المركز العربي للأبحاث و دراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Municipal Election Results and their Repercussions in Tunisia

Municipal Election Results in Tunisia

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction

The announcement of preliminary results of the first multi-municipal elections in Tunisia since independence marked the onset of a new political scene. Despite taking place at a local level, the repercussions of these elections are likely to bridge a rearrangement of the national political scene according to new balances of power engendered by the ballot box. The results could even serve to confound regional schemes aimed at eradicating the freedom aspirations of the Arab spring movements and renewing the production of tyrannical systems.

The Pre-Election and Post-Election Political Scene

These elections, in which the military and security officers voted on 29 April 2018 and civilians on 6 May 2018, included 350 constituencies; the number of municipalities defined by the new administrative division. Overall, 53,668 candidates competed in 2074 lists: 1055 party lists, 159 coalition lists, and 860 independent lists. Ennahda enjoyed the highest coverage with lists throughout all constituencies, followed by Nidaa Tounes, whose lists ran in 345 constituencies, while the rest of the parties were unable to cover more than 69 constituencies at best, some of which were purely symbolic. Independent lists were widespread in most constituencies.

At the closing of the polls on 6 May 2018, 1,796,154 votes had been cast, or 33.7 per cent of the 53,692,992 registered voters. The results announced by the Independent High Electoral Commission, pending finalization after a decision on appeals, indicate that Ennahda won 28.64% of seats, while Nidaa Tounes secured 20.85%, and Ettayar came second or third in most of its constituencies, at 4.19% (125 seats). The preliminary results indicate that the independent lists obtained 32.27 percent of seats nationwide with their victory varying between municipalities and governorates. While they scored a notable victory in constituencies in the capital and the north, their share in the south remained weak compared to party lists.

The Shrinking Electoral Pool

Unsurprisingly, the numbers published by the Tunisian Elections Authority indicate that public participation in these elections, which did not exceed 33.7 percent, represented the lowest participation rate in the electoral benefits witnessed by the country since the revolution and emergence of political pluralism. For months, most of the participating parties have expressed

concern about the lack of enthusiasm for the elections. Despite the absence of accurate figures based on objective indicators and reliable opinion polls, it is safe to say that voter turnout suffered from aversion and indifference rather than any organized boycott. This apathy stems mainly from the prevailing economic and social conditions and the failure of the political elites who won in the previous elections to bring about positive change. No political or civil party called for a boycott of the municipal elections, nor did any media outlets engage in explicit campaigns in such a direction.

The gradual decline in the number of voters, from the 2011 elections and the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections to the last municipal elections, showed up in the electoral pools of the parties, regardless of the percentages and seats they won. Ennahda, which took the lead in the 2011 elections and came second in the 2014 elections, before regaining the lead in this election, lost more than half of the number of voters. Nidaa Tounes and other parties such as the Popular Front and Al-Irada have also lost more than half of their voters in less than four years. Some others, such as Ettayar, not around for the 2011 elections, represent exceptions that indicate the possible emergence of rising powers whose political, intellectual, and ideological leanings differ from Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes and could fill the vacuum brought on by the erosion of the influence of center-democratic parties such as Congress for the Republic, The Republican Party, and the FDTL.

Transformations in the Electoral Map

In the parliamentary and presidential elections 2014, Nidaa Tounes and its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi managed to unseat Ennahda from its first place in the 2011 elections in most neighborhoods of the capital and in the states of the Sahel and the Northwest. The southern governorates, especially in the south-east, remained a traditional electoral pool for Ennahda , while President Beji Caid Essebsi only received around 10% of votes here.

With the announcement of the preliminary results of the last municipal elections, and the relegation of Nidaa Tounes to second place, the electoral map has undergone a national shift in more than one state. In most Tunisian municipalities, Ennahda has restored its lead and has made a qualitative breakthrough in the symbolic city center of Tunis, where a woman could become the mayor for the first time, if the party can obtain the votes of the majority of the municipality seats.

Ennahda lists managed to overtake Nidaa tounes in not only the capital, but also the many municipalities of the coast. In the central city of Sousse, the largest coastal city, the two parties won an equal number of seats, with varied progress in the neighboring municipalities and

governorates. In Sfax, Tunisia's second most populous city, the difference between the number of seats won by Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes was considerable; in some municipalities, including those of northern governorates such as Bizerte, Zaghouan, Nabeel and Kairouan, Nidaa Tounes sunk to fourth place.

In comparison with the results of the municipal elections in some of the municipalities of the capital, the north and Sfax, the electoral map in the north-west and south has remained unchanged since 2014, with a slight shift in some north-western municipalities in favor of Ennahda, with results in the states of El Kef, Siliana and Jendouba varying between voting for Nidaa Tounes or parties of the same political line such as Machrouu Tounes and the Tunisian Project Movement, with a significant drop in voter turnout and a slight improvement in Ennahda lists. In the south, especially south-east (Tataouine, Medenine, and Gabes states), the electoral mood remained the same with the preeminence of Ennahda lists, with the presence of Tunes Al-Irada (the party of former president Moncef Marzouki) in some municipalities and a weak performance by the Popular Front's left-wing coalition lists.

Independent Lists: Identity and Ranking

Contrary to the previous elections, independent lists registered a significant presence with 860 lists distributed across different municipalities. The extent of independent lists raised controversy over their political identity and roles. According to the preliminary results announced by the Independent High Electoral Commission, these lists obtained 32.27% of the vote, coming ahead of Ennahda, but came second in number of seats (1001 seats for independents versus 1101 seats for Ennahda). The debate raised by the independent lists focused on their political identity, and the accuracy of talk about their occupying of the first place.

Independent lists lack any declared political identity, although some are counted as specific parties, and they lack a political, legal or systematic link that connects them within the municipality itself or from one municipality to another, unlike parties. In addition, parties are not allowed to nominate more than one list in each constituency. All these objective factors make the establishment of independent lists opposite the party lists arbitrary, systematic and political. The geographical distribution of seats won by independent lists varied from one municipality to another. While they made gains in the capital and the Sahel (Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia), the voting in the south and some states of the center and the north remained party-based, and the independent lists had a limited presence.

With the exception of some municipalities, it is not expected that the winners of the independent lists will have advanced roles and responsibilities in the next municipal councils. Some of them are expected to ally themselves with winners of the party lists. In particular, the political identities of some independent lists will be aligned to political parties. Many ran as independents because they were not able to meet the conditions of candidacy in the party lists, especially the condition of equal balance of men and women in each list, and the horizontal parity of candidate lists; that is, presenting the same number of female and male-headed lists. It is highly unlikely that the independents will achieve any form of organization and interdependence that qualifies them to become a force of pressure, change or balance.

What Next?

Problems and irregularities in the voting process, which the electoral commission promised to consider and act on, such as postponing voting in the Mdhila municipality of the Gafsa governorate, the entrance of political money onto the scene, and talk about partisan violations by the electoral commission and its regional branches, all remain very limited in time and place, and their repercussions are not expected to provoke radical change in the results or in the electoral map, nor in the legitimacy of the elections and their results.

The preliminary election results did not mitigate the candidates' vigilance. The battle for the distribution of tasks and responsibilities within the municipal councils requires consensus and accurate calculations. The outputs of these will have a significant impact on future benefits and will determine the heft of any party and its margin of movement, especially as the country faces parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019. The results of the municipal elections compared to the 2014 elections saw, in principle, other shifts in the consensus. Ennahda, which led many councils, did not secure, in some of them, a majority that will allow it to maneuver the municipal councils and distribute the responsibilities alone. The relegation of Nidaa Tounes in many municipalities prevents its reliance on the consensual contract which depends on the attendance of each party.

The choice of mayors is the first test of how difficult it is to achieve the expected consensus. Choosing a mayor requires a majority (fifty plus one), which imposes consensus that may gather more than three parties in some municipal councils. Nidaa Tounes will likely accept an agreement with Ennahda by nominating its representatives to assume the role of mayor, especially in the capital and the big cities. This trend began in the municipality of Tunis, which has a symbolic dimension. More than one official from Nidaa Tounes linked the continuation of the agreement with Ennahda to its acceptance of the head of their list.

Conclusion

It is too early to assess the possibility that the municipal councils created by the recent elections will achieve success in transforming local government promises into actions and achievements that reflect positively on the lives of citizens and alleviate the living, services and development crises. However, the pluralism of the elected municipal councils in principle will motivate each party to achieve more, ensure a balance to qualify for the next electoral competitions, and gain more seats, thereby creating a potential environment for engagement and negotiation.

Despite the openly declared regional rejection, holding elections in itself is a gain and a stepping-stone for "democratic transition" that has maintained its course in Tunisia, unlike the other Arab Spring countries. However, that experience is still in its early stages, and regional parties who want to undo the Arab revolutions will not easily accept the development of an experience based on the management of contradictions with political tools that tempt others to follow suit.