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Presidential Elections in Tunisia: Reading the First Round Results

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The results of the first round of the Tunisian presidential elections held on September 15, 2019, indicated that independent candidate Kais Saied topped the list of candidates, followed by the currently imprisoned Nabil Karoui, while Ennahda candidate Abdelfattah Mourou came in third, according to the results announced by the Independent High Authority for Elections. Analysts have offered a variety of explanations for this result, with many have been interested in examining the potential implications of these results for voter attitudes in the October 2019 parliamentary elections.

Kais Saied: Breaking the Mould

Independent candidate and constitutional law professor Kais Saied topped the leaderboard by more than 18%, while the businessman arrested on charges related to corruption, money laundering and tax evasion, came in second, by 15%. Kais Saied's progress was not surprising, with several polls demonstrating his high ratings weeks ago. The combined votes of the two winners represent 33% of the vote, which in turn makes up 45% of voters. This is not a decisive victory but serves as evidence of the fragmentation of the party map.

Kais Saied is a newcomer to Tunisian politics. Before the revolution, he was known for teaching and academic activities, not for any involvement in public affairs. But his stardom burst onto the media scene after the fall of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 and in the years that followed. He continued to appear in the media to comment on constitutional and legal issues, especially during the drafting of the Constitution by the National Constituent Assembly. His own communication style has gained him a huge following among different social strata, especially young people. His style is characterized by calmness and adherence to using classical Arabic, with respect for the morphological, grammatical and phonetic rules. This is helped by his republican voice, his spontaneity and his comfort in talking, which suggests sincerity and distinguishes him from the traditional stereotype of politicians. His performance in the candidate debates stood out.

Unlike other candidates, Saied's campaign was void of much celebration or propaganda, and he has refused any financial support from economic institutions and businessmen. He presented himself as a simple candidate who is addressing young people, especially, communicating with them and listening to their concerns without escorts or advisers, promising radical changes in the political system, breaking the centralized reigns power, fighting corruption, and limiting the privileges of officials.⁽¹⁾

Saied's campaign stirred up some controversy in recent weeks with his rejection of the bill proposed by the late president Essebsi to establish gender equality in inheritance rights, which he claimed was contrary to Islamic teaching. He also stirred another controversy by attacking the parties that he described as "bankrupt" and by calling for "power to be in the hands of the people", emulating a discourse considered populist in many democratic countries. His comments received a response

¹ In his election program, Kais Saied promised to radically decentralize the government and abolish parliamentary elections in favour of having a legislative body appointed by local and regional councils.



from voters who were tired of the promises and conflicts of traditional politicians and are instead on the lookout for an improvement in living conditions and respite from identity politics.

Nabil Karoui: The Role of Political Money

Candidate Nabil Karoui ran for president from prison after being arrested on August 23, 2019, on charges of tax evasion and corruption. Regardless of his supporters ‘and opponents’ attitudes about the relevance and timing of the charges against him, his rise in popularity over recent months, has sparked considerable controversy. Although he ran on behalf of a party, he is candidate that truly stands out from the party map.

The rapid political rise of Karoui began two years ago, when he founded a charity called “Khalil Tounes”, after his son Khalil, who died in a road accident. The charity, which is described as a “non-commercial association”,⁽²⁾ played an important role in promoting Karoui through collecting donations, conducting campaigns to distribute in-kind and cash assistance and holding dinners in a number of slums and districts with clips broadcast on his “Nessma” television channel where beneficiaries express their gratitude. This approach has sparked widespread controversy about the legality of his activities and the ethics of using philanthropy for political gain and buying votes.

The controversy over the relationship between the activities of Khalil Tounes and the electoral campaign of Nabil Karoui escalated after the government of Youssef Chahed submitted a draft amendment to the electoral law to the parliament that would prevent the heads of charities and media owners from running for the presidency after his ratings in various polls went up. Outgoing president Essebsi’s failure to ratify the above-mentioned legal amendment allowed Karoui to continue pursuing his political ambitions and to run for president and legislative elections in all constituencies after he formed a new party called “Heart of Tunisia”.

The results of the first round of the presidential elections indicate significant breakthroughs achieved by Nabil Karoui in the north-central and western regions, and in some marginal neighborhoods in major cities, where the rates of poverty, unemployment and early school dropouts are high.⁽³⁾ The economic situation and the stressful living conditions, the incompetence of the political elites and the estrangement between citizens and the officials, helped to achieve these breakthroughs.

Karoui did not pay attention to the damage to his image caused by leaked audio leaks during the last two years, in which he appeared to threaten his opponents; politicians and civil activists, describing them by rude epithets, using violent rhetoric and profanity.⁽⁴⁾ Karoui is very aware that his presumed electoral base is made up of marginalized social groups with little access to or interest in social networks, and that the influence of his opponents in conflict with him online remains elitist, limited and ineffective.

2 Homepage of official website of the Khalil Tounes Society, accessed 16/9/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2YOyrQS>

3 Facebook Page of the Independent High Authority for Elections, Facebook, 16/9/2019, accessed 16/9/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2kCMBCB>

4 All leaks, Karoui Leaks Website, accessed 5/9/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2yHVjTp>

Karoui is an interesting phenomenon in the Tunisian political scene, despite his personal absence from the election campaign. This phenomenon, however, does not appear to be a product of Tunisia, but rather the profound transformations of classical political values in democracies around the world. The fortunes of the traditional sober politician, who accumulates experience and graduates in level of responsibility within partisan and institutional frameworks, have diminished in favour of the politician, who uses lobbyists, interest groups, media polishing, and investment in a populist rhetoric based on the failure of opponents and promises to an audience that feels marginalized by the media.

The Decline of the Traditional Elite

The presidential election was personal, rather than partisan, as became evident in debates and campaigns. This does not necessarily apply to legislative elections.

The traditional Tunisian party and political system, both in government and the opposition, did not achieve the results it had obtained in previous elections, although opinion polls, prior to the elections, gave it higher ratings. Ennahda, represented by its candidate Abdelfattah Mourou, has fallen to third place, after leading in the 2011 Constituent Assembly and municipal elections of 2018, and coming in second in the 2014 legislative elections. Kais Saied came in a full five points ahead of Ennahda's Mourou. The previously leading parties are no different from Ennahda. The Nidaa Tounes party, which won the 2014 elections, has been completely absent from the 2019 presidential election, after the death of its founder Beji Caid Essebsi, the departure of his son Hafedh abroad, and the dispersal of its leaders and supporters. The newly established Tahia Tounes party, founded by Nidaa Tounes dissidents, was represented by Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and came in at fifth place with just 7% of the vote. Defense Minister Abdel Karim Zubaidi, who is considered an extension of the Bourguiba line, was placed by opinion polls at the top of the rankings but came in fourth place with a significantly lower share of the vote than Saied and Karoui.

Opposition parties, whether leftist, liberal, or centrist suffered a severe defeat. Leftist leader and Labour Party spokesperson Hama Hammami came in at 14th place with 0.7%, preceded by the well-known Democratic Patriots' Unified Party representative Mongi Rahoui, at 0.8%. The Democratic Party, which came in third place in the municipal elections in 2018, did not differ much, but its candidate, Mohamed Abbou, fell to the tenth place in the first round of the presidential elections, with 3.6%, followed by former President Moncef Marzouki who represented the Tounes Okhra coalition, which ranked 11th with 3.1%. Marzouki's party, the Congress for the Republic, won the second place in the 2011 elections with 28 deputies.

The poor results of the traditional political elites that once dominated the Tunisian political landscape – for decades in some cases – shocked many and contradicted the opinion polls. However, the progress of candidate Kais Saied, who lacks any organizational base, media arm or funding sources, shows how the circumstances that governed previous entitlements have changed and reveals the



breakdown of traditional “machines” that have directed a wide spectrum of voters. The disintegration of the previous system and the multiplicity of its candidates, along with Ennahda’s decline following its participation in the government and the differences experienced in the months preceding the nomination of Mourou, and the public’s aversion to the polarization and the tensions that characterized the last years, paved the way for the rise of Kais Saied and, to some extent, Nabil Karoui.

Karoui has relied on the old system for his groundwork, but the hostility between him and the other candidates affiliated with the same system and his imprisonment rendered him an objective outsider. While the political elites carry the responsibility of public apathy, it should not be forgotten that the reluctance to vote, hostility to the political elites, alienation from party politics, and exaggerated expectations of the democratic system, together with exaggerated disappointments, are all manifestations of the failure of a democratic culture to take root.

Conclusion

The results of the first round of the presidential elections in Tunisia represent an early crisis for a regime marked by the fragmentation of the party map and poor economic performance. The result has been a sharp decline in the traditional political elite, whether in power or opposition, despite its organizational capabilities and the media powerhouses that support it. Regardless of who wins the second round, the Tunisian political landscape has undergone profound changes and looks likely to re-establish itself on entirely new rules. The challenge facing Tunisian democracy, which has thus far survived every test thrown at it, is whether or not it will be able to absorb these new principles of play.