

DISCUSSION PAPER

Tunisia's Presidential Elections: A Reflection of Popular Discontent?

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Introduction

On Sunday 13th of October, Tunisians headed to the polls for a presidential run-off to choose between two extraordinary contenders- law professor Kais Saied and media magnate Nabil Karoui. In an open competition in which no one knew who the winner would be, a rarity in the region, Saied became the country's next President with a landslide victory by garnering more than 70 per cent of the vote according to the official results (Aljazeera, 2019). While the voter turnout was only around 55 per cent (BBC, 2019), it was still higher than both the first round of the presidential election and the parliamentary election despite the debates on the possibility of election fatigue as the runoff was the third vote within the scope of five weeks. Looking at Saied's striking victory in numbers, the strong support of the citizens also resulted in him surpassing the total amount of votes won by the entire parliament combined.

Notwithstanding the prevailing popularity of both Karoui and Saied, the outcome of the election still came as a surprise to many, since the first round of the presidential race was significantly competitive. Not only were there 24 candidates running for the post (two of them withdrew a day before the election) but among them were many political heavyweights including some former prime ministers (Hammadi Jabali and Mehdi Jomaa), a former president (Moncef Marzouki) in addition to the incumbent Prime Minister (Youssef Chahed) and the defense minister (Abdelkarim Zbidi). Moreover, for the first time, the 'Muslim democrat'[1] - Ennahda Party put forward its nominee rather than rallying support behind a non-affiliated candidate as it did in the first presidential election of the post-Ben Ali era in 2014. Predictably, within this crowded field of competitors, the votes were divided. While no one succeeded in securing more than 20 per cent of the votes, the candidates who received the highest percentage were not from the establishment elite but were political outsiders. In fact, the results were a manifestation of the disappointment among Tunisian voters with the existing political actors and their failed promises.

This paper examines the reasons behind this protest vote that carried Saied to the presidency. Firstly, it discusses the failures of consensus politics between the country's leading political parties, namely Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda. It then proceeds to examine two vital causes behind this disillusionment being the deteriorating economic situation and rampant corruption that have not been tackled efficiently by any of the governments since the revolution. Finally, it analyses the appeal of both Saied and Karoui as populist anti-establishment candidates and the ways in which they managed to capitalize on the growing discontent among Tunisians. Thus, while it argues that all of these interconnected factors have led to the alienation of citizens from the existing class of politicians, they also resulted in a quest for alternatives which eventuated in people choosing Saied as their new president.

[1] During the tenth congress of the party in May 2015, Ennahda declared the separation of politics and religious preaching (dawa') and rebranded itself as a 'Muslim democratic' party.

2014 Election: Unexpected Alliances

On October 2014, Tunisia held its second parliamentary election following the revolution. The main secular party, Nidaa Tounes, emerged victorious securing 86 out of 217 seats in the legislature (Carnegie Endowment, 2017). The Ennahda Party which was the biggest coalition partner in the government that was formed following the first post-revolution election, fell into the second place by winning 69 seats (Ibid).

The election took place amid a political crisis that began with the assassination of two leading leftist politicians Chokri Belaid in February and Mohamed Brahmi in July in 2013. Simultaneously, the military coup which took place in Egypt also contributed to the already existing tensions and polarisation between the two ideological camps. The secularist opposition groups led by Nidaa had already been denouncing the government as being illegitimate due to the coalition's lack of progress in enacting a new constitution and scheduling of the upcoming elections (Marks, 2015, p.8). The opposition also held Ennahda as ultimately responsible for the death of the politicians (Wolf, 2014a, p.3). After months of anti-government protests following the assassinations, eventually Ennahda was forced to step down handing power to a technocratic government on the lead to the upcoming elections.

The 2014 parliamentary election was seen as a referendum on Ennahda's political performance (The Guardian, 2014). In this regard, the winning party, Nidaa Tounes, not only united secularists in a bid to counter Islamists (Marks, 2014) but also capitalized on both the economic stagnation and the political turmoil to garner votes through creating a perception that they would be the key player making sure that the transition process was kept on track (Wolf, 2014b, 2). That being said, although Ennahda came second in the election, despite all the chaos and frustration, the result was an indicator that the party had been able to establish itself as a major force in the political arena (Ibid.).

In December same year following the parliamentary election, the country held the second round of its first post-revolutionary Presidential election. The result was another victory for Nidaa Tounes as the leader of the party Beji Caid Essebsi won the election in a run-off ballot by claiming over 55 per cent of the votes against his competitor, Moncef Marzouki, who served as an interim President after the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (BBC, 2014).

Being the largest party in the parliament, Nidaa Tounes was tasked with forming the government. After the first cabinet proposal by the newly appointed Prime Minister Habib Essid was denounced by other parties in the parliament as being 'non-representative', Essid announced a grand coalition government that included Ennahda on February 2015 (Marks, 2015).

While this breakthrough coalition between the two leading rivals was praised internationally, it led to dissatisfactions domestically, especially among the respective voter bases. Secularists have long been concerned about the possibility of Ennahda's employment of democratic mechanisms for the sake of imposing their own vision on the rest of the country (Cavatorta, 2018, p.244). For them, the issue at stake was the protection of their individual rights and freedoms from any religious restrictions (Zemni, 2015, p.13). These concerns were particularly evident during the constitution drafting process with regards to three contentious issues being the possibility of inclusion of Sharia, the definition of the status of women, and blasphemy (Marks, 2014, p.20). Despite the fears, Ennahda complied with the consensus in each one of the topics and the new constitution was adopted in 2014 ahead of the elections that was held in the same year. However, for Nidaa Tounes, being a party that was founded on the premise of countering Islamists, becoming coalition partners with Ennahda risked alienation of its voters (Wolf, 2014b, p.5). On the other hand, Ennahda's sup-

porters viewed Nidaa as being the descendants of the old regime which committed a series of human rights violations such as torture against the political opposition in the country including themselves (Ibid.). Thereby, Ennahda's alignment with Nidaa was seen as an act of disloyalty to both party's past and the revolution (Ajmi, 2014). Nevertheless, despite the concerns, the alliance was justified by the party leaders Essebsi and Rached Ghannouchi as a necessary step to avert polarization and to constitute political stability and unity to tackle mounting challenges with regards to economy and security (Grewal and Hamid, 2018).

The inclusive coalition government broadened further into a more all-encompassing alliance under the Carthage Agreement resulting in a national unity government in July 2016. Along with the ruling parties in the coalition (Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, Afek Tounes and the Free Patriotic Union), five other opposition parties (Machrou Tounes, al- Moubadara, al-Joumhouri, al-Massar, and Harakat el-Chaab) and three unions (the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian Union for Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishery) were included in the equation (Yerkes and Yahmed, 2019, p.2,3). While six priorities have been pronounced in the agreement, "combatting terrorism, encouraging development, growth and work, fighting corruption, ordering public finances, decentralization and increasing government efficiency", in reality, these points provided a rather vague roadmap for the national unity government to follow (Dihstelhoff and Sold, 2016). In line with this blueprint, Essid was replaced with Youssef Chahed as the new Prime Minister was entrusted with fulfilling the proposed reform agenda (Yerkes and Yahmed, 2019, p.3).

However, despite the high hopes, in September 2018, almost two years after the formalization of the power-sharing deal between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, the consensus between two parties ended (Reuters, 2018). Although the parties have been at two different ends of the ideological spectrum, the reason for parting ways has not been because of the disputes between the political partners, but rather a reflection of the internal rifts within Nidaa Tounes. Ever since the accession of Essebsi to the Presidency the party has been plagued with a leadership struggle and the President has been accused of trying to make way for his son, Hafedh Essebsi, to replace him (Williamson, 2016). Thus, when Ennahda party decided to back Chahed's bid to keep his post amid the political battle with Hafedh Essebsi, the President declared that he had ended his alliance with Ghannouchi (The Economist, 2018).

While this grand consensus was celebrated as an important step in the country's democratic transition, in reality, it turned out to be problematic on a number of fronts. First of all, as almost 80 percent of the parliament was part of the ruling coalition, there was no meaningful opposition to pressure the government on its policy-decisions (Grewal and Hamid, 2018). Therefore, despite the criticisms raised by civil society organizations, the coalition was able to enact controversial laws such as the counterterrorism law that permits the detention of terror suspects for almost two weeks without any criminal charges, thereby endangering human rights (Ibid.). Moreover, even though Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes have been the key coalition partners, both the policymaking process and the cabinet were dominated by the latter (Yerkes, 2018). With Ennahda keeping in line with Nidaa's proposals and agenda, in time the two parties became indistinguishable from each other (Grewal and Hamid, 2018). Ennahda's inability to push for reforms on issues regarding transitional justice, corruption and the economy have led to a disenchantment among its voter base that the party would be able to bring about long-anticipated socioeconomic change (Meddeb, 2019, p.13,14). Overall, even though the coalition kept the country from falling into chaos, it did not secure any long-term agreement among the country's elites and deepened an already existing disappointment among the voters that none of the political parties could be relied upon to solve their problems.

Enduring Challenges: Economy and Corruption

Economic issues and corruption remain as the top priorities waiting to be addressed by the new President and the forthcoming government. Looking at the state of affairs over the course of eight years after the revolution, it is clear that the general situation has deteriorated. Hence, Tunisians are not only disillusioned with the existing class of political actors and their parties but also with the political system itself (Grewal, 2019).

Economic concerns were one of the primary driving factors which led to the revolution. In the years since, economic growth fell short of fulfilling expectations. For instance, while in 2011 the unemployment rate was at 18 per cent, today the situation has barely improved with the rates dropping only to 15 per cent (World Bank). Similarly, whereas the inflation rate ranged between 3 to 4 per cent during the year of the revolution, this year it has reached 6.3 per cent by the month of November (Trading Economics a). Moreover, while the country's foreign debt was around 40 per cent of the national GDP in 2011, it has increased to as high as 70 per cent according to the most recent data (Trading Economics b). As the statistics show, despite the high hopes, the majority of citizens did not end up in better socioeconomic conditions after the revolution.

Following the agreement on a $2.8 billion loan program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in December 2016 (Reuters, 2019a) and the subsequent adoption of austerity measures, the country has experienced a fresh wave of demonstrations. The underlying reason was the government's initiation of reform policies in line with the IMF demands to cut the budget deficit such as freezing recruitment and wages within the public sector and imposing tax increases, thereby worsening an already difficult situation (Chandoul,



Security measures are taken as Tunisian civil servants and workers gather during a protest within a general strike held for wage increase by Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) in Tunis, Tunisia on November 22, 2018. (Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

2018). Despite the government's claims that the hardship caused by these measures would be temporary, the perception among Tunisians has been rather grim (Gallien, 2018). So far, the country's biggest labour union, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), managed to reach an agreement on an increase in wages after months of protests (TRT World, 2019).

Even though the fact that these chronic economic problems are felt on a country-wide scale, the severe impacts of the crisis can be seen more drastically in the interior and southern regions of the country. It has been the Tunisian hinterlands that have been suffering from "multiple marginalisations" (Sadiki, 2019). This disparity between regions has not only been in terms unemployment, it is also composed of a variety of other interconnected issues such as lack of education, infrastructure, transportation and health care (Moghadam, 2018, p.3). The newly adopted constitution in 2014 has acknowledged these regional asymmetries and favours interior regions in principle, but none of the successive governments since the revolution have been able to come up with any sustainable measures to solve these endemic issues (Meddeb, 2017, p.2). Even though 2011 uprising began in these neglected peripheral regions- Mohamed Bouazizi the street vendor who sparked the revolution by setting himself on fire was from Sidi Bouzid- they continue to be a source of instability because of the enduring disparities (Ibid.).

Corruption remains as another significant problem in Tunisia, despite the fact that every successive post-Ben Ali government has pledged to tackle it. In this regard, the issue has two aspects- while the previous crimes before the revolution must be addressed on the one hand, the ongoing corruption also must be eliminated on the other (Yerkes and Muasher, 2017, p.3).

To achieve the first goal in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, several laws were enacted in order to prosecute the Ben Ali family as well as close-associates (Ibid. p.17,18). The establishment of the Truth and Dignity Commission to investigate both the corruption-related charges and the human rights violations committed since the independence of the country was a potential breakthrough in this respect (Human Rights Watch, 2019). However, soon after the 2014 election, the commission's work started to be hampered by Nidaa Tounes, which had many former members of Ben Ali's party in its ranks including politicians who held high offices such as former President Essebsi (Amri, 2019). The most serious blow in this regard was the reconciliation law proposal in 2015 by Essebsi that was to grant amnesty to corrupt government officials and businessman in exchange for returning stolen wealth under the pretext of reviving the economy (Guellali, 2017a). Even though the proposal faced strong resistance from civil society (Lincoln, 2017), two years later a revised version of the law was passed in the parliament with the support of the ruling parties Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda (Reuters, 2017). Accordingly, the "administrative reconciliation law" granted impunity to the civil servants who were allegedly involved in corruption crimes under the Be Ali regime but did not benefit personally and permitted their return to institutional positions (Guellali, 2017b).

On the other hand, the latter objective was championed by Prime Minister Youssef Chahed through his "war on corruption". While the initiative found support amongst the public, selective arrests under the state of emergency and referral of the detainees to military tribunals have raised criticisms in terms of human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

When asked about their most significant concerns in a survey conducted by Afrobarometer, Tunisians named three issues - management of the economy (58%), unemployment (37%) and corruption (22%) (Afrobarometer, 2018a). They have also evaluated the government's performance as "very bad" or "fairly bad" in terms of economy (68%), creation of jobs (80%) and tackling corruption (65%) (Ibid.). Therefore, looking at the overall picture it is clear that unless these economic grievances are addressed and corruption in the country is brought under control, Tunisia's political future is bound to remain fragile.

The Appeal of Outsiders

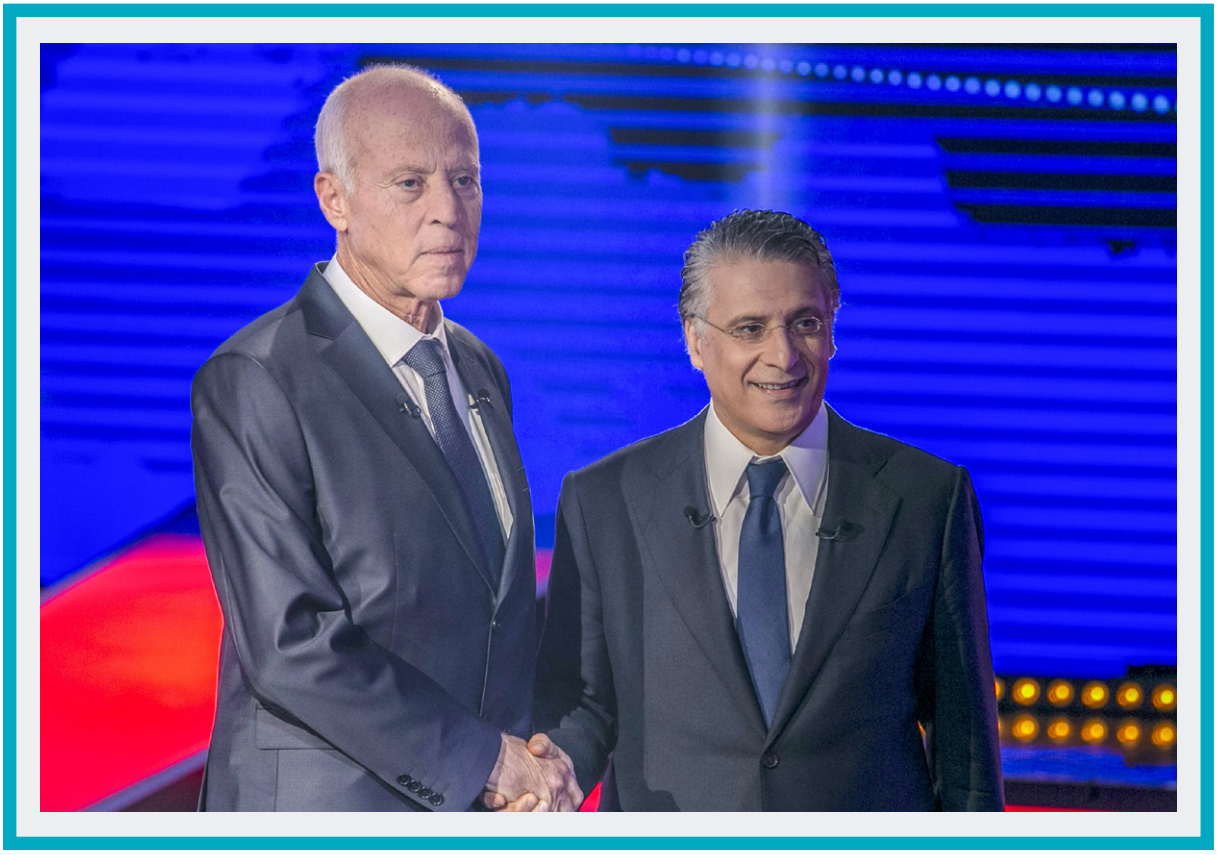
In the midst of these problems both Saied and Karoui advanced to the presidential runoff due to their ability to successfully turn public resentment in their favour by portraying themselves as anti-system candidates who are determined to work to put the country back on track.

Saied, the 61-year-old jurist, stood out because of his vision to alter the existing system. His most striking campaign promise revolves around a proposal for government decentralisation, which would put citizens' will at the heart of the political process (Grewal, 2019). His proposal is based on a three-layered system in which voters would elect local councils that would select regional representatives. In turn, those representatives would choose the members of the parliament (Allahoum, 2019). Alongside his motto of "power must belong to the people directly" (The Economist, 2019), Saied has promised Tunisians to bring real change in terms of their endemic problems such as social injustice, economic difficulties and corruption. He also made headlines due to his openly conservative agenda, including proposals to bring back the death penalty or his opposition to the proposed law on the equal distribution of inheritance between men and women (Safi, 2019). However, all in all, his political campaign has garnered the support of a wide range of Tunisians from leftists to Islamists (Haaretz, 2019). His popularity has been especially tremendous among the youth, as 90 per cent of Tunisians aged between 18 to 25 years voted for Saied (France 24, 2019).

Besides his political pledges, Saied's personality and mannerisms contributed to his frontrunner status. Long before his candidacy, Saied gained prominence among the Tunisian public for being part of a team of experts that took part in the drafting process of the post-revolutionary constitution (Haaretz, 2019). His austere and staunch demeanour accompanied by his usage of classical Arabic in speeches and in televised debates on the issues at hand earned him the nickname "Robocop" (1843 Magazine, 2019). He never held any political position previously and entered the election as an independent candidate with no affiliation to any political party (Grewal, 2019). More interestingly, he has even refrained from voting altogether before this election (Jeune Afrique, 2019). In the eyes of the people he has been a clean figure with no connection to the largely-despised establishment. Saied earned people's respect and admiration also because of his humble behaviour. Not only did he gather the deposit money required to be paid for his candidacy in the election from his family and friends, but he also refused to use public funds for his campaign and went from door to door to speak to the voters in person (Limoges, 2019).

On the other hand, Karoui, the 55-year-old media tycoon, had been at the centre of the debates ever since he announced his decision to vie for the presidency. While his popularity had been largely based upon his charitable activities, which he promoted through his own private Nessma TV station, his campaign was also mainly focused on people's economic grievances in an effort to consolidate his image of being the champion of the poor (Boukhars, 2019). Naming his party as the 'Heart of Tunisia', to achieve his aim Karoui had been travelling across the country helping the needy (Mahfoudh, 2019). That being said, his philanthropic activity almost got him barred from the race. In June, the Tunisian parliament passed and amended an electoral law to ban any candidate who has received or given donations (Kimball, 2019). The law almost ended Karoui's candidacy but it did not come into force as it was not signed by the late President Essebsi.

Karoui was again on the headlines in a short time after that incident when he was arrested on charges of money laundering and tax evasion based on a case that was put forward three years ago by I-Watch, the



Tunisian presidential candidate and leader of Heart of Tunisia Nabil Karoui (R) and Independent Tunisian presidential candidate Kais Saied (L) take part in a televised debate before the second round of the presidential elections in Tunis, Tunisia on October 11, 2019, (Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)

official branch of Transparency International in Tunisia (Bajec, 2019). He was eventually freed only days before the second round of the election, but his detention led to many criticisms that it was damaging the credibility of the election as he was not able to campaign (Volkmann, 2019). While his supporters claimed that the charges were politically motivated (Raghavan, 2019), Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who was at the centre of the allegations of attempting to gain political leverage within the presidential race, denied having any involvement in Karoui's arrest (Volkmann, 2019).

Despite successfully framing himself as an anti-establishment candidate, Karoui was not a political novice. Unlike Saied, who has not been associated with any political party, Karoui was one of the founding members of the Nidaa Tounes Party (Neffati, 2019). All in all, the results of the first round of the election showed that regardless of the controversies surrounding Karoui, he succeeded in making Tunisian voters believe his ability to solve their economic problems (Boukars, 2019).

Conclusion

Tunisia has long been hailed as the only success story of the 'Arab Spring'. Indeed, the country had taken significant steps, such as the adoption of a new constitution in 2014, initiation of competitive and democratic elections and the establishment of a national unity government that brought different political strands in the country. Nonetheless, today the concerns of Tunisians remain as legitimate as they were when the revolution began. Over the course of the eight years since the revolution, their demands, especially in terms of economic improvement and elimination of rampant corruption, have not been adequately addressed.

In the wake of the election marathon that took place at the end of 2019, Afrobarometer conducted a comprehensive survey. One of the questions asked whether participants felt close to any political party, to which 81 per cent responded negatively (Afrobarometer, 2018b). In another significant question, citizens were asked which party's candidate they would vote for if the presidential election was held tomorrow. While 48 per cent stated that they do not know whom they would choose, 29 per cent said they would not have voted at all (Ibid). Their answers were a reflection of the disillusionment with existing political parties and their members as well as the recent election results, be it municipal, presidential or the parliamentary.

While this disillusionment resulted in citizens turning away from the political establishment, it also led to a search for alternative actors who would be able to remedy their ongoing problems. It has been Kais Saied and Nabil Karoui – two populist outsiders who managed to capitalize on this discontent by getting people's support through their personal characteristics and political campaigns promising to fulfil the goals of the revolution. Thus, when Saied was elected, thousands of people poured to the streets in celebration.

President Saied has indeed brought hope back to Tunisians that challenges, especially in terms of economy and social justice, could be overcome. However, the task at hand is not easy. According to the new constitution his mandate is limited to foreign policy, defence and national security whereas the domestic policy falls under the domain of the prime minister. That being said, Saied has a very strong popular support that none of the other politicians currently have. He also has been endorsed by many political parties during the presidential runoff, thereby enjoys their political backing as well. Moreover, while Saied is an independent figure who is not affiliated with any of the political parties, this gives him an advantage that he maintains an equal distance to all of the political players and is not part of any agendas. All in all, the most important question that remains to be answered is whether Saied will be able to make use of his position and this strong support behind him to stimulate a highly divided parliament to deliver the promises that Tunisians are desperately counting on.



Tunisians gather to celebrate the victory of Tunisia's independent candidate Kais Saied after he has secured more than 72% of votes in the presidential election held on Sunday, said an exit polls agency, at Habib Burgiba Street in Tunis, Tunisia on October 13, 2019, ***(****Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency)*

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