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# The Tunisian Elections: Surprise Results and Challenges Ahead

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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### Unit for Political Studies

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The results of the second round of Tunisia's presidential elections, held on 13th October, resulted in a landslide victory for Kais Saied over his rival Nabil Karoui. These results follow parliamentary elections in which Ennahda narrowly topped the list, but without the majority needed to form a government alone. By the second half of this month, a new political and institutional landscape will be determined, but many details depend on the coalition expected to form a government, and the nature of the relationship that the president and the parliament will have with the cabinet.

## Building a Government

The results of the 6 October parliamentary elections shattered the party map, with Ennahda securing 52 of the 217 seats. Qalb Tounes came in second with 38 seats, followed by the Democratic Current with 22, the Dignity Coalition with 21, the Free Destourian Party with 17, the People's Movement with 16, and Tahya Tounes with 14 seats. Other party lists won between 1 and 4 seats each, meaning they cannot form their own blocs in the next parliament, and their deputies will have to either join other blocs or remain independent.

Ennahda's bloc has remained at the forefront in parliament since 2011. The movement came in second place in the 2014 elections, but its bloc quickly returned to first place after Nidaa Tounes was dissolved. Despite topping the list of winners in the most recent elections, its number of seats have declined by 17 in relation to the 2014 elections, when it managed to earn 69. Similarly, most parties that enjoyed the largest share of seats in the previous parliament saw a decline this year. Late president Essebsi's former party, Nidaa Tounes, which won 86 seats in 2014, secured seats for just 3 deputies. The Popular Front (a coalition of nationalist and leftist parties and personalities), led by Hama Hammami, was absent from the new parliamentary scene after having won 13 seats in 2014, while the Tounes Okhra coalition, supported by former President Moncef Marzouki, suffered a similar fate. Other parties also came out empty-handed despite having enjoyed blocs in the previous parliament, such as the Free Patriotic Union and the Nidaa Tounes splinter party Machrouu Tounes, which won just three seats despite its bloc in the previous parliament boasting 15 deputies.

In contrast, several parties made significant progress in these parliamentary elections. Democratic Current increased its seats from 3 in 2014 to 22, taking third place. The Dignity Coalition's ascension to fourth place was a shock considering its relative new arrival to the scene, obtaining a significant share of the vote, especially in the southern states. In the same context, the People's Movement increased the number of its deputies from 3 to 16.<sup>(1)</sup>

The effect of the proportional representation principle in the electoral law is clear from the distribution of seats in the new parliament. Ennahda and the top-ranked parties are the worst affected by this mechanism, with one seat equaling 10,790 votes, while other lists received one seat with only 600 votes.<sup>(2)</sup> While Ennahda received 31% of the overall vote, it only obtained 23% of the seats. While the

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1 For more details, see: Preliminary Results of the Legislative Elections 2019, Facebook, ISIE page, 10/10/2019, last accessed 14/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2IKhBJk>

2 For more on the proportional representation system, see: "How Tunisia's legislative elections are held", *Al Jazeera Net*, 23/10/2014, last accessed 14/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2M9GznJ>.



proportional representation mechanism has helped small parties, coalitions and independent lists to ensure a certain presence in the parliamentary scene, it has produced a divided and disordered parliament and prevented any party from obtaining a majority that allows them to form a viable government capable of maintaining endurance and stability. The party that will be tasked with forming a government will have its work cut out. In this case, Ennahda, despite its inability to reach the required quorum to win the confidence of parliament even if it reaches an agreement with other party lists, has the daunting task of forming a new government. All statements made by Ennahda leaders hint at their refusal to enter into any government coalition with the runner-up, Qalb Tounes, or with the fifth place Free Destourian party. Ennahda has, on the other hand, indicated an alliance with the Democratic Current, the People's Movement, the Dignity Coalition and Tahya Tounes. However, the leaders of both the People's Movement and the Democratic Movement have made statements expressing that, so far, they are likely to reject this coalition.

In any case, a government, with the participation of Ennahda, the People's Movement, the Democratic Current, the Dignity Coalition, Tahya Tounes and independents, is in the making. Ennahda may find itself forced to choose a head of government from outside its ranks to ease the reservations of other parties. If the Democratic Movement and the People's Movement continue to refuse to enter into a government alliance with Ennahda, and the latter is unable to win the confidence of a parliamentary majority, President Saied will have to entrust those he deems most able with the task of forming a government. In the event that the legally stipulated period passes after a second mandate without the government gaining the confidence of parliament, the constitution grants the president the right to dissolve parliament and call for new parliamentary elections.<sup>(3)</sup> In any case, the last possibility remains low considering the political cost that will be paid by the parties who refuse to meet an agreement, if new elections are called.

## Kais Saied: A Big Victory with Even Bigger Expectations

The outcome of the second round of the presidential election was by no means normal. Most of the predictions and opinion polls that preceded the polling day gave close estimates. In most cases, they gave Saied a lead over his rival, but Saied's victory with 72.71% of the vote exceeded all expectations, including those of his supporters. Winning by a wide margin was not the only surprise in the second round of the presidential election. While the turnout was 45% in the first round of the presidential election and 41% in the parliamentary elections, it rose to 55% in the second round. Statistics published by the Independent High Electoral Commission show that the higher overall participation rate was accompanied by an increase in the youth participation rate.<sup>(4)</sup> The major cities, where most universities are concentrated, have benefitted from voluntary campaigns to facilitate the movement of students to their hometowns to vote, which helped to increase the participation rates of young people, who have had a relatively small turnout in previous elections.

<sup>3</sup> See: Article 89 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia.

<sup>4</sup> ISIE Facebook page, last accessed 14/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2kCMBCB>.



As soon as the preliminary results were announced, which showed a significant lead for Kais Saied over Nabil Karoui in the second round, most Tunisian cities held huge celebrations.<sup>(5)</sup> No previous election results have yielded such huge celebrations, which have in the past been limited to the headquarters of the parties and their surroundings, similar to the celebrations of Ennahda supporters after the results of parliamentary elections. Saied's victory and the widespread celebrations have attracted the attention of observers for several reasons. These include the lack of any organizational framework or party machine, in addition to the spontaneous nature of the celebrations and the lack of any coordination between revelers other than social media invitations. Despite the number of parties that won in the parliamentary elections, including Ennahda, the Democratic Current, and the People's Current, which have expressed their support for Kais Saied and called on their members and supporters to vote for him in the second round, the festivities remained spontaneous and did not seem connected to any specific party.

In the same vein, Kais Saied, since his nomination and even after his win, has maintained assurances of his independence, distanced himself from any party affiliation, and repeatedly insisted on the necessity of amending the centralized system of government. He has also stressed the need to launch political, economic and social projects from Tunisian interior and rural areas, through a mechanism based primarily on local councils.<sup>(6)</sup> Saied's rhetoric, in this sense, gained him a significant percentage of the vote, especially from the interior, which suffers from social and economic deprivation along with insufficient services or infrastructure. This has led to discontent concerning the official developmental approach applied since before the revolution. In the Southern provinces, between 90 and 97% voted for Saied.

Saied's rhetoric in favour of the youth and marginalized was not his only selling point. Throughout the election campaign, he refused funding from political parties, businessmen and financial and economic institutions, and was keen to demonstrate an air of simplicity and asceticism. He distinguished himself from other candidates who organized lavish campaigns and made the most of his position as the alternative to a competitor synonymous with the old regime, imprisoned on suspicions of corruption and tax evasion. In addition, Kais Saied's rhetoric took a decisive attitude on controversial issues, which other candidates tried to skirt around with hesitant positions. He made clear his rejection of normalizing relations with Israel, which he considered "high treason," and opposed the inheritance equality bill proposed by late President Beji Caid Essebsi, earning the votes of a considerable segment of conservative voters.

With his special communicative style and the unprecedented landslide he achieved in the second round of the presidential elections, Kais Saied has presented a fresh image contrasting that of the traditional politician. He has earned the confidence of a significant number of Tunisians. The high expectations from Saied in an economic, social and political context that is overwhelming and stressful, land him

5 Mohammed Ali Latifi, "Celebrations in Tunisia following Kais Saied's Election as President", *Al Jazeera Net*, 14/10/2019, last accessed 14/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/35y1459>.

6 Amina al-Zayani, Kais Saied: The Man in the Shadows Approaches the Lights of the Presidency," *the New Arab*, 13/10/2019, last accessed 14/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/35z1Mk4>.

with responsibilities that may not be commensurate with his limited constitutional powers, especially in light of his lack of any organizational, party and parliamentary backing, and the uncertainty that still surrounds the nature of the next government. Personal behaviour may attract votes, but it is neither a policy nor an approach to governance, and ultimately remains superficial until tested.

In this context, Saied is counting on profound changes in the political, institutional and developmental system, which remains dependent on his ability to win parliamentary support from large blocs to pass legislation. This support may require calculations and trade-offs and a step back from the rhetoric that has characterized his election campaign. Moreover, the solution of social and economic issues in Tunisia does not lie in the contents of the constitution. Even if the president-elect has built his career as a professor of constitutional law, changing the constitution cannot solve all the country's problems.

## Conclusion

With the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections, the Tunisian political and institutional landscape has entered a new phase. The parliamentary elections resulted in huge losses for many political parties that had topped the 2014 election leaderboards, with some emerging empty-handed, and the relative rise of third parties. This foreshadows a dissonant parliamentary scene in which it is difficult to reach a consensus to form a sustainable government that can perform. In the presidential elections, Kais Saied shocked everyone by obtaining an unprecedented majority, which bestows upon him the great responsibility of meeting the aspirations of the public to bring about the promised changes, with his limited constitutional powers.

Finally, the public's disillusion with parties and political elites is a subtle reminder of the growing threat of populism to democracy. Even if the plethora of divisions, "party tourism" and political opportunism are the most important reasons behind this disillusion, there is no substitute for political elites and parties in the contemporary pluralist democracy.