of vote	
Beji Caid Essebsi	Nidaa Tounes 1,279,941	36.9	1,289,394	39.5	9,443
Moncef Marzouki	Congress Party: 68,451 Democratic Current: 66,370 Ennahda: 947,017 Total: 1,081,838	31.1	1,092,418	33.4	10,619
Himma Hammadi	Popular Front: 122,436	3.5	255,529	7.8	133,093
Hachemi Hamdi	Al Mahaba: 40,591	1.2	187,923	5.8	147,332
Slim Riahi	Free Patriotic Union: 140,873	4.1	181,407	5.6	40,534
Kamal Murjan	Al Mubadara: 43,356	1.2	41,614	1.3	-1742
Ahmed Najib Chebbi	Republican Party: 55,576	1.6	34,025	1.0	-21,551
Mustafa Ben Jaafar	Ettakatol: 23,331	0.7	21,929	0.7	-1,402

Outcome of the presidential elections

Opinion polls gave the lead to Beji Caid Essebsi at least one year before the elections. Predictions of change began gaining popularity in summer 2013, especially after the Rahil sit-in (which began 26 July 2013 in Tunis and other cities calling for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly) that signalled the onset of the popular uprising that led to the Troika government's downfall. In the last opinion poll published by Sigma in July 2014, Essebsi obtained the highest percentage (29.8%), about 10% more than Marzouki (9.9) and Hamadi Jebali (11.2). It is worth noting that in this poll, a member of the Constitutional Front who had the support of around 10% of the vote was sidelined by his own voters in the first stage of the presidential elections.

Opinion Poll Conducted by Sigma in July 2014						
Kamal Murjan	Moncef Marzouki	Mohammad Jebali	Himma Hammami	Hachemi Hamadi	Beji Caid Essebsi	Mustapha Ben Jaafar
10.3%	9.9%	11.2%	4.8%	3.1%	29.8%	3.2%

The levels of participation were close in the two rounds, dropping from 62% to 59% of registered voters, while 70% of registered voters voted in the legislative elections; however, none of the candidates won an absolute majority in the first round. In that round, the results showed that Beji Caid Essebsi and Moncef Marzouki led the pack with a combined 73% of the vote, with Essebsi winning 39.5% and Marzouki 33.4% of the vote. Behind the top two contenders was a big drop in support with around 8% for Himma Hammami, and around 6% for each Hachemi Hamadi and Slim Riahi. This trio has different directions and reflects a

diverse public opinion. Hammami, who enjoys the Front's support, has an good record of struggle; Hamadi, who hails from Sidi Bouzid, enjoys a tribal base of support in the mid-western region (Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine), while Riahi rode a wave of support as a young rich businessman who showers the public with promises and boasts a complex network of relations, some of which are clientelist.

In the first round of the presidential election, the Nidaa Tounes candidate, Beji Caid Essebsi, won almost 1.3 million votes, nearly matching the number of votes obtained by Nidaa Tounes in the legislative elections. Independent candidate Marzouki, on the other hand, launched his candidacy with weak electoral credentials because the parties that supported him (Congress for the Republic and the Democratic Current) together brought in no more than 135,000 votes in the legislative elections. Despite this apparent handicap, he was able to attract 70% of Ennahda's voters and 5% of those who voted for Nidaa Tounes in the legislative elections. To were added his own supporters, the otherwise unaffiliated 11% who voted for him plus another 13% from supporters of other parties or those did not take part in the legislative elections.

Although Ennahda recommended a number of candidates (Hammouda Bin Salamah and Abdel Razzaq al Kilani, for example), Marzouki was the only one able to attract Ennahda supporters, persuading a number of their local and national cadres. This can be explained by his clever ability to present himself firstly as protector of the revolution, based on his judicial legacy, secondly as a balancing force between the legislative and executive branches in the face of Nidaa Tounes' potential aggressive behaviour and, thirdly as a safety valve against any potential return to the old system through the election of one of its historic leaders. His campaign focussed on Essebsi's advanced age and authoritarian past, portraying him as a symbol of the "counter revolution," to the point of accusing him of being a "tyrant." Marzouki addressed himself to young, downtrodden and angry citizens and to the Arab nationalists, Salafists and supporters of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. These were the ones who defended him in the press and social media and sat in the front rows of his gatherings (which elicited negative reactions among political circles, even some of his own sympathisers). His sympathisers among Ennahda faithful followers gave him around 18000 election observers in the first round and 31000 observers in the second. Ennahda's leadership, however, did not condemn the move, which it explained as its cadres' legitimate interest in ensuring the safety and transparency of the election process.

For his part, Beji Caid Essebsi relied on Nidaa Tounes' machinery and took advantage of his ability to assess the public mood, reassuring the public of his good intentions, his commitment to the achievements of the revolution and promotion of pluralism, all without alienating or marginalising anyone. He presented himself firstly as the man who, as prime minister (February to October 2011), led the country through the first stage of a safe transition that culminated in the first free and fair elections. Secondly he portrayed himself as the seasoned politician who helped the country avoid civil war when he participated with Ennahda in the National Dialogue during the Bardo strike in August 2014. Thirdly he presented himself as the statesman who can now restore the country's grandeur after the decline that happened in the wake of the Troika's mismanagement. Finally, he depicted himself as ideally situated to bridge the gap between Islam and democracy. From the liberal perspective it is the missing link in the Bourguibian authoritarian modernity.

Analysis of the results

The second round of the presidential elections was acrimonious, forcing different political stakeholders and the media to intervene to calm the situation down and call for the spirit of competition to prevail. The victory by Beji Caid Essebsi did not come as surprise for various reasons, the most important being Marzouki's lack of an impressive electoral record. Hamma Hammami, who came in third, openly stated, in both his own name and that of the Popular Front, the decision to "block Marzouki's path" for having involved himself in the Troika's foolish policies, and for his reliance on the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. In turn, Hachemi al Hamdi chose to keep quiet and left immediately after the first round for his home in London, Slim Riahi openly endorsed Beji Caid Essebsi and there was also a long list of supporters that joined the "presidential majority" around Essebsi. However, since the candidates do not own their voters' votes, two thirds of Himma Hammami's voters opted for Essebsi and one third for Marzouki; and while one quarter of Hachemi al Hamdi's voters opted for Essebsi and three-quarters for Marzouki, Slim Riahi's voters split between the two candidates. As for those who had voted for the bottom 22 candidates from the first round, they numbered only 260,906 voters (e.g. almost equivalent to the number of votes obtained by Hammami alone).

The final result saw Essebsi win by a margin of 55.7% to Marzouki's 44.3%, i.e., a difference of 11 percentage points at the national level. Marzouki added 286,016 votes to his first round tally and led in 15 constituencies, while Essebsi led in 18 of the more densely populated constituencies and increased his tally by 442,148 votes. Moreover, while the northern provinces (both east and west) and coastal regions favoured Essebsi, Marzouki won by a landslide in the southern provinces (both east and west), and led by a small margin in the mid-western constituencies (Kairouan and Kasserine), in Sfax and among the expatriate voters (except in France). In general, northern votes went to Essebsi and the southern ones to Marzouki, while the middle split between them equally. This difference deepens the rift between north and south that had appeared in the legislative elections. In El Kef, for example, (the north-west) Essebsi won 75.4% versus Marzouki's 24.6%, while in the southernmost regions, Marzouki won the highest percentage of votes (88.9%) in Tataouine, close to the Libyan border, versus 11.1% for his adversary. These differences mark important junctions in the country's political history. The south of Tunisia has been known since the middle of the 20th century for its links to Arab Islamic issues and its support for the Yousifiya Movement (Arabist), while the north was more receptive to Bouguibian thought. There are many reasons for this, chief among them is the internal migration from the northern regions to the capital and coastal areas. We noticed differences between the regions in marriages and fertility patterns, as well, which usually indicate deep social change.

According to opinion polls, age played a significant role. Older citizens between 45 and 59 years preferred Essebsi by more than 20 percentage points (61.8% vs. 38.2%), with the difference widening further for citizens over sixty, (74.6% vs. 25.4%). On the other hand, the votes of the youth (19 to 29 years) and middle-aged citizens (30 to 44 years) split equally between the two candidates. In terms of gender, Marzouki was supported by 46.8% of men and only 39% of women, while Essebsi won the support of 61% of women and 53.2% of men.

Marzouki's ideal voter is a young or middle-aged man from the southern provinces. Essebsi's is an older man or woman over fifty from the north, the coastal areas or greater Tunis.

The impact on Ennahda

The Ennahda Movement's Shura Council decided that it would not field a candidate and would give its voters and supporters the freedom to elect "the person they see as most fit" to be president of Tunisia. This neutral stance has had a negative impact on the Movement. Its opponents accused it of double-talk and threatened to exclude it from governmental consultations, especially since in the final analysis only 2.6% of Ennahda's electorate voted for Caid Essebsi. This means that Ennahda's base did not adopt a negative neutral stance but voted in force (70% of them) for Mr. Marzouki, almost equal to the number who voted for Ennahda in the legislative elections. In addition to differing assessments by the Movement's popular base and its moderate leadership, signs of a split in the leadership appeared when Hamadi Jebali, the former secretary general and a moderate, announced his implicit support for Marzouki on November 27 after the first round results were announced. He underlined "the need to elect a president of the republic from outside the party that won the legislative elections," and on December 11, announced his resignation from Ennahda in protest against the Movement's withdrawal from the presidential race. Jebali expressed the fear of "the people being taken back to the authoritarian system," and announced that he will be devoting his entire time to the defence of freedoms.

The crisis deepened further when Habib al Loz and Sadek Chourou, considered members of the extremist current within the Movement, sided with Jebali. On December 12, al Loz wrote in his blog that real neutrality meant "blocking the path to any return of authoritarianism and corruption," and a categorical break with any "alliance or partnership" with Nidaa Tounes, and called on Rached al Ghannouchi to assume his responsibilities. On the same day, Chourou wrote in his blog that the presidential race was a struggle between the project of freedom, justice and dignity and the return to the old regime. He said that duty requires that we first "resist against the counter revolutionary force" and support Marzouki, whose qualities make him "worthy of carrying this project's banner." He called on Ennahda's leadership to fear God and strive for the Movement's unity. In turn, the Movement's vice-president Sheikh Abdel-Fattah Mourou admitted the presence of a rift that could grow wider, saying in an interview with Sky News Arabia, "I expect a rift within Ennahda, and perhaps some of its base or youth will secede as punishment for its choice, because some of them are angry for not endorsing Marzouki." He added, "I expect Marzouki to establish a party whose base would be the young supporters who will withdraw from Ennahda." In a conversation with al Sabah newspaper on December 22, Sadek Chourou played down the intensity of the crisis inside the Movement but warned of the fallout from any rapprochement with Nidaa Tounes, due to the negative repercussions it would have on the Movement's unity. Rached al Ghannouchi was forced to publically defend the Movement's neutrality and reassure the angry voter base. He stated in various newspaper and television interviews that the Movement's neutrality had spared the country civil war, adding that the elections might have been hampered or stalled had Ennahda fielded a candidate (by which he means that a coup would have taken place). He went on to say that the fear among the wide base of the

Movement's supporters and public opinion was that Nidaa Tounes will act aggressively was unjustified, and that he trusted the new president.

In reality, Ennahda fell into its own technical trap because of too many assumptions. It was almost certain of winning the legislative elections in a manner that would give it a margin of negotiations in the presidential race, especially since it was not able to referee among its two candidates, Ali al Areed and Hamadi Jebali, both of whom were seeking the Party's endorsement. The aim behind the "consensus president" idea was to overcome the crisis and keep the balance of power in place until the legislative election results were complete and most parties accepted, within the context of the National Dialogue, Ennahda's right to the presidency. However, the rejection by all candidates of the consensus president idea, including those close to the Movement, imposed neutrality on Ennahda as the least damaging option, though it ended up being more costly.

Conclusion: From Conflict to Consensus

Moncef al Marzouki seems to be the current winner from the uncertainty among Ennahda's leadership and supporter base; the reason is that he has not thrown in the towel and expressed his readiness to forge ahead towards mobilising his supporters and rallying the public around him. Though he hinted at having certain doubts about the election results, thus causing disturbances to erupt in the south, he retreated and announced from his campaign headquarters the launch of a "Citizens' Movement." In doing so, Marzouki took advantage of the anger brewing, thus turning himself from an ally to an adversary of Ennahda. Will he succeed in launching a third poll that brings together all the disgruntled elements? And will he meet with the cadres that are left or will leave Ennahda? The most recent is Abdel Hameed al Jalasi, the Movement's vice president who, on January 28, announced his resignation from his position in the executive office for reasons that are still murky. Is it due to al Ghannouchi's unilateral decision-making or to his refusal to deal with Nidaa Tounes?

However, Beji Caid Essebsi turned the tables on everyone. He was expected, as president of the republic, to ask Nidaa Tounes, which obtained the highest number of seats, to form the government, as Article 89 of the constitution requires. He decided instead to appoint to the post Habib Essid, a consensus figure who was minister of the interior in Essebsi's first government (February to October 2011), and a security consultant to Hamadi Jebali's government (2011-2013). The move came as a response to criticisms born of the fear that Nidaa Tounes would monopolise the three main leadership positions (the presidency of the republic and the Council, and the head of government). Essid held negotiations with all parties without exception, including those not interested in being part of his government. Initially, the intention was to form a government that adheres to Nidaa Tounes' secular beliefs and Essebsi's promise to govern only alongside those who share a similar background. However, after marathon consultations, Essid announced a government of weak legitimacy, 70% of whose members were independent figures, raising in the process the ire of all the parties, including Nidaa Tounes itself. The Popular Front (15 seats) boycotted the government, Afaq (8 seats) displayed great anger and Ennahda (69 seats) expressed disappointment at being completely left out of the government. They all threatened to withhold confidence in the government, forcing Essid to reconsider its formation, and embark on a more serious round of negotiations. However, with the issue hinging on whether

Ennahda would be part of the government, Nidaa Tounes members were split between those who approved and those who did not. In an emergency meeting, their parliamentary bloc rejected the idea (by 70 out of 86 votes) followed by the executive committee's decision, one day before the second government formation was announced. However, the official announcement of the government on February 3, 2015 came contrary to expectations based on the election results, and confused observers. Essid announced a coalition government whose members hailed from four different parties; Ennahda got one ministerial portfolio and three secretary of state posts, the sovereign ministries (Interior, Justice and Defence) were entrusted to neutral figures, and the foreign ministry was given to the secretary general of Nidaa' Tounes.

It is clear that the head of state, Essebsi, holds all the strings and chose consensus over conflict, and an easy majority over a simple one for a government that, in a quasi referendum (169 out of 217 votes), won the confidence of parliament on February 5, 2015. This outcome is the result of a personal agreement between al Ghannouchi and Essebsi, both of whom imposed controversial options on their respective broad support bases. If consensus is the theme that defines these moves, then real partnership remains contingent on healing the wounds of the "rejectionist front" within both Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, and on convincing Nidaa Tounes' voters that the decision was a good one. This in turn is contingent upon the government's success in resolving the economic crisis, promoting development, and responding to the urgent needs of ordinary people.

About the authors

Hafedh Chekir is a member of the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique, demographer and statistician. His areas of interests include: demographic studies, demographic change, birth rates and immigration and public opinion surveys.

Hamadi Redissi is professor in Public Law and Political Science, Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tunis. He was a visiting scholar at Yale University in 2008 and annual visiting professor at St Joseph University (Beirut) and the Faculty of Political Science (Bologna).

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