



A GUIDE TO THE TUNISIAN ELECTIONS

OCTOBER 2011



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Project on Middle East Democracy

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About POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we aim to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

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On October 23, Tunisians will vote for a national constituent assembly in the first competitive elections in the Arab world since historic uprisings swept the region this year. These elections will not only be critical for the future prospects of democracy in Tunisia, but will have implications for the entire Middle East and North Africa. If successful, they will help dispel claims of Arab exceptionalism to democracy, and could set an example for the rest of the region. On the other hand, if problems stemming from these elections were to derail Tunisia's democratic transition, that could be a considerable setback for democracy across the Arab world. Despite the significance of this moment, the National Constituent Assembly elections have received very little coverage in the American press. Yet there could hardly be a more important time for the United States to be well informed about the developments in Tunisia. While the revolution that overthrew President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was fueled exclusively by indigenous forces, international support for Tunisia's democratic transition will be critical to its success.

The dearth of substantive analysis on the elections prompted POMED to develop this guide for the Washington policy community. The report is informed by conversations with various Tunisian civil society activists, public opinion polling experts, political analysts, government officials, candidates for the constituent assembly, and leaders of numerous political parties, as well as representatives of various international organizations that are providing support to Tunisia's political transition. In presenting an overview of the political landscape as Tunisians head to the polls, we hope to facilitate better understanding of these critically important elections in Washington and encourage additional support from the U.S. and the international community for Tunisia's historic transition to democracy.

Getting From Street Protests to the Ballot Box

The overthrow of ruthless dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14 was a watershed moment in Arab politics and belied the notion that governments can forever ignore the demands of their people through harsh repression. Following Ben Ali's ouster, the interim government has resigned twice and seen multiple cabinet reshuffles due to continued pressure from protestors. During this stage of Tunisia's transition, the country is not led by any elected officials, but relies instead on an interim president, a prime minister and cabinet*, and the following three independent reform committees:

- Committee to Investigate Human Rights Abuses
- Committee for Economic Reform and Employment
- High Commission for the Fulfillment of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition

Of the three committees, the High Commission (henceforth called the Ben Achour commission, after the commission's chair, Yadh Ben Achour) is playing a central role in overseeing the transition and preparing the country for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) elections in October. Although not an elected body, the 150-person Commission derives its legitimacy from consensus between its various members, which includes representatives from 12 political parties, 18 civil society organizations, including trade unions, professional associations, and human rights NGOs, and prominent "national personalities." The Ben Achour Commission, along with the 16-member electoral commission that it created, has the authority to draft decree-laws that must then be approved and issued by the interim president, Fouad Mebazaa. With so many centers of power, however, Tunisians have sometimes struggled to identify who is actually in charge.

Given its highly educated middle class, progressive policies on women's rights, developed market economy, and relatively homogenous society, Tunisia is considered by many to be the Arab country best positioned to undergo a successful transition to democracy.

* As stipulated in the constitution, the speaker of the parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, acceded to the Presidency when Ben Ali stepped down. When Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi resigned in February, Mebazaa appointed Béji Caïd Essebsi as Prime Minister who has named members to the cabinet since then.

At the same time, Tunisia faces daunting economic challenges that could destabilize the country. Economic growth, which was 3.8 percent last year, has fallen to less than one percent this year.¹ Tourism, which accounted for seven percent of GDP, has collapsed and foreign direct investment has dropped by 17 percent. The unemployment rate is 18.5 percent while youth unemployment is even higher at around 23 percent.² Furthermore, there are vast inequalities between the prosperous coastal regions and the impoverished interior, long neglected by the government. This economic hardship has been exacerbated by the influx of refugees from neighboring Libya, driving up prices on basic staples.

Tunisians also worry about the precarious security situation. The absence of police on the streets has led to occasional localized violence and looting, and people fear that further violence could erupt given political tensions. Indeed, the political scene has become increasingly polarized between secular and Islamist groups, youth and the older generation of political elites, and old regime elements and new political players.

Mass protests have occasionally threatened the country's fragile stability and have sometimes been met with force by police officers. Many Tunisians are disappointed with the slow pace of reforms and see little improvement in their lives nine months after the revolution. To its credit, the government has dissolved the former ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party, released political prisoners, lifted media restrictions, confiscated the assets of Ben Ali's inner circle, indicted him and his family—albeit in absentia—on corruption charges, and dismantled the secret police. However, many feel that with no one yet implicated in the deaths of almost 300 protestors this spring and Ben Ali and his coterie in exile, real justice has not been served. Perhaps most importantly, people are frustrated that the economic problems that helped trigger the protests in January have not been addressed. It is against this backdrop that Tunisians will go to the polls to vote for a constituent assembly on October 23.

The National Constituent Assembly

The NCA will be responsible for writing a new constitution and preparing the country for presidential and/or parliamentary elections. Among the major issues that will be debated during this process are the role of religion in public life, the adoption of

a presidential versus parliamentary system of governance, and the degree to which governmental authority will be decentralized. Beyond drafting a new constitution, the NCA's mandate is not clearly defined. It will be a sovereign body with the authority to decide how it operates and how the country is governed in the interim. On September 15, the major political parties that are members of the Ben Achour Commission signed an agreement limiting the term of the assembly to one year and authorizing the assembly to appoint a new government. However, the agreement is non-binding and many people assume that it will not be honored.

Electoral System

The 218-seat assembly will represent 33 electoral districts—27 domestic and six abroad (two for France, one for Italy, one for Germany, one for the Arab world, and one for the Americas and the rest of Europe.) Three of the larger governorates within Tunisia (Tunis, Nabeul, and Sfax) are split into two districts. Each district is allocated a maximum of 10 seats, with each seat representing 60,000 people. In order to ensure adequate representation for those living in marginalized, rural areas, governorates with less than 270,000 people are allocated two additional seats and those with between 270,000 and 500,000 are allocated one additional seat.³

The elections will take place in one round and the seats will be distributed based on a closed-list proportional representation system using largest remainders. Every candidate, whether he or she is an independent or affiliated with a party, is required to run as part of a list with as many candidates as seats available in that district. The number of seats a list receives will be calculated as follows: the number of votes cast in a given district will be divided by the number of seats allocated for that district to produce a quota. The quota is then divided into the vote that each party receives and the party wins one seat for each whole number produced. The remaining seats are allocated to the parties with the largest remainders. For example, if 100,000 votes were cast and 10 seats are to be filled, the quota is 10,000. So if one party receives 38,000 votes, it would win 3 seats (38,000/10,000) with a remainder of 8,000. This number would then be compared with the remainders of other parties to allocate the remaining seats.

There is also a requirement that the candidates on each list alternate between men and women to ensure gender parity and that at least one candidate on each list be under the

age of 30. However, many of the lists are expected to win only one seat, and because few parties have placed either women or youth candidates in their lists' top positions, the assembly is likely to have considerably less than half its seats filled by women and even less by youth. Senior officials of the former ruling RCD party are banned from running as are regional governors, judges, and local officials unless they resign from their posts.⁴ With over 60 political parties, more than 1,400 candidate lists, and no electoral threshold in a proportional representation system, the NCA is expected to be a deeply fragmented body.

Political Parties

Since the fall of the former regime on January 14, a plethora of new parties have emerged, creating a highly confusing political landscape. In stark contrast to the repressive Ben Ali era when there were only eight legal political parties, many now complain that it is too easy for new parties to get legal accreditation—there are currently over 100 political parties, although only 60 some parties along with a number of independent lists will be standing in the elections. Polling in the country is inconsistent, however, a handful of larger, well-established parties have dominated every poll. As such, while the number of seats each party will win is unclear, there is a reasonable sense of which major parties will enter the assembly. Below are brief descriptions of the eleven parties and the one independent list that have polled the highest in Tunisia's most recent polls:⁵

Al-Nahda

Hanns-Seidel poll (Sept 22-24): 25% **Sigma poll (Sept 7-9): 22.8%**

Founded: 1981 **Legally Recognized: 2011**

Leaders: Rachid Ghannouchi, Hamadi Jebali

The Islamist party Al-Nahda is widely expected to win the largest number of seats in the NCA. Under the former regime, the party was banned and its members either imprisoned or exiled after garnering between 10 and 17 percent of the national vote in the 1989 elections. In the wake of Ben Ali's ouster, the party has sought to quickly rebuild itself in preparation for elections. On January 30, the founder of the party,

Islamic scholar and activist Rachid Ghannouchi, returned from exile in London and on March 3 the party was officially legalized by decree of the interim government. Al-Nahda is generally considered to be the best-organized party in the running, with members working tirelessly to cultivate a grassroots network.⁶

Given Tunisia's long tradition of state-imposed secularism, party leaders take great pains to present Al-Nahda as a moderate party committed to democracy. Ghannouchi often compares his party to the Turkish Justice and Development party with whom Al-Nahda members have had a close relationship for years. He has also stated that the personal status code is derived from sharia, that polygamy is illegal, and that the headscarf is a personal choice.⁷ Al-Nahda was also the first party to endorse the gender parity requirement in party lists.⁸

Despite these efforts, many in Tunisia fear that the party will reverse the country's secular identity and advances in women's rights. Critics of Al-Nahda accuse the party of "double-speak," with party leaders espousing progressive, democratic rhetoric in front of certain audiences only to contradict themselves in other platforms. For example, when visiting Cairo in August, Ghannouchi stated that, "the ultimate objective of Muslims was the installation of the caliphate."⁹ While the party later distanced itself from this statement, the damage was already done.

For its part, Al-Nahda feels that secular, leftist groups are working to undermine the party and eviscerate its influence. The party has twice withdrawn from the Ben Achour commission, claiming that the body has exceeded its authority and lacks popular legitimacy. When the government postponed elections from July to October for technical reasons, Al-Nahda viewed the decision as a political one that would allow other parties to better organize and become more competitive against it.¹⁰ Al-Nahda also opposed a law promulgated by the commission that limited funding for political parties given the party's vast monetary resources.¹¹ And in September, Al-Nahda came out against an initiative by 40 parties to limit the powers of the assembly to writing a constitution, which would effectively curtail its influence since it will most likely have the largest representation in the NCA.¹² On September 15, Al-Nahda unveiled its party platform, which protects the gains of women and proposes a single-chamber parliament and a prime ministerial system in which the president would be elected by parliament itself, rather than by a nationwide election.¹³

Parti Démocrate Progressiste/Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)

Hanns-Seidel: 16%

Sigma: 10.9%

Founded: 1983

Legally Recognized: 1988

Leaders: Ahmed Nejjib El Chebbi, Maya Jribi

The center-left Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) is considered the most prominent of the secular parties and has presented itself as the most viable alternative to Al-Nahda. The PDP was one of three genuine opposition parties operating legally under Ben Ali, but held no seats in parliament. Originally called the “Progressive Socialist Rally,” the party changed its name in 2001 to reflect its move away from socialism. PDP has slowly shifted its leftist ideology to a more centrist one, and now advocates some economic policies that are seen to be more liberal and pro-business.

Its leader, Ahmed Nejjib El Chebbi, was an outspoken critic of the regime and at one point staged a hunger strike to protest government repression.¹⁴ Having endured years of harassment by security forces and constant slander in state-owned media, Chebbi is potentially more credible than opposition activists who fled abroad.¹⁵ A lawyer by training, Chebbi has defended civil society activists and journalists targeted by the government. In 2006, he stepped down as party leader to demonstrate the importance of power alternation, thereby making feminist and human rights activist Maya Jribi the first female secretary-general of a major Tunisian political party. Chebbi continued to be a major player on the political scene, and intended to run in presidential elections in 2009 but the electoral law was changed specifically to make him ineligible. The PDP also boycotted the 2009 parliamentary elections, which Chebbi denounced as a “farce” whose “results are already known.”¹⁶ On January 17, three days after the collapse of the Ben Ali government, Chebbi was appointed to the interim cabinet as Minister of Regional Development, but resigned two weeks later in protest of Beji Caid Essebsi’s appointment as prime minister and of a government ban on cabinet ministers running in upcoming presidential elections.

During the election campaign, PDP has seen the defection of some members who accuse Chebbi of prioritizing fundraising over a commitment to the party’s ideology because of reports that he has offered positions on party lists to wealthy businessmen. This policy

has also been perceived to marginalize younger members and has exacerbated an inter-generational rift within the party. Before January 14 PDP enjoyed a stronger base of support and popularity than other secular, center-left parties, but it has struggled to attract youth who were active in the revolution. The party has also been criticized for conducting a vociferously negative campaign against Al-Nahda and is being investigated for violating a ban on political campaigning during the period from September 12 – October 1.¹⁷ In an effort to counter Al-Nahda's potential power in the NCA, PDP called for a referendum that would have limited the assembly's role to drafting a constitution.¹⁸ Yet, as the party closest in size and level of funding to Al-Nahda, PDP has also been on the same side of certain debates with its Islamist rival. For example, both parties initially opposed the postponement of elections to October and a law limiting financing for political parties. Unlike Al-Nahda, however, the PDP prefers an American-style presidential system of government, for which Chebbi would most likely run as a candidate.¹⁹ On October 6, PDP advocated the formation of a modern democratic block in the assembly comprised of secular, centrist groups Ettakatol, the PDM Coalition, and Afek Tounes.²⁰

Ettakatol/Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés/ Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL)

Hanns-Seidel: 14%

Sigma: 9.2%

Founded: 1994

Legally Recognized: 2002

Leader: Mustapha Ben Jaafar

Ettakatol is a social democratic party—slightly to the left of PDP—that existed legally during the previous regime, but held no seats in parliament. The leader of the party, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, is a medical doctor, and party members include many leftist doctors and intellectuals. Both Ben Jaafar and Ettakatol were barred from participating in the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively. On January 17, 2011 Ben Jaafar was named Minister of Public Health in the interim government. However, he resigned from this position the following day to protest against the inclusion of former regime elements in the government—a move that made him immensely popular on the street. While Ettakatol is not as well funded as Al-Nahda or PDP, the party has risen significantly in the polls since June thanks to a cadre of industrious volunteers, an

effective outreach campaign to voters, and a dynamic social media platform. The party has reportedly been gaining about 20,000 new members per week.²¹ Ettakatol's party platform focuses on improving the lives of the disenfranchised, including through the revision of tax codes to redistribute wealth and through efforts to integrate informal workers into the formal economy.²² Ettakatol also seeks to eliminate corruption and has publicly released the party's budget and membership information to demonstrate its commitment to transparency. Women's rights is another main feature of the party's platform and Ettakatol is one of very few political parties in Tunisia to call for inheritance laws that ensure equality between men and women, and to condemn domestic rape.²³ The party has said that it will not enter into "any coalition with extremists," presumably Al-Nahda, but is ready to cooperate with other democratic progressive parties in the assembly.²⁴

Congrès pour la République/Congress for the Republic (CPR)

Hanns-Seidel: 8%

Sigma: 4.5%

Founded: 2001

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Moncef Marzouki

Founded by longtime human rights activist Moncef Marzouki in 2001, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) is a center-left party focused on the protection of human rights and civil liberties. The party was banned a year after its creation, and Marzouki and other party members were forced into exile in France, where the party continued to operate until January. Upon the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Marzouki and other CPR members returned to Tunisia and Marzouki announced his intention to run for president. The party's platform emphasizes the creation of a democratic society, which requires upholding the individual and social freedoms outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as establishing a clear separation of powers between the different branches of government. CPR advocates a system of decentralization that gives regional councils maximum power.²⁵ The party refuses funding from corporations and other external sources because it does not want to become beholden to business interests.²⁶ CPR and Al-Nahda formed a common front against violence at the end of July, and Marzouki has hinted at a willingness to align with Al-Nahda in the constituent assembly.²⁷ In September, CPR aligned with Al-Nahda against 40 other

parties in opposing a referendum that would limit the power of the NCA to drafting a constitution.²⁸ For reasons not entirely clear, CPR was the only major party not to sign the September 15 agreement regarding the assembly's mandate.²⁹

Al-Watan and Al-Mubadara

Al-Watan

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: 3.1%

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Kamel Morjan

Al-Mubadara

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: 3.1%

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Mohamed Jegham

Al-Watan and Al-Mubadara are both headed by former RCD members. Kamel Morjan of Al-Watan served as Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UN institutions in Geneva under Ben Ali. As a veteran diplomat, he was the first senior Tunisian official to engage in dialogue with opposition parties after Ben Ali left power.³⁰ Mohammed Jegham is a former interior and defense minister. Following the collapse of the Ben Ali government, he was appointed Minister of Trade and Tourism in the first unity government, but was quickly replaced due to his strong ties with the former ruling party.

The RCD was barred from all activities on February 6, 2011 and dissolved by the judiciary on March 9. Former senior members of the party were banned from participating in the constituent assembly elections on April 12. However, this has not prevented these two figures from engaging in political activities. While neither Morjan nor Jegham are eligible for candidacy in these elections because of their association with the former ruling party, they are nonetheless involved in the campaigns of their respective parties, which are running on joint lists in some districts. Much of the RCD support base has become fragmented, but coalitions such as this one could enable

remnants of the former regime to have a modest presence in the assembly.³¹ Moreover, polling may underrepresent the actual level of support for these two parties since many Tunisians may be reluctant to admit that they intend to vote for parties seen as linked to the former ruling RCD party, yet still do so in the privacy of a voting booth.

L'Union Patriotique Libre/Free Patriotic Union (UPL)

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: 1.7%

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Slim Riahi

Founded after the Tunisian revolution, the Free Patriotic Union (UPL) has stirred controversy for its exorbitant spending in the campaign. The party's founder and financier, Slim Riahi, grew up in Libya--where he made a substantial fortune in Libyan oil services and property development. Since the summer, Mr. Riahi has invested roughly \$20 million into the Tunisian economy through the Tunis Bourse and Carthage Cement. UPL was absent from politics until it initiated an extensive and refined advertising campaign in July. The campaign spanned all media platforms and prompted the interim government to ban political advertisements in September in an attempt to level the playing field. Riahi is not running for office himself, but he is the leader of the UPL and finances most of the party's activities. In August, Riahi announced his intention to buy a 20 percent stake in newspaper publisher Dar Assabah, prompting some Tunisians to ponder if Riahi saw himself as a "Tunisian Berlusconi."³² Furthermore, Riahi's connection to the Libyan oil industry forced UPL to quell rumors that it was funded by Muammar Gaddafi's family.³³ Riahi's work with the U.K. and U.S. in the oil sector also sparked rumors that he was a western puppet.³⁴ The UPL's platform is based on support for free-market economics and modernist values. Specifically, the party platform includes a plan for real-estate development in south-east Tunisia, the creation of a cross-border financial services hub, increased investment in a range of fields including agriculture and technology, and respect for the nation's Islamic heritage.³⁵ As of mid-September, the party claimed to be the 3rd most widely recognized in Tunisia—largely due to its media blitz. However, this recognition does not appear to translate into actual support for the party.

**Al-Badi/Parti Ouvrier Communiste Tunisien/
Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (POCT)**

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: 0.8%

Founded: 1986

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Hamma Hammami

The Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (POCT) is a Marxist-Leninist party that represents the far left, Marxists, and communists in Tunisia. Hamma Hammami is a charismatic leader who enjoys significant popularity amongst Tunisia's student and youth population. Hammami has been jailed several times since the 1970s, and an Amnesty International report states that in 1994 he was arrested and tortured by Tunisian authorities.³⁶ Among POCT's supporters are the "Kasbah Protestors," groups of youth that have been demonstrating in Tunis' Kasbah square since the revolution in support of greater reforms of the political system.³⁷ The party's youth faction, Union des Jeunes Communistes Tunisiens (UJCT), was particularly active on college campuses during Ben Ali's presidency.³⁸

On July 22, the party held its first congress as a legal organization. During those meetings, members of the leadership considered removing the word "communist" from the party name. This reflects the complicated relationship that POCT has had with religion in Tunisian politics. Although the party is Marxist and secular, it has tried to characterize its attitude towards religion as similar to those of most other secular parties, as less religious or non-religious, but *not* anti-religion.³⁹ The POCT platform includes calls for nationalizing international companies operating in Tunisia, allowing workers to run companies nationalized by the Council of Workers, guaranteeing the freedoms to strike and demonstrate, and conducting a foreign policy opposed to imperialism, and resisting the normalization of relations with Israel.⁴⁰ Despite the electoral weakness of the party, its leadership is widely popular as Hammami and other heads of the party appeared in the media frequently during the Tunisian revolution.⁴¹

Afek Tounes

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: 0.7%

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leader: Mohamed Louzir

The secular and market-oriented Afek Tounes party was founded by economists, Tunisian businessmen living abroad, and other professionals in private enterprise after the fall of Ben Ali. Because of its ties to the business class, Afek Tounes is often perceived to cater to the wealthy elite. Some in the political sphere, notably Moncef Marzouki of the CPR, have accused Afek Tounes of links to Ben Ali's RCD party, a charge that Afek Tounes has adamantly denied.⁴² Afek Tounes has also been subject to numerous outside disruptions. For example, an attempt to hold a meeting in Sidi Bouzid this past July was prevented when locals burned a party banner and prevented the meeting from taking place.⁴³ The party's platform calls for neoliberal economic reforms, secularism, and political rights. Some specific positions include ensuring the separation of powers, developing economy-oriented activities with high added value, implementing a plan for new infrastructure, making Tunisia more attractive to foreign investment, integrating the Tunisian economy into the regional and global economic system, creating a transparent rule of law, separating religion and state, and religious pluralism. The party has attained some popularity amongst university graduates and secularists.⁴⁴

Alliance Démocratique Indépendante/Independent Democratic Alliance

Hanns-Seidel: 3%

Sigma: NA%

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leaders:

Abdelfattah Mourou, Hamouda Ben Slama, Slaheddine Jurchi, Radwan Masmoudi

The Independent Democratic Alliance is a coalition of independent candidates and former members of other political parties. It is the only independent list that has polled as well as some of the major parties. The Alliance says it supports the goals of the

revolution, and its members are not officially affiliated with any particular party. While some individual independent candidates such as those in this list are expected to have success in the upcoming elections, it appears that independent lists will generally not perform as well as party lists due to their relative lack of monetary and organizational support. Independent lists currently represent around 45 percent of candidate lists, but such candidates are expected to win considerably fewer than 45 percent of NCA seats.⁴⁵ Abdelfattah Mourou is a Sufi Islamist and helped to found the precursor to Al-Nahda, Al-Jamaa Al-Islamiyya, although he resigned from the party in 1992. Radwan Masmoudi is the founder of Center of the Study of Islam and Democracy, a nongovernmental organization based in Washington, DC, who returned to Tunisia during the summer of 2011. Slaheddine Jourchi is a longtime democracy activist and researcher who has published numerous books on the topic of progressive Islamism.

Ettajdid

(part of the Pôle Démocratique Moderniste/Modernist Democratic Pole (PDM) coalition)

Hanns-Seidel: 2%

Sigma: 1.3%

Founded: 1993

Legally Recognized: 1993

Leader: Ahmed Brahim

Ettajdid is an openly secular, leftist party that was legally recognized under the former regime. Unlike the other two genuine opposition parties that were allowed to operate during the Ben Ali era (PDP and Ettakatol), Ettajdid participated in both the 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections. However, the party only won three seats in parliament and the party leader, Ahmed Brahim, won less than 2 percent of the presidential vote. Heir to the Tunisian Communist party, Ettajdid abandoned communism in favor of socialism in 1993. While Ettajdid does advocate for more government intervention in the economy than most other major parties, it has rejected communism since 1993 but is often wrongly perceived as still espousing communist policies.

During the first interim government after Ben Ali's ouster, Ahmed Brahim held the post of Minister of Higher Education but resigned on March 1. Ettajdid is the most prominent party within the Modernist Democratic Pole movement, which is a coalition

of secular groups seeking to counter Al-Nahda. PDM is the only major competitor that has gone even further than required in advancing women candidates, by placing female candidates in the top position in half of its lists.⁴⁶

Parti du Travail Tunisien/Tunisian Labor Party (PTT)

Hanns-Seidel: 1%

Sigma: NA

Founded: 2011

Legally Recognized: 2011

Leaders: Abdel Jalil Al Badoui

The PTT is primarily a pro-labor union party. It is largely supported by Tunisia's main labor federation, the Tunisian General Union of Labor (UGTT), although this union has historically experienced divided membership.⁴⁷ The UGTT played an important role in the protests that led to Ben Ali's ouster. The PTT is opposed to globalization, and advocates domestic investments and a decentralized government to help spur economic growth. While many of its ideologies center around developing labor rights, it also has an emphatic foreign relations stance, and calls for reviewing all international treaties to which Tunisia is a signatory.⁴⁸

Major Concerns

Registration Process

Given that these are the first competitive elections in Tunisia's history, the newly-created Tunisian election commission, the Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections (ISIE), has struggled with various organizational and technical challenges throughout the electoral process. Few people expect that the elections will be marred by extensive fraud and rigging, and there will be about 5,000 election observers—including more than 1,000 from international groups.⁴⁹ However, issues with voter registration could potentially cause problems on Election Day.

In June, the interim government postponed elections from July to October in order to give the ISIE more time to organize, including putting three million Tunisians into the voter registry and ensuring hundreds of thousands of others received valid identity cards. When voting registration opened on July 11, registration turnout was initially disappointing due to technical problems with the online registration system and more importantly, because of poor voter education on the system and procedures. Although registration was extended until August 14, only 55 percent of eligible voters registered during this period, most likely due to confusion over the process.⁵⁰

Indeed, days after the ISIE extended the date of the election to encourage more people to register it also announced that anyone with a national ID card was eligible to vote, causing some uncertainty over whether registration was even necessary. This step has also resulted in a larger role for the Interior Ministry in the electoral process as the ministry manages the existing database of national ID cardholders—a move that has raised concerns given the Interior Ministry's legacy of repression during the Ben Ali era.

All of these changes have also generated uncertainty regarding the procedures for those who have not registered but plan to vote on October 23, and tensions could erupt if people are turned away at the polling stations or if the rules are applied inconsistently.⁵¹

Number of Parties

In a country where one party dominated the political landscape for decades, the surfeit of political parties in the wake of the revolution has overwhelmed and confused voters. Over 60 parties and a number of independent lists are competing in the constituent assembly elections, many of them founded after January. These nascent parties have had limited time to organize themselves, let alone to develop concrete policy platforms or campaign strategies. Even those parties that existed prior to the revolution have struggled to reach out to voters and build grassroots constituencies, since many of these groups were either in exile or severely limited in their ability to operate under the old regime.

Since the launch of the electoral campaign period on October 1, national TV has broadcast a different candidate every three minutes from 6 to 8 pm and from 9 to 11 pm every night, resulting in 20 different candidates per hour. While Tunisians appreciate the unfettered political space, the cacophony of largely indistinguishable parties debating

issues not directly related to their primary concerns has left many voters frustrated and ambivalent about the election.⁵²

According to two polls conducted in September, 30 percent of Tunisians were undecided about whom to vote for and nearly a third indicated they would vote for none of the parties.⁵³ Voter apathy and/or dissatisfaction with the political process so soon after the revolution does not bode well for Tunisia's transition to democracy. That said, this phenomenon is not unique to Tunisia. For example, 156 political parties ran in Spain's first democratic elections in 1977 after the fall of Francisco Franco, but this number quickly diminished in successive elections.⁵⁴

Knowledge of the NCA's Role

There appears to be some confusion regarding the purpose of these elections and the role of the constituent assembly. According to a survey conducted in May, less than half of adults could correctly identify that the upcoming elections were for a constituent assembly.⁵⁵ While voter education and information has improved considerably since May, confusion over the process and the assembly's role persists. The responsibilities of the constituent assembly are often conflated with those of a parliament, and it is not clear that voters understand that the assembly's primary mandate is to draft a new constitution. While the assembly will be a sovereign body with ultimate authority during the next stage of Tunisia's transition, there is a danger that it will be unable to meet citizens' high expectations, particularly with regard to the economic and security situation.⁵⁶

Polling and Party Expectations

With political debate and freedom of expression completely stifled under the Ben Ali regime, public opinion polling did not exist in Tunisia prior to the revolution. Since January, with the unprecedented opening in political space, numerous companies that had previously focused on business-oriented market research have expanded their work to include opinion polls. Given their lack of prior experience in this field, however, these companies struggle to produce results that are reliable or scientifically sound. Moreover, most polling in Tunisia has focused on nationwide levels of support, entirely overlooking the variation within specific electoral districts. In addition, there are other factors that will determine how overall levels of support will translate into numbers of assembly

seats apportioned according to a complicated proportional electoral system using largest remainders. Last, polling is banned during the official campaign period (October 1 – 22), which means that the latest data does not take into account the effect campaigning may have on voters and does not reflect any of the most recent shifts in support.

As a result, there seems to be a clear sense of which parties will win a significant number of seats in the assembly, but very little certainty regarding exactly how many seats each will win. Some parties may therefore win far fewer seats than they anticipate. And there is some danger that in such a scenario, these parties will conclude that the system is rigged against them and will publicly reject the results, undermining the credibility of the election. However, the presence of 5,000 election observers—nearly 20 percent of whom are international election experts—mitigates this threat.

Youth Participation

Although youth were the driving force behind the protests that removed Ben Ali from power, they are conspicuously absent from the political scene during the transition. Many political parties have failed to engage youth, and reportedly only 17 percent of those aged between 18 and 35 has registered to vote.⁵⁷ Despite a requirement that every party list must include one candidate under the age of 30, it appears that youth are not in the top position of very many candidate lists, making it unlikely that youth will win a significant portion of seats in the assembly. If youth continue to feel marginalized politically, there is a risk that they may return to the streets to voice their grievances, creating social unrest and challenging the legitimacy of the elected assembly.

Looking Ahead

Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly elections on October 23 are a potential turning point in the country's fragile democratic transition. If the elections go smoothly, it will be the most significant indicator of genuine progress since popular protests overthrew brutal dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January. In contrast, if elections are marred by violence or flagrant rigging, Tunisians who have already grown frustrated with the transition process, may conclude that stability is more important than democracy. Given the role of Tunisia's uprising in sparking democracy movements throughout the region,

the implications of these elections go beyond Tunisia. The entire Middle East will be watching for signs that democracy can succeed in the Arab world as Tunisians vote in the first competitive elections since historic changes swept the region.

Despite confusion over the electoral process and dissatisfaction with political parties, Tunisians have considerable expectations for the period following the elections. Since Ben Ali's ouster, people have been frustrated with the slow pace of reform, but in recent weeks they have tempered their demands with the understanding that elections must take place before their grievances can be genuinely addressed. Yet the legitimacy that comes with being an elected body also means that people will demand more from the National Constituent Assembly. Unfortunately, as the political landscape becomes increasingly polarized, there is a risk that the coming period will be marked by gridlock. The electoral system is designed to ensure that the makeup of the assembly reflect as accurately as possible Tunisia's varying interests. While it is certainly positive that the body tasked with shaping the future identity of the country has broad representation, the vast number of parties with disparate priorities could make it difficult to reach agreement on key issues. Yet with a reeling economy and a tenuous security situation, it is crucial that political parties work together to tackle Tunisia's daunting challenges. Failure to do so could derail the country's democratic transition. These elections, therefore, are about more than selecting a constituent assembly, they will determine the prospects for genuine democracy taking hold in Tunisia.

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