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**Assessment Report**

**Tunisia's elections:**

**A milestone on the path to democratic transformation**

**Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS**

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***Assessment Report***

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With the election on October 23, 2011 of the Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting a new constitution, Tunisia has concluded the first phase of its transition to democracy following the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali – and initiated the second phase, that of actually creating the constitution and establishing a democratic regime.

The elections were conducted in an organized, transparent manner and enjoyed a high turnout, signaling a proper beginning for a new era. Even before the final results were declared, the official partial returns and the political blocs' own estimates indicated that the moderately Islamist Renaissance (Nahda in Arabic) Movement would be the winner, having received about 40% of all votes cast. The Congress for the Republic came second, followed by the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, while the Popular Petition's fourth-place finish sprang the biggest surprise of the elections. After the Democratic Modernist Pole and the Progressive Democratic Party conceded defeat, Nahda began consultations to form a government of national unity government which would reflect the facts produced by the elections.

### Political blocs and parties on the ballot

**The Renaissance Movement:** Established in the late 1960s as *al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah* (the Islamic Group) before changing its name to the "Movement of Islamic Tendency" in 1981, the organization was only active in the intellectual field. When it tried to obtain legal status, Bourguiba rejected its existence as a political movement and arrested its founder, *Sheikh Rashid al-Ghannushi*.

After the ouster of Bourguiba in 1987, the movement initially established good relations with the Ben Ali regime. Having changed its name again, this time to the "Renaissance Movement" in response to legal conditions banning any political party from monopolizing or claiming to speak for the religion, it participated in the 1989 elections and won 17% of the vote. In 1990, Ben Ali launched a massive crackdown on Renaissance, sending many of its supporters into exile, but the movement maintained its popularity among Tunisians. It contested the Constituent Assembly elections with an open political view derived from its reformist understanding of Islam. It did not clash with Tunisia's secular traditions, especially regarding the personal status law. The movement also supported the adoption of a parliamentary system for the formation of governments.

**The Congress for the Republic (CPR1):** Established in 2001, the CPR was one of the major parties opposing the former regime. Gaining registration only after the successful revolution, the CPR was known for its severe criticism of the former regime.

After the revolution, the CPR's current leader, Moncef Marzouki, was the first to call for a national unity government including all forces in Tunisia except the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). The CPR contested the elections as a secular

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<sup>1</sup> This and other abbreviations used in this document stem from the French-language ones by which most Tunisian parties are known in Western circles.

democratic party, with a leader of apparent pan-Arabist tendencies. The CPR's political platform stressed the need to retain Arab/Islamic identity as a cornerstone of Tunisian civilization. The CPR opened up to the Renaissance Movement and the other Islamist parties, lying in the middle between them and the Democratic Modernist Pole. It prefers a hybrid model<sup>2</sup> as the most suitable form of government for Tunisia in the coming stage.

**The Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL):** Led by *Mustapha Ben Jaafar*, the FDTL was not officially recognized until 2002 but was established in 1994 by a group of progressive activists. The FDTL is a secular party open to nationalist and Islamist forces. It joined hands with the parties and powers representing such forces to create the 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms, which also included by the Workers' Communist Party. The FDTL entered the elections with a political platform aimed at democratization and building a strong economy, in addition to its socialist aspirations related to healthcare and fighting poverty.

The CPR and the FDTL have been known for their struggle in defense of human rights in Tunisia and their anti-authoritarian position.

**The Popular Petition (PP):** The PP has no organizational body or party framework. However, the Traditional Conservative Party, which operates under the umbrella of the PP, was officially recognized on July 15, 2011 under the leadership of *Iskander Bouallagui*. The PP platform is based on the ideas of its founder, Mohammed al-Hachimi al-Hamidi. It has adopted a progressive, conciliatory Islamic rhetoric on social rights, competing with both Renaissance and the secular parties. This reflects a prominent contradiction in its ideas. The PP enjoyed media support from al-Hachimi al-Hamidi's *Mustakilla* (which means independent in Arabic) television channel. It also formed coalitions with businessmen who had previously supported Ben Ali's RCD. The PP contested the elections effectively and earned the majority of votes in the Sidi Bouzid district. Following the polls, several lawyers filed complaints against it with the Independent Higher Elections Authority (ISIE), accusing the PP of offering bribes during the campaign.

**The Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM):** With a secular leftist orientation, the PDM was established on May 31, 2011 and is a bloc of 11 parties. The most notable are the Renewal (Ettajdid in Arabic) Movement (formerly the Tunisian Communist Party) and the Socialist Left Party, in addition to leading secular intellectuals who were not known for opposing the former regime. The new bloc created its political platform on extremist secular bases, dedicating its political rhetoric to dealing with Islamists confrontationally, as opponents, and trying to form a counterbalance to their impact on Tunisian society. However, it was the biggest loser in the Constituent Assembly elections, receiving only a small number of votes.

**The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP):** The PDP is the most prominent opposition party. Officially recognized in 1998, since 2006 it has been led by Maya Jribi, who succeeded founder

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<sup>2</sup> The hybrid model in this instance is a semi-presidential one drawing on both presidential and parliamentary systems, for example France's current Fifth Republic.

Ahmed Najib Chebbi. The PDP once took historic, bold stances against Ben Ali's regime, and its activists played a key role in the beginning of the Tunisian Revolution. However, the party welcomed the decisions enunciated by Ben Ali in his final speech as president and proposed a reformist option, while the people were no longer willing to accept anything less than the overthrow of the regime. This step proved to be a historic mistake for the party, which drew a barrage of criticism, especially when it rushed to join the first government of Mohamed Ghannouchi. Just after the revolution, the PDP adopted a hard-line secular position and escalation against the Renaissance Movement.

### **Reading the election results**

The results of the Constituent Assembly elections reflect a basic reality: Tunisian society wants a clean break with the Ben Ali era, even at the level of cultural identity. Various actors arrived at this desire via disparate routes, but the confluence of their respective votes have made it a reality.

The elections also reflect the attempt of the poor and middle classes to reclaim the revolution after fears that it has been hijacked by remnants of the former regime. The Tunisian Revolution was in essence a revolt of the poorer classes, who had suffered the effects of structural development defects. These classes expressed a clear stance in the elections, refusing anything related to the former regime.

The victory of the Renaissance Movement indicates fundamental changes in Tunisian society, brought about by the, over concepts of identity and belonging. The vote for the Renaissance Movement was more than just ideologically close to, or far from, the popular circles that had been marginalized during Ben Ali's reign. It also transformed into a popular perception that rejected not only the former regime's exclusionary despotism but also its extremist secular orientation. Therefore, the main factor in Renaissance's triumph was not just the fact that it had been subject to greater political persecution than other opposition parties, but also the belief that it constitutes the total antithesis of the former regime. In this view, it can therefore be counted on, more than the others, to produce the aforementioned clean break with the former regime and the elite associated therewith. The party also provided answers to many of the questions about identity which had become increasingly problematic during the Ben Ali era. These are the voters' expectations, and only time will tell whether the movement is able to act accordingly.

Renaissance presented a clear-cut political platform that defined its preferred form and principles of government, and adopted a general approach despite the intellectual variations within its vast political spectrum. It also generated a political discourse that is open to secular parties and seeks to preserve the real national gains of both Tunisian society and the Tunisian state, including the establishment of institutions during the country's modern history. The party also addressed the Code of Personal Status and the rights of Tunisian women.

Had Renaissance adopted an extremist religious stand rejecting the institutions built by the Tunisian state and opposing its social achievements, its electoral success would not have been achieved. The typical Tunisian citizen who supported the Renaissance Movement is against the

former regime, even at the level of cultural identity, but such a voter does not want either a civil war with secular forces or a relinquishment of gains.

For the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties FDTL, although the explanation of their results overlaps significantly greatly with the reasons behind the victory of Renaissance, these results also convey the views of a large portion of Tunisian secular currents and emerging changes in social orientation. The vote for these parties, open to Islamic movements, reflects the adoption of a conciliatory approach by a part of the secular public, against frictions and divisions inside Tunisian society within the context of the secular/religious conflict. The conciliatory approach recalls in a way the political literature of the former regime. Both parties leaned on national opposition, non-Islamist social segments of society, rejecting conflict between secular and Islamist poles that would pose a threat to Tunisia's unity and stability.

Based on these facts, the loss of the (PDM) and other left-wing parties, having based their political platforms on criticism of Renaissance and positioning themselves as the latter's antithesis, can be understood. Tunisian public opinion has developed a view that links these parties to the culture of the former autocratic regime and sees them as its extension, especially since the cultural elites of these parties have common stands with those of the old regime.

Distance from or proximity to the former norms of political life were the criteria that governed the choices of Tunisian voters who wanted a break with the past. The best evidence for this is the defeat of the opposition PDP, even after its legacy of struggle. Despite the party's principled opposition to the former regime, which had earned it widespread respect, its participation in Mohammed Ghannouchi's first post-revolt government, which included ministers from the former ruling party, and its escalatory rhetoric aimed at drawing secular support alienated it from a major portion of the electorate.

The most surprising results in the elections were those of the Popular Petition (PP). The PP list competed strongly with political forces such as Renaissance and the CPR in several districts, especially Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine.

The PP adopted a political rhetoric of Islamic, social and populist dimensions directed against Renaissance. At the same time, it acted as political cover for Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) members, especially businessmen.

The PP's populist discourse presented a bold platform compared to those of some other parties, promising 200 Tunisian dinars (approximately USD 140) per month in unemployment benefits to 500,000 unemployed Tunisians, free healthcare, and exemption of the elderly from local bus and train fares. This populist platform aimed to win votes without consideration of either the government's financial position or the deteriorating overall economic situation, and its promises attracted considerable attention among poorer segments of society. These promises can be interpreted as evidence of the PP's familiarity with Tunisian reality, but also reflect its awareness that it was far from being able to achieve results similar to those of Renaissance, from which the

group's leader, al-Hachimi al-Hamidi had resigned a few years before the revolution. It made such commitments in order to expand the voting possibilities of the candidates on its list candidates, totally aware that it could not win the elections or take the reins of power, absolving it of any blame for not keeping its word.

In conclusion, a reading of the Tunisian election results leads to the following:

- The Constituent Assembly elections have posed a real test for confidence in democratic change and Tunisia's refined political culture. The elections also were more of an occasion to challenge the former regime at the level of the Tunisian people's identity and belonging than a competition among political blocs.
- The distance separating parties from the former regime and the price they paid in confronting it were more of a factor in attracting vote than the ideological differences among the parties.
- Voters differentiated among political blocs according to the degree of extremism and practice of political exclusion with opponents. Both Renaissance and some of the secular movements, which emerged as the winners, tend to national unity and reconciliation.
- The electoral system has revealed gaps in campaign financing and organization that adversely affected some parts of the electoral process.
- Tunisia's elections revealed that the proportional list method, even at the level of districts, brings more variety and justice to representation. If a plurality (or "first-past-the-post") method had been employed, the minority parties would have received no or little representation, while Renaissance would have secured an overwhelming majority of the seats without having obtained a majority of the votes.

### **New phase, new challenges**

The successful electoral process in Tunisia was an honorable prelude to democratic change in the Arab world. Having provided inspiration for revolutions in many other Arab countries, Tunisia also will be the driving force of Arab democratic change if its democratic experience proves successful. Tunisian public opinion is pan-Arabist, committed to Arab causes, chief of which is the Palestinian cause. Tunisia also is an advanced model in terms of aptitude for democratic transition, especially amid popular revolutions with fair demands in countries where popular and official attitudes are not far from sliding into political sectarianism and tribalism. Such attitudes can lead to foreign interventions, bearing high risks that can carry negative effects for the change sought in so many Arab countries.

The biggest challenge facing the democratic transition in Tunisia is the ability to establish reconciliation and openness among different political forces in order to build an institutionalized national state. The ideological rivalry between modernist and Islamist currents has deepened the crisis of identity in Tunisia over the past decades. Consequently, a coalition consisting of democratic powers from disparate parts of the spectrum will be a basic lever for the process of democratic transformation. Building a strong national economy based on an integrated production cycle is one of the biggest challenges for Tunisia in the coming stage, since the



economic factor has played a key role, not just in the recent revolution but also in previous unrest, such as the Bread Uprising in 1984, the Revolt of the Mining Basin in 2008, and the Redeyef Uprising in 2010. Therefore, addressing economic issues and their social repercussions, as well as departing from the unequal development and neo-liberal economic system that allocated wealth to a small elite under the previous regime, will be a social pillar and safety valve for democratic transformation.

Tunisia has multiple advantages that make it a better candidate for democratic transformation than other Arab countries, including the existence of modern state institutions accredited to the former regime since independence; an effective middle class; cultural, religious and ethnic harmony that contributes to a coherent national identity; a rich political culture; and an institutional, union-based framework that accommodates citizens. Such factors promote the values of citizenship and the practice of its associated values.