

Despite Challenges, Another Successful Step for Tunisian Democracy

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Brief Analysis

The surprising results of Tunisia's first round of presidential balloting signal that voters are generally disenchanted with the country's political establishment.

On Sunday, Tunisians voted in free and democratic elections, the country's second ever since the revolution of 2011. According to national as well as international observers, these elections took place without any major problems or fraud. To the surprise of many, preliminary results show that two anti-establishment candidates are leading in the race for the presidency. The two top candidates will now face off in a second round of elections over the next couple of weeks to determine Tunisia's next president. However, these initial results already signal that Tunisian voters are generally disenchanted with the country's establishment candidates and are seeking alternatives.

According to the preliminary results published by Tunisia's Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), Kais Saied—an atypical 61-year-old professor of constitutional law—placed first in the presidential race with 18.40 percent of the vote. Though Saied has no background in electoral politics, his supporters apparently found his legal expertise appealing, along with his promises to combat corruption and bring a new perspective to solving national problems. This message resonated particularly well with young educated Tunisians: 37 percent of his voters are between the ages of 18 and 25 and 25 percent possessed a university degree according to polls conducted by Sigma Conseil, a Tunisian polling agency, making him the most popular candidate among Tunisians university graduates.

Saied's campaign promises include adding a recall provision in the constitution that would allow Tunisians to recall their elected officials. Saied has also stated that he opposes the implementation of former President Essebsi's signature equal inheritance law, which would require that men and women receive equal inheritance. This law was popular due to it being one of the first laws in the Arab world that would make it possible for women to receive equal inheritance. Though, many Islamists and conservatives have rejected it, claiming it goes against Islamic law. In

terms of governance, Saied has advocated decentralizing power in both the economic and political spheres to shift power away from the central government to local governments instead. Most importantly, he has positioned himself as an alternative to the political establishment and system that has failed to uphold many of the economic and social promises of the revolution. Kais Saied's conservative stances on key social issues will likely be a cause for concern for many secular voters going into the second round of elections.

Second in the polls is 56-year-old media magnate Nabil Karoui, who has received 15.58 percent of votes according to the ISIE. Though Karoui has been under arrest since August 23 on suspicion of money laundering and tax evasion, he was allowed to participate in the elections as he has yet to face formal charges. Karoui's election team has actually used his current incarceration to his advantage, rallying Tunisians across the country to support Karoui against a perceived political establishment that seeks to keep him from power through false charges of corruption.

During the campaign process, Karoui has positioned himself as a protector of the downtrodden in Tunisia—focusing on the same Tunisians of the country's interior regions who served as the bulwark of the revolution in 2011. Karoui contends that the current ruling elite offer nothing but promises to the forgotten Tunisians living in the most impoverished and peripheral parts of the country and that, under his presidency, hundreds of thousands will be lifted out of poverty. However, Karoui's opponents have argued that his acts of philanthropy towards Tunisia's poor are a veiled attempt to buy his way into the presidency. And despite being perceived as an anti-establishment candidate, Karoui has had close ties with mainstream secular parties such as Nidaa Tounes in the past and has generally shared their liberal views, especially with regards to economic liberalization.

In contrast, the biggest losers of this election are undoubtedly Tunisia's establishment candidates. Abdul Fatah Mourou, the candidate representing Tunisia's Islamist party Ennahdha, came in third place with 12.88 percent of votes. And despite initially being considered a front runner, former Defense Minister Abdelkarim Zbidi received only 10.73 percent. But the biggest surprise came with current Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who only managed to garner 7.38 percent of votes despite a nation-wide drive to mobilize voters and millions spent in advertisements.

While some may point to splits in the secular-centrist camp to explain the poor performances of Zbidi and Chahed, a general disenchantment with the ruling elite and mainstream parties among voters is more likely to blame.

Although we are still waiting for the full stats from the election, political elites failed to predict that Tunisians would opt for political newcomers, or that Tunisians in the country's periphery—older and mostly uneducated voters from the interior of the country—would turn out to vote at higher rates than expected.

Also concerning is the elections' overall low voter turnout rates: only 45 percent of registered voters turned out to vote in these elections, as compared to over 60 percent in 2014. Voter turnout will likely be similar during the run-off election expected to be held on October 6, the same day as the legislative elections. Establishment parties will undoubtedly feel the pressure of their underperformance when Tunisians vote in the legislative elections. Infighting between secular-centrist parties and declining support for Ennahdha may pave the way for other marginal, newly-formed parties and independent electoral lists to gain seats in parliament, leading to both a presidency and parliament looking vastly different from Tunisia's previous government.

The Tunisian Parliament is also expected to become more fragmented, with none of the presidential front runners maintaining a strong party basis and the nomination of a potentially weak Prime Minister. This fragmentation will pose additional challenges when enacting necessary reforms. However, the necessary alliances and coalitions between different parties might allow the Tunisian State to evolve away from political parties competing over civil and political appointments to the detriment of state stability. The first years after the revolution were marked by the regular firing of civil servants and judges accused to be too closed to one party or another. In other words, short term instability in the Parliament could bring middle term stability within Tunisian institutions.

Another key trend highlighted during the first round of the election is that Tunisian Islamism seems to be further diluted in democracy. Kais Saied has a conservative stance but rejects the monopoly Islamists try to have on religious references. Kais Saied's positions on homosexuality, gender equality, and the constitutional role of Sharia will concern human rights advocates in Tunisia but it would also weaken the traditional opposition role of Islamist forces (Brotherhood-like or Political Salafists). At the regional level Kais Saied's potential election would represent a conservative democratic alternative different from Islamism.

This dynamic would challenge the division between Islamists and Secularists as the main driver of Tunisian politics. Ennahda's endorsement of Kais Saied for the second run of the presidential election hinted at a possible alliance between the two candidates. However, part of Ennahda's leadership might reverse the trend away from political Islam, reverting back to an agenda that more closely aligns with traditional Islamist politics.

By selecting the two outsiders more concerned with socio-economic challenges than the traditional divides between Islamists and Secularists, Tunisian citizens have shifted away from the partisan lines that have characterized Tunisia since 2011 and demanded answers to the social and economic difficulties that started the revolution in the first place. ❖

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