Tunisians to Elect a New President

by **Sarah Feuer (/experts/sarah-feuer)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarah Feuer (/experts/sarah-feuer)

Dr. Sarah Feuer, an expert on politics and religion in North Africa, was the Rosenbloom Family Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.

Brief Analysis

With no clear front-runner emerging and public disillusionment mounting, the struggling Arab democracy is transitioning from a period of consensus to uncertainty.

On September 15, Tunisians will vote in the country's second presidential election since 2011, when a local uprising overthrew longtime autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and sparked a wave of revolts across the region. Eight years on, Tunisia is the only "Arab Spring" state to remain on the path of full democracy, a distinction that continues to elicit praise from outside observers. Inside Tunisia, however, the past five years have been marked by disillusionment with unmet economic expectations and widespread frustration with the government's perceived inability to address them. Both sentiments are coloring the current election cycle, sidelining the contentious Islamist/secularist debates that infused the 2014 elections.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Originally scheduled for November, the current round of voting was moved up following the July 25 death of President Beji Caid Essebsi, so that his successor could take office within the constitutionally mandated ninety-day period. Under normal circumstances, Essebsi would have completed his five-year term, and voters would have chosen a new parliament before proceeding to the presidential election. Now, however, they will be choosing their head of state—who also serves as commander-in-chief and sets defense, foreign, and national security policy—before the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 6. If no candidate receives a majority of votes on September 15, a runoff will be held between the top two candidates.

Among Tunisia's population of 11.8 million, a remarkable 85 percent of eligible citizens are registered to vote. (By comparison, only 75 percent of eligible Americans are registered.) In the 2014 elections, turnout was around 63

percent for both round one and the ensuing runoff between Essebsi and human rights activist Moncef Marzouki. Yet the 2018 local elections garnered a much lower rate of 35 percent, prompting concerns about declining interest and faith in the electoral process. Still, the registration period for the current cycle saw 1.5 million citizens sign up, and polling by the International Republican Institute earlier this year suggested turnout will exceed 50 percent. Whatever the case, voting will once again be monitored by domestic and international observers, so it should proceed freely and fairly.

NOTEWORTHY CONTENDERS

An eye-popping twenty-six presidential candidates will appear on the ballot, including two women. Remarkably, an openly gay man was in the initial mix despite the fact that homosexuality remains a crime in Tunisia, but his candidacy was ultimately rejected for reasons that remain unclear. Three televised debates have been held, a first for Tunisia and a novelty in the Arab world. No obvious front-runner has emerged, but four candidates appear to be leading:

Youssef Chahed. A forty-three-year-old agronomist who has served as prime minister since 2016, Chahed was forced out of Essebsi's secularist party Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) last year. The move was prompted by his intense disagreements with the president over their division of power, and his objections to how Essebsi's son, Hafedh, was maneuvering to control the party. Chahed recently formed a new party, Tahya Tounes (Long Live Tunisia), whose campaign has emphasized the needs of young people. Yet he may face difficulty convincing the wider populace that he should occupy Carthage Palace. While his anti-corruption policies were widely praised, the austerity measures he oversaw after the IMF loaned Tunisia $2.8 billion in 2016 did not endear him to the masses, who have been contending with entrenched income disparities, an inflation rate twice as high as pre-2011 levels, and unemployment hovering at 15 percent nationally and 35 percent among youths.

Abdelfattah Mourou. A lawyer by training, Mourou cofounded the Ennahda (Renaissance) Party, Tunisia's main Islamist movement, and now serves as its vice president. He was elected to parliament in 2014 and thereafter became deputy speaker. The seventy-one-year-old's candidacy marks a significant development for Ennahda, which previously shied away from fielding presidential contenders for fear of provoking the kind of backlash that decimated its original parent group, the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt and other countries. By contrast, Ennahda has preferred to govern in coalition with secular parties like Nidaa Tounes and downplay its Islamist orientation, thereby solidifying its dominance in parliament. In 2016, the party even declared it would be **curtailing its religious activities (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/from-political-islam-to-muslim-democracy-tunisias-ennahda-changes-course)** and devoting itself entirely to politics, replacing the label "political Islam" with "Muslim democracy."

When Ennahda announced this summer that it would field a presidential candidate and put leader Rached Ghannouchi in the running for parliament, it seemed confident that the strategy of restraint had sufficiently cemented the party's place in Tunisia's political landscape. Although that calculation may still be a gamble, Mourou's past willingness to criticize the party and his reportedly positive relationships with legislators across the political spectrum make him a relatively safe choice.

Nabil Karoui. The founder of Nessma TV, one of Tunisia's leading stations, Karoui is currently sitting in jail on charges of money laundering and tax evasion. The fifty-six-year-old has become a well-known figure in recent years thanks to his frequent media appearances and philanthropic work. A former member of Essebsi's faction, he founded the party Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia) and has campaigned around broadly populist themes, advocating on behalf of the poor and decrying the lack of government services. He was polling above 20 percent when he was arrested in late August, prompting accusations that his rivals were looking to eliminate him from the field (the allegations against him first surfaced in 2017 following an investigation by prominent local anti-corruption NGO "I

Watch"). Tunisian law allows individuals accused of criminal activity to run for office as long as they are not convicted, so while Karoui was unable to attend the debates, his name remains on the ballot.

Abdelkarim Zbidi. A doctor by training, the sixty-four-year-old Zbidi is widely viewed as a technocrat seemingly untainted by his longtime affiliation with the Ben Ali regime. He served until recently as defense minister, then resigned to run for president, maintaining his longtime status as an independent while highlighting his experience in the security realm. Tunisia has seen **considerable improvements (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-development-of-tunisias-domestic-counter-terrorism-finance-capability)** in its counterterrorism capabilities since a string of high-casualty attacks in 2015 and an attempted Islamic State insurgency a year later. Yet this summer's spate of suicide bombings was a reminder that the country remains fragile, so Zbidi's association with the extremely popular armed forces may serve him well.

BEYOND THE VOTE

The tenor of Tunisia's election season suggests that its democracy may be transitioning from a period of relative consensus to something far less certain. Essebsi's passing evoked eulogies of the grand bargain he reportedly struck with Ghannouchi in 2013, an arrangement rightly credited with saving the country from the social unrest and political turmoil plaguing its regional peers. Yet the limitations of this secular/Islamist consensus were evident long before Essebsi's death, breeding political paralysis and undermining deeper economic reforms.

Indeed, the election has underscored the price of Tunisia's post-2013 political stability: namely, growing discontent among an electorate keen to see democracy deliver not only individual freedoms, but basic economic dividends as well. Whoever wins the vote may feel liberated from the years of stagnant elite consensus, but the new president will also face an increasingly restless public, profound fiscal challenges, and a tenuous security situation.

This predicament highlights the necessity of continued American assistance, especially in the economic and counterterrorism realms. The country still needs help with insulating itself from Libya's civil war to the east, Algeria's political implosion to the west, and the prospect that thousands of Tunisian foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State may be returning home. The government has managed these local threats admirably while avoiding thorny entanglements further afield, such as Iran's hegemonic ambitions and the Saudi-Qatar rift. Washington has a keen interest in ensuring that Tunisia remains not only a democratic success story, but also a strategic ally in an unpredictable neighborhood.

Sarah Feuer is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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