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Tunisian Presidential Elections

Ennahda's Calculations

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Contents

- Introduction** 1
- Moro's Nomination: Motivations and Context** 1
- Internal and External Calculations** 2
- Conclusion** 3

Introduction

On 7 August 2019, Ennahda's Shura Council voted to nominate the movement's Vice President and speaker of the parliament Abdel Fattah Moro for the presidential elections, which are set to take place in mid-September 2019. 98 votes were cast in Moro's favour, with none against and five abstentions. This has brought to an end months of internal and external debate over whether Ennahda should put forward its own candidate or instead support a candidate from one of the other parties. But it also raises new questions regarding the ramifications of this step, how well Ennahda and its candidate will do in the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections to be held shortly thereafter, the new alliances expected to be formed, and how this will affect relations with other regional states.

Moro's Nomination: Motivations and Context

Moro's connection to the Islamist movement dates back to 1968, when he first met Ennahda's now president Rached Ghannouchi. In the same year, he and Ghannouchi founded Al Jamaa Al Islamiyya, which in 1981 became the Islamic Direction Movement and in 1989 Ennahda. He was elected as the movement's Vice President at Ennahda's 2012 congress, and in 2014 became a parliamentary deputy representing the Tunis caucus, going on to become Deputy Speaker. When Mohamed Ennaceur became interim president following the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi on 25 July 2019, Moro replaced him as Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives.⁽¹⁾

Moro's nomination did not come easily, with broad internal debate taking place throughout 2018 as to future electoral strategy. On the one hand there are those who believe that regional circumstances are such that Ennahda – widely considered to be an Islamist party – will not be able to occupy the presidency, and as such should throw its weight behind an external candidate. On the other hand, the political and electoral weight of the Movement, which makes up the largest single parliamentary bloc and controls most municipalities, have led some to believe that it must inevitably throw its hat into the presidential ring. Mere weeks ago, according to statements made by members of the party's politburo and senior leadership, it was the former opinion that dominated Ennahda's thinking.⁽²⁾ But at the Shura Council's meeting on 7 August 2019, after two days of discussions, it was the second option that won out – and with a significant majority.

In its official statements and comments made by its leadership, the Movement has been keen to stress that this was a decision made democratically within party institutions, and that it was the ballot box alone that settled the question in favour of nominating a candidate rather than the politburo's preferred strategy. But it is clear that both internal calculations and the death of Essebsi

1 For more, see Zied Mezghanni, "Moro ... Meet Ennahda's nominee", *Alestiklal*, 10/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2YZjQsv>).

2 See, for example: "Rached Ghannouchi: Ennahda is searching for the ideal candidate to support in the elections," *Al Jazeera*, 17/07/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/31DhRRo>).



were also present in the final decision of the Shura Council and the decision to nominate Moro for the presidential race.

Internally, the weeks leading up to Moro's nomination witnessed a tug of war between central and regional leadership over the electoral lists for the coming parliamentary elections. Former leaders within took to social media to express their dissatisfaction with Ghannouchi's personal interventions to amend some of the lists,⁽³⁾ notable in a party which until now had largely maintained its organisational unity and kept disagreements within its official structures (unlike other parties such as Essebsi's Nedaa Tounes and the leftist-nationalist Popular Front, which have been weakened by internal schisms). By putting Moro forward, and doing so in person in the Shura Council, Ghannouchi has helped to bridge the divide within the party, to positive effect: the malcontents have quietened down and the various central and local bodies have set about preparing for the presidential and parliamentary elections.

As far as the broader political climate is concerned, Essebsi's death has produced a general reconsideration of alliances and positions and encouraged various parties to enter the race with their own candidates. Following the Constitution, which requires elections to be held between one and a half months and three months as of the death of an incumbent, the independent Electoral Commission has brought forward the first round of the presidential elections. This means they now fall before the parliamentary elections. Parties know that the results of the presidential elections will affect how people vote in the parliamentary elections to follow. Throwing Ennahda's electoral weight behind an external candidate in the former may thus lead to greater gains for that candidate's party in the latter, at Ennahda's expense.⁽⁴⁾

Internal and External Calculations

Moro's nomination has not only put an end to internal debates over who should be Ennahda's candidate. It has also dashed the hopes of other external candidates who might have relied on the Movement's support. Discussions with Prime Minister Youssef Chahed continued right up until the meeting of the Shura Council. But Chahed's refusal to stand as an independent and decision to instead put himself forward specifically as the candidate of his party, Tahya Tounes, ultimately led Ennahda to nominate Moro instead.⁽⁵⁾

Alongside Chahed, Ennahda's candidate will face other big names associated with the traditional establishment: Abdelkarim Zebidi, the Defence Minister; Mehdi Jomaa, the former Prime Minister;

3 See for example Amel Hilali, "Fear God in the Movement! Ennahda leaders direct harsh messages to Ghannouchi," *Al Jazeera*, 17/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/31DhRRo>).

4 See: *Future of Democratic Transition in Tunisia After Essebsi*, Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 01/08/2019 (accessed on 20/08/2019 at <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Post-Essebsi-Future-of-the-Democratic-Process-in-Tunisia.aspx>).

5 See: "Harouni: We held discussions with Chahed but today he is Tahya Tounes' candidate," *Mosaic FM*, 07/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2ZOxtAP>).

and Nabil Elqarawi, a businessman and owner of the Nesma satellite TV channel. The party knows that the number of traditional candidates standing will make this election different in many respects from 2014. Then, Essebsi – thanks to his veteran politician status – was able to unite many of those opposed to Ennahda and the Troika government, exploiting polarisation by presenting himself and his party as a modernist alternative to Islamism. No other traditional candidate won a significant share of the vote. Indications suggest that this time, none of these candidates will withdraw in favour of another, although tactical voting may prevent their shared constituency being split. Ennahda, meanwhile, will enter the race united behind a single candidate.

Given the advances made by Ennahda in previous parliamentary and municipal elections, the capacity for organisation and mobilisation that has historically distinguished its campaigns, and the disunity of its competitors, Moro is very likely to enter the second round. Here, if polling is to be believed, he will face one of the four traditional candidates: Chahed, Zebidi, Jomaa or Elqarawi. The independent Kais Saied's name has also come to the fore in recent days.

While Moro will most likely make it through the first round, whether he will ultimately win the presidency or not is far less clear and will be determined by various factors. Tactical voting for whichever traditional candidate qualifies may result in very different results from those of the first round. Moro, too, will probably benefit from tactical voting by supporters of other first round candidates unwilling to back a representative of the traditional institution: former president Marzouki, the independent Kais Saied, former PM Hamadi Jebali and some supporters of Democratic Current candidate Mohamed Abbou. All these candidates are predicted according to polling to enjoy some first round success.

As well as domestic factors and calculations, it is also likely based on previous experience that regional powers opposed to democratic transition in Tunisia will attempt to intervene on behalf of one candidate or another, supporting them financially and with media backing. Campaigns of this kind have already been launched by the Egyptian and Emirati media.⁽⁶⁾

Conclusion

The presidential elections set to take place in mid-September 2019 will be different in many respects from the 2014 elections. Ennahda is putting forward its own candidate for the first time, without this triggering a major negative reaction. This suggests the naturalisation and normalisation of Tunisian democracy. The traditional establishment, meanwhile, is sharply divided and represented by a number of candidates, providing Ennahda with an opportunity to make it through to the second round. There, alliances will be reconfigured and tactical voting will take place. At the same time, regional intervention is expected to intensify.

⁶ See for example "Emirati money corrupts Tunisian elections," *Journaliste sfaxien*, 07/11/2014 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/33xb255>); "Official documents prove Emirati funding for larger parties within NSF," *Noon Post*, 06/08/2014 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2YrxZni>).



Nonetheless, Ennahda's decision to nominate its own candidate represents an important step forward in Tunisian democratic transition. It means that the Tunisian experiment has matured to the point where everyone – both inside and outside Tunisia – accepts the presence of a candidate representing an Islamist movement committed to the democratic system and constitution, leaving the electorate to decide their fate in democratic elections. Ennahda will no longer be forced to remain in the background of the political process, afraid of engaging fully and transparently in democracy.