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ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Tunisian Legislative Elections: A Vote Between the Revolution and the Old Regime

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Tunisian Legislative Elections: A Vote Between the Revolution and the Old Regime

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## Introduction

Tunisia's recent legislative elections signal major steps in the country's process of democratic transition. The path to democracy was laid out by the Troika coalition, Tunis' transitional leadership, which set about creating and codifying a constitution that enshrined democracy into the laws of the nation. The coalition did this through the promulgation of electoral law, setting the country's legislative frameworks that would guarantee its democratization. The Troika laid out the only democratic constitution in the Arab world to date, and set forth the mechanisms for a peaceful rotation of power. The holding of elections, and even before that the formation of the Nidaa Tounes Party (Tunisia's Call), are both the result of the successful governance of the coalition that brought two secular revolutionary parties—the Congress for the Republic and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties—in alliance with the Islamist Ennahda. This coalition prevented a religious-secular polarization at a critical period in Tunisia's history; something that was not prevented in other Arab states.

Before the transition to the democracy envisioned by the coalition is complete, however, Tunisia must still hold presidential elections and form a new government. While the Troika-led transition period can be seen as having succeeded in laying down the rules for democracy, the challenges of putting democracy into practice and consolidating a break with the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali signifies that there is still work to be done. Just what work remains can be extrapolated by analysis of several factors, from the results of the recent legislative elections, to the nature of the forthcoming government, and the results of the presidential elections given the wider presidential powers mandated by the new constitution.

To begin with, the results of the legislative elections are highly significant. This is particularly the case given that the Tunisian model is the only paradigm for democratic transformation in Arab revolution countries. The fact that the elections themselves went smoothly is also important, since polarization in many other instances has split the revolutionary forces into those for political Islam and secularists. In most scenarios—and Tunis is no exception here—there also exist divisions between revolutionary forces, those of the old regime, and those seeking a counterrevolution. Within this atmosphere, the results of the Tunisian elections have tended to be reduced to the victory of the "secular" Nidaa Tounes and the defeat of the "Islamist" Ennahda. This figuration of the results is, however, a mistaken reading of events. While the election results showed a decline in the number of Ennahda seats, their main feature was the formation of two

large political currents that control around 71 percent of the seats in the legislative assembly. As predicted by electoral opinion polls in Tunisia in the nine months before the elections, including the Arab Opinion Index conducted by ACRPS, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda claimed the top number of seats. Either one of these camps might lead a coalition government alongside other smaller parties in parliament, and given their failure to defeat these smaller parties, will be forced to concede key elements of policy as they seek to engage in the political process.

The major losers in the elections were the civil and secular revolutionary forces, whose representation in the legislative assembly shrunk. The low number of votes came principally because would-be constituents cast their ballot for Nidaa Tounes and parties similar to it. The share of votes going to civil revolutionary forces fell from 91 seats after the 2011 elections to 30 seats in 2014. This came about due to numerous factors, including polarization between the supporters of the two main parties, the decision by a portion of voters not to 'waste' their votes but casting them for the party they believed would win, and the decline in importance of a legacy of struggle against the previous regime as a factor drawing the support of voters. These factors were exacerbated given the fragmentation of civil revolutionary forces in the years after the revolution.

Since the elections to the constituent assembly, the birth of the Troika, and the legislative elections, the civil revolutionary forces have not been able to form an alliance around an electoral program. On the contrary, civil revolutionary forces became rivals plagued by infighting. The souring of relations between civil revolutionary forces showed them in a light that seemed all too much like the parties affiliated with Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda. The civil revolutionary parties thus lost any possible gains when they, along with these other smaller parties, lost their revolutionary brand (without having achieved much in the way of civil or secular gains) when they aligned with Nidaa Tounes. These smaller parties joined on with Nidaa Tounes, whether on the basis of ideological or policy affinity, or out of political pragmatism, centrally to show their hostility to the Islamism of Ennahda and their aversion to the other revolutionary civil forces. The fragmentation that afflicted secular revolutionary forces also hastened their decline. Perhaps the best example of this is the Congress for the Republic, a single party that split into three, in addition to having some of its MPs leave to become independents, or to join other parties. This was not a phenomenon unique to the Congress for the Republic, and the same thing happened to parties like the Social Democratic Path and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties.

When all of these complex factors are taken into account, analysis of Tunis' elections results can go beyond the Islamist-Secularist split and consider the division between the country's revolutionary and non-revolutionary forces. Such an analysis would show that the civil revolutionary forces lost more than 60 seats in the elections compared to their 2011 results, a fall due principally to the downturn in support for the three fragmented parties (the Congress, the Forum, and the Path) that were not cushioned by the gains made by the Popular Front. When analysis of the elections is carried out splitting parties based on whether or not they have a history of opposition to the old regime (whether Islamist or secularist), those with a history of struggle can be seen to have dropped from 180 seats in 2011 to 100 seats in the 2014 elections. Yet, those parties that do not have a legacy of opposition to the old regime, or might even represent the regime's legacy, rose from 20 seats in 2011 to more than 100 in these elections (the seats of Nidaa Tounes and similar parties). Moreover, there is a bloc of 15-17 seats that includes lists that are not associated with either of these two classifications.

If the election results are seen as divided between the control of Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda over the majority of the seats in parliament, and this is taken into account along with the fall in the share of the revolutionary parties and rise in parties connected to the old regime (or at the least non-revolutionary parties), then the question posed by the results changes. Instead of a victory of the secularists over the Islamists, or a struggle between the two, the question becomes: why did Nidaa Tounes and the forces seen as an "improved" version of the old regime, win the largest number of seats in parliament? And equally importantly: why did the revolutionary parties fall back?

## Changes in Vote-Determining Factors: 2011 versus 2014

The results of the 2014 elections in Tunisia are doubly significant because they reflect the changes in issues that determine voter choice in a post-revolutionary setting. There is significant data available that allows for an analysis of how, and according to which factors Tunisians voted, such as the 2014 Arab Opinion Index for Tunisia. The index revealed that the majority of Tunisians, when making their choice at the ballot box, focused on a set of ethical qualities for candidates and heads of lists. These criteria included the honesty, integrity and seriousness of a given list's platform. The second most important factor, cited by some 20 percent of Tunisians, was around the ability and competence of a list to administer the state. While significant, competence was at the top of the list alongside other important criteria. For example, 15 percent of those polled stated that they would vote for parties whom they believed would improve the

economy; five percent stated that they would vote for parties that would ensure law and order, stability, and the functioning of the country; and seven percent stated that they would vote for lists which would end discrimination between Tunisians, and specifically between the nation's regions. The criteria with the smallest number of proponents was, interestingly, those looking for parties that sought to break with the previous regime or guarantee democratization, at less than one percent of respondents.

The determining factors for electoral behavior in 2014 were thus almost entirely different from those in 2011. In the Arab Opinion Index of that year, Tunisians were focused instead on voting for parties and lists that worked to consolidate a democratic system, break with the authoritarianism and nepotism of the former regime, bolster justice and equality, fight against financial corruption, preserve Tunisia's Arab and Islamic identity, and improve the economy.

This transformation in the vote-determining factors for Tunisians was reinforced by the priorities of citizens, as the Arab Opinion Index 2014 for Tunisia clearly showed. In the report, 37 percent of respondents named the absence of law and order and political instability as their top concern, with a similar percentage identifying the poor state of the economy as the priority. Issues such as fighting financial and administrative corruption and democratization were also priorities, but for less than four percent of respondents. Reinforcing these priorities would have been the instability of the Arab world generally, and around Tunisia (including Libya and Egypt) in particular. A series of terrorist attacks and political assassinations that rocked the region from the second half of 2013 until the success of national dialogue, would certainly have affected voter decisions and criteria for successful candidates. Thus, the majority of Tunisians focused on ethical aspects, even though these are hazy in political terms. The key criteria for a successful candidate became: the ability to restore security and end instability, followed by the economy. These priorities trumped the stance of parties towards the former authoritarian regime and its practices, as had been the case in 2011. Accordingly, Tunisians voted for the political forces that they believed would provide solutions to those problems they found most significant.

The success of Nidaa Tounes can be read from within these factors. The party essentially came into being to counter the Islamist Ennahda movement ideologically, but it also fashioned itself as the defender of the "civic identity of Tunisian society." In light of the successive terrorist attacks and political assassinations, Nidaa Tounes strategically portrayed these attacks as reflecting the failure of the state and the weakness of its security apparatus. Within this void, the party styled itself as the best-

qualified party to administer the state and restore law and order based on members' political and security experience from the time of Bourguiba and the early days of Ben Ali.

In addition to the changes in vote-determining factors, from which Nidaa Tounes and similar parties benefited, the increase in abstention rates in 2014 compared with 2011 also affected the share of the votes obtained by civil revolutionary parties. This can likely be attributed to the generally prevalent feeling that the political conflict of 2013, which culminated in the resignation of the Troika government, was purely a party struggle and a move in the wider Tunisian national interest. Accordingly, it was felt that participation in elections where the same parties were competing would result in a victory for the party that represented the aspirations of citizens for solutions to their daily preoccupations. Electoral and political apathy was reinforced by the conviction of citizens that party competition was restricted to Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, one of which was sure to win. What this effectively meant was that the proportion of those who believed their votes would not count rose. Such feelings were magnified by the inability of the civic revolutionary forces to form an alliance and persuade voters of their ability to compete for an influential share of seats.

## Taking Account of Regional and Socio-Economic Divisions

If understanding the change in factors influencing Tunisian voting helps in better understanding the results, then a detailed reading of the geographic and socioeconomic distribution of votes for Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda might shed further light. Indeed, breaking results down by district shows three clear patterns:

- In ten electoral districts (Sfax 1, Sfax 2, Manouba, Zaghuan, Siliana, Sidi Bou Zid, Jendouba, Tunis 1, Ben Arous, and Kasserine), either Nidaa Tounes or Ennahda won by a margin of only 5 to 15 percent. So, even at the largest margin, the party that came second place must be considered to have been a real competitor with popular support. The relatively balanced split between the two parties overall further illustrates their broad popularity across the country.
- Nidaa Tounes gained more than half of the votes in eight electoral districts, including the coastal regions and provinces of Mahdia, Monastir, Sousse, and Nabeul (a tribal homeland and geographically an extension of the Tunisian coastal plain). The party also won a majority in Tunis 2, Ariana, and Kef. The popular base for Nidaa Tounes can thus be understood as concentrated in the



coastal provinces, Nabeul, and a not insignificant portion of Tunis. Mapping these preferences onto the pre-revolutionary political geography of Tunis reveals that the provinces favored by the old regime—which are also the wealthiest provinces—in 2014 became the core electoral support for Nidaa Tounes.

- Ennahda took half or more of votes in seven electoral districts (Gabes, Kairouan, Medenine, Tozeur, Kebili, Tataouine, and Gafsa) from Tunis' southern and inland provinces. These provinces were precisely those marginalized by the pre-revolutionary regimes, and in both pre- and post-revolutionary periods voters in these regions demanded an end in discrimination in development or wealth distribution between the provinces.

Such an examination of voting results reveals the highly complex and dangerous regional division that exists in Tunis and that influenced voter decisions. Rather than an election based on social and cultural determinants, socioeconomic factors of Tunis' voting districts were a key factor. The confluence of social and socioeconomic factors were what determined how the programs put forward by the two parties were received in the different regions, and determined voter priorities.

The resulting divide suggests that the process of separation between districts that began under the old regimes has continued in the post-revolutionary era. Economic and social discrimination targeting regions with particular cultural features can thus be seen to mark the very evolution of the state of Tunis. The fact that this separation continues is highly significant, since it was such discrimination between regions that led to the Tunisian revolution in 2011 and the overthrow of the old regime.

Looking at the election results based on cultural factors thus obscures a worrying trend centered rather on socioeconomics. The fact that Nidaa Tounes defeated Ennahda by a large margin in Tunis 2 reveals the support for Nidaa Tounes' platform by the upper and middle class neighborhoods (including Carthage, La Moursa, La Goulette, Manar, and El Menzah), while working class districts such as Omran and Ibn Khaldoun, voted instead for Ennahda. The same logic applies to the results of Tunis 1, Ariana, and even Ben Arous, electoral districts made up primarily of working class, lower middle class, and poor neighborhoods. The districts of Sfax 1 and 2 can be analyzed in similar fashion: Nidaa Tounes gained more votes in Sfax 2, which includes the wealthier neighborhoods and suburbs, while Ennahda did better in Sfax 1, which is made up mostly of working class neighborhoods and the city's rural hinterland.

These patterns are not restricted to the dominant political groups, and in fact the same pattern can be observed with respect to the smaller parties. For example, the non-revolutionary parties (or those that in one form or another represent the former regime, or that competed with Nidaa Tounes for the legacy of the Constitutional Rally) obtained more votes in the coastal provinces of Nabeul, Tunis 2, Ariana, and some provinces in the northwest. This shows that voter support for non-revolutionary parties lies in provinces that were considered areas privileged by the pre-revolutionary regimes. On the other hand, support for the revolutionary and civil forces (who draw their legitimacy from a record of opposition to the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali) can be seen in the less affluent regions on the country's periphery. While some marginalized Tunisian provinces gave their votes to local lists as a way to maximize focus on local problems and maximize regional benefits (as in the case of Gafsa, Gabes, and Tozeur), this makes up the minority of districts and does not change the overall analysis. Indeed, the situation still reveals a dangerous split that may widen depending on the results of the forthcoming presidential elections.

The divide revealed in election results has historical roots going back to the struggle against colonialism between the Bourguiba and other groups. It is related to issues of religiosity, social conservatism, and differences in rural and urban ways of life. The election results can thus be seen to express a socioeconomic divide that corresponds to long-term regional divisions that also take into account historic perceived differences in identity.

The formation of the new government will have a significant impact not only on Tunisia's political process, but also on the consolidation of its democratic transformation. A government formed by Nidaa Tounes and political parties seen as an extension of the legacy of the former regime and without Ennahda or the civil revolutionary parties will make the process of democratization a difficult one. Such an outcome would make it more likely that the new political regime will adopt authoritarian tendencies. This is because the long experience of the Nidaa Tounes leadership in running the state and its familiarity with the state's bureaucracy, security and civic apparatus may mean falling back on bad habits. A Nidaa Tounes government formed with the support of smaller parties, and not a broad coalition, would serve to exclude from government political forces with strong electoral support from less privileged regions and provinces. Without the participation of parties representing these groups and classes, it will be much easier for opposition to mount mass mobilizations against such a new government. This outcome seems particularly likely in view of the widespread feeling in these regions

that, given that their preferred party is not in power, they are at risk of continued marginalization similar to their pre-revolutionary experience. For these districts, it was precisely this experience of marginalization that sparked the revolutionary drive, and a return to such a state would be problematic. Indeed, the political exclusion of these groups could lead to events similar to what took place in Gabes 1 and Gabes 2, where protest camps were set up by residents of the southern and inland provinces as political developments made them feel that the revolution was about to be stolen from them. If a narrow-based government led by Nidaa Tounes and backed by small parties is realized, it will surely lead to polarization. The same principal, however, applies to an Ennahda-led government that could go ahead without Nidaa Tounes.

While analysis of the legislative elections reveals a clear-cut scenario, things become more complicated when the presidential elections are taken into account. A victory for Nidaa Tounes would threaten to send the country along the path of single-party dominance. This would mean that all of Tunis' new constitutional institutions would be under the control of a single leadership, even in the case of a broad-based coalition government, since the powers enjoyed by the president were and continue to be greater than those that were stipulated during the transitional period. Either a broad-based coalition government or a narrow coalition led by Nidaa Tounes would mean the concentration of power in the hands of Nidaa Tounes, which came to power on the basis of preserving security and stability and restoring the authority of the state and its institutions. This could slow down Tunis' transformation to democracy, and might even derail the process by undermining the separation of powers, the role of oversight, and the rule of law.

The best scenario for Tunisia today is for the president of the republic to be a representative of the civil revolutionary forces. Since these forces derive their legitimacy from a record of opposition to the dictatorship of Ben Ali, their leadership would make it possible for the president to assure a system of checks and balances in a government led by Nidaa Tounes (even in a coalition with Ennahda) and a parliament controlled by those two parties. Moreover, this scenario would ensure that the divisions between the party would be bridged through joint action, rather than deepening the political conflict between them.