

Tunisian Elections Suggest a Move Beyond Secularist and Islamist Politics

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Brief Analysis

The Tunisian presidential elections on September 15 were held under a strange atmosphere—one that suggested a complete lack of trust in the government and ruling elite that has controlled the public sphere since the 2011 revolution. The official results announced two days after elections by the independent electoral commission known as ISIE showed that two candidates often referred to by the local media as outsiders have come out on top.

Qais Said, a conservative constitutional law professor known for his systematic use of classic Arabic in his public speech had 18.40% of the vote, while Nabil Al Qaroui, a controversial media mogul that was arrested in August for suspicion of money laundering and tax evasion had 15.85% of the vote. This duo surpassed all of the country's 'establishment' candidates, including known local politicians like Nahdha candidate Abdelfattah Mourou, acting Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, Defense Minister Abdelkrim Zbidi, two former prime ministers, a former president, and a long list of 24 other candidates running along with Said and Qaroui.

In order to understand what can be characterized as a political earthquake in Tunisia, it is worth examining what led voters to turn away from the establishment in the past elections. The prelude of what seems to be a major turning point in the Tunisian democratic transition process occurred in May 2018, when independent candidates won more seats in the municipality elections than all the political parties combined. This result reflected the total distrust and disappointment by the public opinion regarding local politicians, and this fact was proved by the low participation rate.

However, the frustration of the public opinion deepened when the elected representatives in the local municipality councils appeared totally unable to enforce their power or implement any real change, suggesting that the long-expected decentralization process was not actually in effect. More broadly, Tunisians are exhausted by the fact that many see no real improvement in their daily lives, and the social and economic reforms that were announced after ousting former president Ben Ali never happened.

The chaotic management of the federal government and the collapse of the national economy has led a growing number of Tunisians—especially the youth—to question the *raison-d'être* of the democratic process, and began to challenge established Tunisian politics. Nahdha lost two thirds of its electors compared to 2011, and late president

Beji Caid Essebsi (BCE) who saw his party-Nidaa' Tounis fall apart during the previous three years, decided in 2018 to publicly announce the end of the Al Tawafiq "consensus policy" between Islamist and secular politicians. With this announcement, he also expressed his frustration about what his lieutenants described as "the finger prints of Nahdha in the dismantling process of Nidaa."

In the aftermath, Nahdha head R. Ghannouchi attempted to build a new coalition based on the same consensus model during 2014 elections. It is a proven tactic that allowed him to rule behind the scenes while hiding behind local politics while his secular partners took the blame of the governments' poor performance. Tunisian local analysts also made much of his declaration that "Nahdha is searching for the rare bird to support in the next presidential elections." Many Nidaa' activists considered Y. Chahed as this potential 'rare bird,' and the most likely chance for Nahdha to take the presidency.

But Prime Minister Y. Chahed, who had dramatically defected from BCE's Nidaa', has also been criticized for the poor economic results of his government, as well as his alleged use of the state institutions to push his personal agenda. In May 2017, under anti-corruption slogans, he sent the most prominent Nidaa' funder—the controversial businessman Chafiq—to jail. There, despite being a civilian, Chafiq faced a court martial with the national intelligence director and the chief of the anti-terrorism division for intelligence with a foreign military. In June 2019, Chahed's government presented a reform of the electoral code—subsequently rejected by BCE—that would have a posteriori effect. The main target of this reform was media mogul N. Qaroui, also a former member of Nidaa', who transformed his TV channel (Nessma TV) to a semi-official tribune to Tunisian secular politics.

BCE's death on July 25 was a disruptive event for the Nahdha coalition and its allies among the defectors of Nidaa'. Their opponents—who call themselves sovereigntists but are often referred to as populists by the ruling coalition and partisan media—defend a nationalist vision of Tunisia's relations with foreign economic partners and the European Union (EU) in particular. The sovereigntists' narrative sought to target the economically marginalized majority of Tunisians and the 1.5 million of new registered voters whose decision will shape the results of the upcoming 2019 presidential and legislative elections.

The failure of successive governments to tackle the aspirations of the frustrated and unemployed youth in particular led to the deterioration of the political and social conditions in Tunisia. As in 2011, the political debate went from the parliament back to the streets, and large parts of the population did not identify themselves in the elected politicians of either secularist and islamist parties.

Thus, the declarations of Q. Said that this polarization between Islamists and secularists is "an artificial struggle that diverts from the real social and economic issues" made him a popular anti-system candidate. His vision is instead based on a constitutional reform that includes a decentralization process and putting an end to the parties' regime that rules the country since 2011, led by his campaign director Ridha Al Mekki, a leftist university leader during the 1980s from the Watanioun Democratioun (WATAD) party. This vision is characterized by the reconciliation between the Tunisian left and religion, as well as a radical anti-globalization position inspired by the relatively recent political developments in Britain, the United States, and Brazil.

In the other side, the ideologue of Qaroui campaign is Mondher Thabet, another leftist from the same generation as the opposing campaign director Mekki. Founder of the liberal party under the former regime, Qaroui has adopted a sovereignist narrative since 2011. Qaroui's campaign has presented a more sophisticated economic vision developed by Yadh Loumi, a prominent accountant who put forward the need to change the economic development model for Tunisia and has questioned the partnership with the EU known as (DCFTA/ALECA). This is in line with local professionals, trade union (UGTT), and economy experts, who have blamed the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean association agreement (EMAA) for the de-industrialization of Tunisia and the collapse of its economy. Notably, this is a position that the ruling coalition hasn't share.

The emphasis on policy as a distinguishing feature of this election also reflects the view of the Tunisian public that Tunisia's democratization process is based almost exclusively on organizing elections, lacking participative institutions or inclusive mechanisms that would guarantee transparency and accountability. Said has directly addressed this frustration by suggesting that they hold the elected officials accountable by creating a mechanism to remove them from office even during their mandate.

It must also be remembered that Tunisia's politics are influenced by the social context and personal ties. The stakes of the upcoming 2019 elections will be particularly distinct from the previous ones. For example, it appears that a majority of Tunisians support a conservative position regarding their country's inheritance law, in contrast to recent efforts to change it. And a growing distrust of social media has made direct contact with voters and traditional media more influential. In contrast, public presidential debates did not appear to have significant influence on the public opinion and were in fact criticized for a format that prevented any real discussion.

Due to all these factors, Nahdha, often seen as the biggest organized political party in Tunisia, is likely to continue its free fall in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The slow implementation of reforms, the adoption of the so-called economic reconciliation law, and an ambiguous initial position regarding the inheritance law imposed by Nahdha leadership appear to have cost it its position in government.

Paradoxically, the death of BCE accomplished his objective to organize presidential elections before the legislative elections in October—a move that had been categorically rejected by Nahdha and its allies—and will influence the next parliament. This change to the electoral calendar makes the presidential elections a prelude to the legislative ones, and given the disastrous result of the major political parties in presidential elections, it is likely that the next parliament will also be completely different from the current one. In light of these developments, independent candidates and political parties should take the lessons of this election to heart and form a parliamentary group that adopts a sovereigntist policy and a conservative ideology. ❖

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