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Tunisia Presidential Elections 2019

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TRT WORLD
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Introduction

On July 25th 2019, the death of Tunisia's first democratically elected President, Beji Caïd Essebsi, following the uprising of 2011, was announced. Unlike many of Tunisia's counterparts which took part in the so-called Arab Spring, Tunisia has often been hailed as one of the success stories for its transition to democracy following 22 years of authoritarianism under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Instead of Essebsi's passing descending the country into the throes of chaos, Tunisia has instead remained true to its path of democracy and its constitution by bringing forward the date of presidential elections from November 17 to 15 September.

However, the challenge of maintaining good governance in a country riddled by corruption remains Tunisia's biggest challenge. Since 2011, Tunisia has had ten major government changes, which have caused public trust in political parties and institutions to plummet. The new president faces the challenge of fixing the state's budget deficit, a stagnant economy with high inflation and an increasing unemployment rate of 15.2 per cent, up 3 per cent from before the revolution.

Despite its problems, Tunisia has managed to remain strong in the last nine years, and its experiments with political plurality have both been positive and negative for the country. One of Tunisia's main political parties in the current power coalition, Ennahda, is being observed closely particularly in whether it can maintain current as well as new support as it seeks to transition away from the label of political Islam towards "Muslim democrats". Its presidential hopes are part and parcel of Tunisia's current experiment in becoming a liberal democracy and time will no doubt reveal the rights and wrongs of this rocky political period.



(Yassine Gaidi- AA)

OVERVIEW OF TUNISIA'S POLITICS

- The 1959 constitution granted the president sweeping executive and legislative powers.
- Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba's party, the Neo-Destour Party, later renamed the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), was the only legal political party until 1981.
- In 1988, a multiparty system was introduced and elections held a year later in 1989 but the RCD still dominated.
- Laws banning political parties based on ethnicity, religion, language, or region prevented the Islamist Ennahda Party from acquiring legal status to be able to run and many of its leaders were imprisoned or exiled. Islamist exclusion from politics changed after the ousting of the Ben Ali regime in 2011.
- In January 2014 the majority of the 217-member Constituent Assembly voted to approve a constitution that was acceptable to all sides of the political spectrum.
- The legislative authority is held by a single chamber, the Assembly of the People's Representatives. A president can be impeached if the Assembly of the People's Representatives manages to secure two-thirds in a vote.
- The Constitution of 2014 limits the role of the military, guarantees equality between men and women, the independence of the judiciary, the separation of politics and religion and ensures that executive power is shared between prime minister and president.
- After legislative elections, a cabinet is formed within four months. Failure to do so results in the possibility of the assembly being dissolved and new legislative elections.
- The president is elected for five years and is allowed two terms, has to be Tunisian, over the age of 35 and a Muslim.
- The criteria to run also includes having 10,000 citizen signatories or 10 parliamentary signatories or 40 elected municipal leaders, $3,400 must be deposited to the country's treasur.
- There have been ten governments in eight years as well as seven prime ministers and three cabinet reshuffles.
- The speaker of the assembly is elected by members of parliament and becomes interim president in the event of the death of the president; in this year's case Mohamed Ennaceur is the current interim president.

MANEUVERING THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

- The 2019 presidential and legislative elections will be Tunisia's fourth round of elections since the 2011 revolution and its second democratic presidential elections. The initial date for elections was in November but due to Beji Caid Essebsi's death on July 25th the date was pushed to September.
- Predicting a winner this year is difficult due to how open this year's election is.
- Parliamentary elections will take place in October.
- Registered voters in Tunisia rose to seven million this year but the main question is how many will choose to abstain from doing so due to the high levels of distrust in the political system.
- In order to ensure that the elections are truly democratic, national and international monitoring groups will be present but they often fail to account for all fraudulent activities.
- Further developments in civil rights have paved the way for civil society to strengthen including the operation of watch-dogs like AlBawsala, I-Watch or Nawaat.
- This year's presidential candidates had to announce their candidacies between July 22nd to 23rd with the list of the 26 eligible candidates announced on August 31st.
- Candidates can only campaign between September 2nd to the 13th before voting takes place on September 15th and the preliminary results expected two days later on the 17th.
- Three televised debates, a rare sight in MENA politics, will be held between Tunisia's presidential hopefuls and broadcast on 11 TV channels and over 20 radio stations.

Election Climate

Eight years after the "Jasmine Revolution", disenchantment with the political system and impatience with the country's rocky democratic transition has reached an all time high. Whilst Tunisians are split in how they assess the last five-years of Caid Essebsi in politics, it is likely to be defined by his attempt to reconcile his secular position with the Islamist opposition through consensus and national unity.

He will be remembered for co-brokering the historic power-share between his party Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda which was able to anchor the country. However, his legacy has now torn his party apart with divisionary positions on his consensus policies and alliance with Islamists, modernised or not, which also failed to ease the economic crisis or people's frustrations.

According to a Afrobarometer survey taken in 2018, support for democracy decreased significantly from 70 percent in 2013 to 46 percent in 2018 with many Tunisians believing that politicians are simply too out of touch with the everyday issues they face. 79 percent of those surveyed also expressed uncertainty whether they would vote or not or who they would choose which is representative of the thinking many Tunisians share of the ballot box not exacting much change given how the problems which caused the first wave of protests in 2011 have not been adequately dealt with.

The government has imposed painful austerity measures such as allowing the dinar to fall over 20% against the dollar in the last two years. However this fall has also proven positive, opening the doors for tourists to resume their holidays, following the lull in visitors after the terror attacks in 2015, as well as boosting some exports.

In the last municipal elections on 6 May 2018, independent candidates did better than party candidates, gaining 33 percent and 29 percent of the vote respectively, which is an indicator of the general distrust of the current organised political scene. The results of the elections ended up destabilising the parliamentary and government coalition between the secularists, Nidaa Tounes, and Ennahda, which in turn exacerbated the fight for control of Nidaa Tounes this year forcing Youssef Chahed to quit the party and form his own. The paralysation of the government and parliament is largely due to these disputes, influenced by powerful businessmen/women, particularly on whether Chahed, who has not seen eye to eye with Hafedh Essebsi, the son of the late president, should resign from his post as prime minister.

Due to the electoral commission (ISIE) banning the publication of polls it is difficult for observers to evaluate the strength of each candidate this year. The fear for many Tunisians is to see a regression to authoritarianism and so the more palatable exit from any crisis is to see a technocratic government and for the duties of parliament honoured so issues surrounding the PM are dealt solely by it. The question of the role of the president is one of the main political questions, namely how much authority over parties they are given and whether parliament and the government can fully exercise their duties and powers afforded to them by the constitution.

The signatories of the Carthage Agreement, the roadmap of the National Unity Government (NUG), signed on 13 July 2016, face the task of finding a compromise in order to end the internal fighting and crisis of government and to convince Tunisians away from choosing to abstain from voting (the municipal elections saw 66.3 percent of Tunisian voters boycott the elections).

The Tunisian General Labour Union, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for its role in resolving the political crisis of July 2013 in the National Dialogue Quartet, has also opposed the economic and social direction of Chahed's government and has mobilised protests as a result. The presence of anti-democratic networks in politics, business and administration, as well as those loyal to the old system have all contributed to any post-2011 political achievements facing the threat of being reversed.

But whilst distrust of the political system is high for many Tunisians, civil society enjoys better support for keeping Tunisians informed through their close monitoring of institutions and for aiding the democratic transition. Civil society was instrumental in passing a 2017 law that protects whistleblowers who uncover corruption and also established the Truth and Dignity Commission (whose mandate expired in December 2018) to investigate human rights abuses under the authoritarian rule.

Main Parties

Ennahda
founded in 1981 (holds 68 seats) headed by **Rached Ghannouchi**

Tahya Tounes
founded in 2019 (holds 44 seats) headed by **Youssef Chahed**

Nidaa Tounes
founded in 2012 (holds 41 seats) was headed by **Beji Caid Essebsi**

Machrou Tounes,
founded in 2016 (holds 16 seats) headed by **Mohsen Marzouk**

Popular Front
founded in 2012 (holds 15 seats) headed by **Mohamed Jmour**

Candidates to Note



Abdelfattah Mourou (71)

Ennahda's Candidate

The first to run as a presidential candidate for Ennahda in 38 years, winning 98 of the party's votes. Mourou replaced Mohamed Ennaceur as the parliamentary interim speaker after the latter became the country's acting president following Essebsi's death. There are mixed reviews to Mourou's success, some view his moderatness as a breath of fresh air for the party, others see his religious standing as overriding his competence as a lawyer and politician. Mourou, who is likely to make it past the second round of voting, due to the split amongst the secularists, has distanced himself from some of the more socially conservative positions of Ennahda and is known for his good standing amongst the party's opponents. Mourou has promised that if elected he will be "president of all Tunisians, not president for Ennahda supporters".



Youssef Chahed (43)

Tahya Tounes' Candidate

Chahed has delegated his PM duties to public service minister Kamal Morjane while he undertakes his campaign in the spirit of "Habib Bourguiba's vision for the country, with a focus on the state, education, health, women and the administration." An unpopular figure amongst Tunisians across the spectrum for some of his austerity and privatisation measures as well as for failing to ease the high unemployment rate, some believe he puts other candidates at an unfair disadvantage due to his current position and the resources at his disposal. Chahed, who renounced his French citizenship so he could run, believes he has been a figure of target because of his government's "open war" against corruption.



Abdelkarim Zbidi (69)

Nidaa Tounes' Candidate

Zbidi, an independent candidate backed by Nidaa, is the current defence minister and a former Essebsi ally. He is seen as a balancing act between liberals, democrats and leftists. After a poor start at his first press conference in which his communication skills were criticised, Zbidi will need to ensure his campaign sails a lot smoother if he is to find favour amongst voters. He has promised to "restart the social ladder", improve public services by making them more accessible for Tunisians and to revise the constitution so that the head of state has unsharable powers.



Nabil Karoui (55)

Qalb Tounes' Candidate

The Television mogul is currently in prison facing charges of money laundering and tax evasion and is unlikely to be released before election day. Despite his incarceration, Karoui is one of the more popular candidates and is expected to do well due to the support he has garnered from his charitable activities around Tunisia. A self-styled "outsider" Karoui is seeking to shake up Tunisian politics. Due to the ban on his popular Nessma TV channel from reporting on the presidential campaigns, unknown advertisers decorated large billboards with the words "prison will not stop us, see you on 15 September" which may be in violation of campaign laws. His campaign is currently being run by his wife Salwa Smaoui, a senior director at Microsoft. Karoui's candidacy was almost prevented in June this year after the government passed an amendment that would see new conditions for presidential candidates directly affecting Karoui. However Caid Essebsi died before it could be ratified. His party believe his arrest is a political move and that the politician has been singled out by Chahed's government.



Abir Moussi (44)

Free Destourian Party's Candidate

The former deputy secretary general of the party of ousted president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the Democratic Constitutional Rally. Moussi is largely seen as a Ben Ali apologist and has called for the return of the fundamentals of his regime. She is known for her hardline views against the participation of Islamists in the political sphere and has vowed to launch an "investigation" into the events of January 14, 2011 which saw Ben Ali ousted from power which voters nostalgic for a Tunisia pre-2011 will find favour in. Despite being supported mainly by middle class Tunisians, her mission is to convince Tunisians, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, that nothing was gained from the 2011 uprising which she refuses to term as a "revolution".

The Power Coalition

The alliance between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes ended with an announcement on September 24 2018 by Caid Essebsi after four years following Nidaa Tounes' win in the 2014 elections and a consensus reached with Ennahda which resulted in a ruling coalition.

The consensus between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes was based off the "secularist-Islamist rapprochement" during the 2000s a model which later helped Tunisia to navigate towards the Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011. But deep political polarisation between Islamists and Secularists stunted the constitutional-drafting phase between 2012 and 2013 which intensified following the assisanination of two prominent political figures. However a year later the country was able to hold its second national elections democratically and adopt a new constitution thanks to the National Dialogue Quartet, comprised of human rights activists, lawyers and labour unionists.

Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes decided to power share in a coalition with Afek Tounes and the Free Patriotic Union after securing sixty-nine and eighty-five seats respectively and attempted to use the medium of dialogue to quell the polarisation and to refocus efforts on the economy. In 2016, the Carthage Agreement was created and the National Unity Government (NUG) established, which also included three unions and five opposition parties, and was tasked with improving fiscal policies, combatting terrorism and reducing the high rates of employment. Prime Minister Habib Essid was replaced by Youssef Chahed whose mission via the NUG was to see the Agreement implemented but which never came to much fruition legislatively.

The coalition failed to truly create unity between all the fundamentally different political parties and the revolutionaries and figures from the Ben Ali regime. Maintaining the current parliamentary and government coalition has required more effort that would have been better placed in the implementation and consolidation of Tunisia's constitution rather than the weakening of its institutions and its tepid economy. While the idea behind the coalition was to offset the deep polarisation in order to attempt to deal with the country's pressing issues, the inclusion of over 80 percent of Tunisia's parliament within the coalition ended up eradicating the opposition and those who could prevent the government from passing problematic laws. In 2018, Nidaa Tounes suffered from the low voter turnouts more so than Ennahda who has remained the stronger entity in light of Nidaa's internal issues.

Since 2014, the coalition has instead alleviated the country's political polarisation and postponed key reforms such as establishing a new Constitutional court, independent constitutional authorities, and increasing parliamentary autonomy. The decentralisation process has also been delayed due to fears that electing regional councils will weaken central government. Many of the revolution's aims have not been met by the failed consensus between Ennahda and Nidaa and laws have come into effect which threaten to regress the country away from its course towards liberal democracy.

The questions surrounding the elections are whether or not it will reshape the political system into a more presidential one, whether further changes to the constitution can be expected and necessary reforms finally passed. What remains to be seen is if the split between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes will pave the way for the opposition to strengthen which may in fact prove more beneficial for the success of Tunisia's delicate democratic experiment.



(Enes Canlı- AA)

Thoughts from Observers



Sharan Grewal
Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Do you feel the presidential elections have been prioritised more so than the parliamentary elections next month?

The presidential elections were originally scheduled for after the parliamentary ones, but were moved up as a result of former President Essebsi's death. This is unfortunate as the president, constitutionally, is supposed to only be a secondary player, less powerful than the prime minister, and involved primarily in foreign policy and defense. Instead, since the presidential elections are being held first, the presidential candidates are getting the full electoral hype and media attention. This attention may implicitly feed into popular demands for a return to a presidential system, as many Tunisians are already frustrated with the slow and relatively ineffective consensual politics that have characterized the semi-presidential system thus far.

Should we anticipate a possible return to authoritarianism?

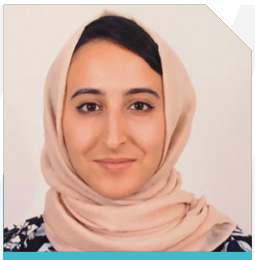
There is growing disillusionment with democracy, as it has largely failed to improve the economy and the everyday lives of Tunisians. By almost all metrics the economy is even worse today than that which led to the Arab Spring in the first place. Accordingly, most surveys find that support for democracy has fallen from roughly 70% to 40% today, with a corresponding uptick in support for dictatorship. This disillusionment has contributed to support for populist candidates who are making grand promises of eradicating poverty whether or not they respect democratic structures.

How are the presidential elections a test for Tunisia's democracy and how will it serve as an example for the greater MENA particularly following the so-called Arab Spring?

The danger for Tunisia's democracy would be the victory of one of these populist outsiders who in turn governs autocratically, and remains in power through corruption and vote-buying. Tunisia's democracy is particularly susceptible to this form of breakdown, both because of the popular disillusionment with democracy and because of the lack of institutional checks on the presidency - there is no constitutional court and the parliament remains relatively weak. It is important that Tunisia pass this test, as a strong vibrant democracy could serve as a model if not an ally for democracy activists across the region.



(Yassine Gaidi- AA)



Mariem Masmoudi

Tunisian Political Analyst

Do you feel the results of the elections will come as a surprise given how open the race is?

Speaking of the first round of presidential elections, if we were to see sweeping support for one particular candidate such that a second round is unnecessary, yes, that would indeed be a huge surprise. More likely, a second round will be necessary, and what will be a surprise there will be who the contender to Abdelfattah Mourou will be, because it is almost certain that Ennahdha's support base will be enough to get him into a second round. Once there, however, it seems all-but-guaranteed that the other candidate, not Mourou, will win. While he is very well respected even outside of Enahdha or even conservative circles in Tunisia, fear of Enahdha remains a significant enough factor that would preclude a Mourou victory.

How do Tunisians perceive this year's elections?

By and large, Tunisians have grown weary of politics because of all the unfortunately negative and destructive rhetoric and actions we've seen by individuals or parties over the years. But they do seem more excited and hopeful for the presidential elections than for the parliamentary elections. Whether it is because of Tunisia's history with one-man rule, or because of very legitimate criticisms of large numbers of MPs' behaviors and policies, Tunisians largely are rallying more for the presidential elections than the parliamentary elections that will follow.

What challenges does Tunisia face from external actors hoping to see a certain result?

Though relatively successful in maintaining a generally stable political system since the revolution, Tunisia is hardly out of the crosshairs of nefarious foreign actors. One particularly poignant way of quantifying this challenge is through political party funding; parliament has passed a number of important laws to track and monitor political party funding, but this has thus far been limited to only domestic transactions and fails to account for in-person cash transfers. A second important challenge has been social media campaigns, which are too easily orchestrated from anywhere in the globe with relatively little effort and with considerable consequences.



Sarah Yerkes

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

As one of the so-called Arab Spring's success stories how has Tunisian politics evolved in the last eight years?

The political transition has been mostly successful – by the end of the year, Tunisia will have had three legislative elections, two presidential elections, local elections as well as a progressive, liberal constitution, the development of a mostly independent media sector and extremely vibrant civil society. There is still a lot of work to be done in implementing the constitution – particularly in the judicial sector (like creating the Constitutional Court) and in continuing to devolve power from the central state to the regions and localities, but on balance, the political transition has made tremendous progress.

What are the expected results of the elections this year and the levels of change likely to be enforced?

I really don't know who is likely to win either the legislative or presidential elections (which, by the way, is another sign of a healthy democracy – not knowing the outcome in advance). However, after Essebsi's death, it is clear that there will be a change in power. We could see Ennahda take the presidency and prime ministership. We could see Ennahda take one but not the other. We could see a technocratic government under Zbidi. Or we could see Chahed keep the reins. Regardless, though, this marks a new phase in the democratic transition and whoever is elected will need to focus on addressing the economic situation.

I do think turnout will not reflect how important or monumental this election is. Turnout has steadily decreased in each election, and people are incredibly frustrated with the government's inability to deliver positive economic change. So while we have seen a big increase in the number of registered voters, we may not see a huge turnout.

What does the future look like for the NUG & the balance of power in Tunisia?

I don't have a great answer about that yet – it is too speculative. Several of the candidates and parties have said they would be willing to work with Ennahda, so we could see another coalition government. Or we could see Ennahda not needing partners. Or a more secular coalition amongst various parties. We shall see! On the balance of power, what is most interesting is that multiple candidates have discussed changing the duties of the president and the prime minister to make Tunisia into more of a presidential system or more of a traditional parliamentary system. I'm not sure anyone will be able to make that happen, as it would require amending the constitution, but it is interesting that that is being debated today



Youssef Cherif
Tunis-Based Analyst

Given the deep political polarisation in Tunisia can we say the coalition between Secularists and Islamists has failed?

Actually, the coalition was doomed to fail since its early days because Nidaa Tounes collapsed a few months after the 2014 elections. The consensus was therefore an entente between a well established leader (Ghannouchi, head of Ennahda since the 1970s, who therefore enjoyed strong support and faithful allies) and Caid Essebsi, whom supporters only recently discovered (after 2011) and whose support was consequently easier to dissipate. The philosophy behind the coalition, i.e. a dialogue and understanding between secularists and islamists, didn't take hold. But it succeeded in keeping institutions working and in decreasing the ideological polarization (Islamists Vs. Secularists) that we see less in these elections than in 2014.

What are the challenges Tunisia's political system faces and will the elections change much?

There is widespread corruption, a slow and partly-ineffective bureaucracy, and a major lack of confidence in the institutions among the population. I don't think the elections can change this directly, but perhaps a new government/parliament can push towards more reforms.

What do Tunisians hope to see in these elections & how can the political class hope to secure their trust once again?

Tunisians want a better life, cheaper commodity prices and more rewarding jobs. They will vote for the candidates who will promise this. This actually paves the way for populists who will say they will do these things but who actually can't. The mistrust will hence persist. Tunisia needs competent, democratic, non-populist leaders who are able to work with less animosity towards each other and who can unify rather than divide.



(Nacer Talel- AA)

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