

# Beyond the Ballot Box: U.S. Priorities in North Africa's 2024 Elections

by [Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](#), [Amine Ghoulidi \(/experts/amine-ghoulidi\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](#)

Sabina Henneberg is a 2023-24 Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Junior Research Program.

[Amine Ghoulidi \(/experts/amine-ghoulidi\)](#)

Amine Ghoulidi is a geopolitics and security researcher at King's College London.

 Brief Analysis

**By recognizing the limits of electoral processes in countries like Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia, Washington can focus more on addressing economic, social, and institutional challenges, managing regional dynamics, and engaging strategically with global competitors.**

Some observers have called 2024 the “[year of elections \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/series/2024--year-of-elections\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/series/2024--year-of-elections),” and the moniker is especially apt in North Africa, where presidential contests are scheduled in Algeria and Mauritania and have been tentatively planned in Tunisia and Libya, though the exact timeline remains in flux. These campaigns will highlight the evolving landscape of Western engagement in this oft-overlooked region. In addition to traditional support for democratic processes, U.S. policy will have to adapt to the complexities of each nation’s political realities while navigating an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment—from growing Chinese and Russian influence to troubling deterioration in the Sahel region. This entails a more holistic U.S. strategy that addresses broader economic and security concerns.

## Elections Weren’t Enough

In Mauritania, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani [will seek \(https://alakhbar.info/?q=node/51751\)](https://alakhbar.info/?q=node/51751) a second term [on June 29 \(https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/4/20/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%B1#:~:text=%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9%20%D8%A](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/4/20/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%B1#:~:text=%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9%20%D8%A). Tunisia plans to hold its presidential election sometime in the fall, while Algeria’s is [scheduled \(https://www.el-mouradia.dz/ar/president/65fc599effe8f6001dbd01f8\)](https://www.el-mouradia.dz/ar/president/65fc599effe8f6001dbd01f8) for September 7. In Libya, some legislators have [called \(https://www.alarabiya.net/north-africa/libya/2024/04/29/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-2024\)](https://www.alarabiya.net/north-africa/libya/2024/04/29/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-2024) for a voting by year’s end, but the seemingly interminable effort to draw an agreed roadmap for presidential and parliamentary elections has yet to bear fruit.

Even in countries whose timelines are tentatively set, the electoral landscape is fraught with uncertainty. In Algeria, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s decision to hold the vote in September, three months before his current term ends, has raised questions about his motives. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied has [expressed \(https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1705102-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%AD-%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%94%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9\)](https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1705102-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%AD-%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%94%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9) his intention to run again without formally declaring his candidacy—an ambiguous state of affairs that is compounded by the lack of a specific election date or a clear electoral law.

Libya’s situation is particularly precarious. Repeated failures to meet electoral [deadlines \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyan-elections-are-possible-this-year-un-envoy-says-2023-03-11/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyan-elections-are-possible-this-year-un-envoy-says-2023-03-11/) under the UN’s auspices have cast [doubt \(https://dawnmena.org/libya-needs-more-than-elections-to-end-its-democratic-odyssey/\)](https://dawnmena.org/libya-needs-more-than-elections-to-end-its-democratic-odyssey/) on the feasibility of conducting credible national elections. Observers also wonder what impact voting would have in such a volatile environment, and whether the outcome would lend any semblance of legitimacy to the current ruling elite (see below).

These political trajectories illustrate why U.S. policymakers will need to devote even more attention beyond the ballot box to broader issues that affect stability and development in North Africa, such as economic fragility, insecurity, and irregular migration. The period since the 2011 Arab Spring has illustrated the limitations of a narrow focus on elections. In Egypt, the 2012 presidential vote was competitive but failed to prevent a return to military rule. Libya’s 2012 and 2014 elections, held amid growing insecurity and political fragmentation, did little to stabilize the country or establish a functioning central government. Tunisia held three rounds of free and fair elections (2011, 2014, 2019) but ultimately failed to prevent Saied from imposing an increasingly [personalized and authoritarian \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022) style of rule. And Algeria’s 2019 presidential election brought a former prime minister to power following mass protests, failing to address the disjointed opposition movement’s calls to change the status quo.

## Current Electoral Outlook

Given this track record, the upcoming elections hold slim prospects for changing the leadership of any of these countries or strengthening their democratic institutions. In Libya, some progress has been made on establishing a constitutional and legal framework, but persistent political disagreements have stalled advances and contributed to the UN Special Representative’s frustrated [resignation \(https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240417-un-s-libya-envoy-bathily-resigns-citing-stalled-political-progress\)](https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240417-un-s-libya-envoy-bathily-resigns-citing-stalled-political-progress) on April 16. Even if elections occur, they will hinge on a fragile political settlement, the [goodwill of heavily armed militias \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/libyas-armed-group-catch-22\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/libyas-armed-group-catch-22) locked in a years-long power struggle, and some kind of concession by eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar, who seeks the presidency. Moreover, the success of democratic transitions often depends on multiple factors beyond electoral pacts, such as economic stability, transitional justice, and the strength of the judiciary and other state institutions. Premature elections could therefore wind up exacerbating Libya’s tensions, as they did in 2014.

Tunisia's outlook for change is equally bleak. President Saied has [incarcerated \(https://apnews.com/article/tunisia-presidential-election-opposition-5ea033488ab1b8498cc29fd8db852fe6\)](https://apnews.com/article/tunisia-presidential-election-opposition-5ea033488ab1b8498cc29fd8db852fe6) numerous opposition figures, effectively discouraging potential challengers, and his [speeches \(https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisias-kais-saied-announces-presidential-re-election-bid\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisias-kais-saied-announces-presidential-re-election-bid) proposing to exclude those operating "in the arms of foreigners" only intensify the climate of intimidation and uncertainty. The recent dip in voter turnout may worsen as well, driven by economic concerns, political disillusionment, and a planned boycott on election day. Hence, even if Saied secures another victory as expected, his second term would be marked by a significant absence of electoral legitimacy.

More broadly, Tunisia's next election will be based on a controversially adopted 2022 charter that signaled a [move away \(https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/87496\)](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/87496) from inclusive democratic processes. The electoral commission's [compromised \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-coup-saied-seizes-control-electoral-commission-latest-power-grab\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-coup-saied-seizes-control-electoral-commission-latest-power-grab) independence and recent [dealings \(https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/04/en-tunisie-l-instance-chargee-de-superviser-les-elections-va-cooperer-avec-la-russie-6225993\\_3212.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/04/en-tunisie-l-instance-chargee-de-superviser-les-elections-va-cooperer-avec-la-russie-6225993_3212.html) with Russia's Central Electoral Commission further erode confidence in the vote's integrity. Paradoxically, halting this regressive process could represent a stronger stance for democracy than allowing the current election to proceed under such flawed conditions.

In Algeria, holding the vote early seems more like a bid to consolidate power than foster democratic growth. One possibility is that Tebboune hopes to preempt potential challengers by accelerating the schedule. He might also be aiming to lessen the risk of protests amid widespread political and economic dissatisfaction. Most likely, however, he is responding to clan infighting involving the military (traditionally the country's most powerful political force) and attempting to curtail other power centers.

In any case, the outcome seems predetermined at this point. For one thing, incumbents have historically achieved landslide victories in Algeria. Moreover, years of targeted repression and strategic cooptation have weakened the opposition, undermining the potential for a robust democratic process. Government control over the [media and political arena \(https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/algeria/\)](https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/algeria/), coupled with lingering questions about military influence in politics, casts doubt on the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. And while Tebboune has signaled some level of social and economic openness, his policies are doing little to address the grievances that sparked the 2019 [protest movement \(https://africanarguments.org/2023/08/algeria-the-hirak-and-its-aftermath/\)](https://africanarguments.org/2023/08/algeria-the-hirak-and-its-aftermath/), which called for more political freedoms, anti-corruption measures, and a transition toward a [civil state \(https://www.aps.dz/ar/algerie/102447-2021-02-25-18-23-16\)](https://www.aps.dz/ar/algerie/102447-2021-02-25-18-23-16) not led by the military. To consolidate support behind his agenda, authorities have resorted to nationalist tactics such as invoking the [specter of aggression \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algerian-president-says-morocco-ties-have-reached-point-no-return-2023-03-21/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algerian-president-says-morocco-ties-have-reached-point-no-return-2023-03-21/) by neighboring Morocco.

Mauritania offers a different—though by no means ideal—narrative. The relatively peaceful transfer of power to President Ghazouani in 2019 was widely regarded as free and fair and marked a significant step away from military rule. A former general, he is poised to run for a second term against weak opposition, bolstered by his party's track record of electoral victories. His administration has maintained stability even as other countries in the volatile Sahel region struggle. He has also implemented policies aimed at reducing poverty and improving social welfare, further solidifying public support despite some [criticisms \(https://www.article19.org/resources/mauritania-new-law-on-protection-of-national-symbols-threatens-free-speech/\)](https://www.article19.org/resources/mauritania-new-law-on-protection-of-national-symbols-threatens-free-speech/) over restrictive laws affecting freedom of expression.

Nonetheless, the chances of significant advancement in the country's democratic institutions are low due to limited political competition and power concentration within the ruling party. Mauritania also faces broader challenges such as enhancing social cohesion, addressing past [human rights abuses \(https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/MAURITAN944.PDF\)](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/MAURITAN944.PDF), and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Improving the country's democratic trajectory would require active efforts to reform media law, strengthen judicial independence, and ensure a more transparent and inclusive electoral process, among other measures. Given the fast-approaching election date, however, the more likely outcome is a vote with little competition from the opposition. Even so, a well-executed, peaceful election could still be viewed as a positive step for Mauritania, especially in a region where political stability is deeply in flux.

## Policy Implications

The slim chance that these four countries will see significant political reform or leadership change this year raises questions about the efficacy of elections as a tool for genuine democratization and development in the region. The increasingly antagonistic rhetoric and military posture between some of these governments also threatens stability and progress in North Africa, as Algeria attempts to forge a new political bloc with Tunisia and a [reluctant \(https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/148951/libyan-envoy-visits-morocco-after.html\)](https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/148951/libyan-envoy-visits-morocco-after.html) Libya, primarily aimed at isolating Morocco.

Such developments underscore the urgency of a more proactive U.S. approach to prevent further regional fragmentation. With its active engagement of Tebboune's government—[recent setbacks \(https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15670.doc.htm\)](https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15670.doc.htm) at the UN Security Council notwithstanding—the Biden administration is well-positioned to work with Algiers in promoting regional de-escalation. Yet these diplomatic efforts should also be leveraged to promote a shared vision for a stable and integrated North Africa.

As Washington navigates the evolving regional landscape, it must maintain a clear-eyed understanding of the limitations of electoral processes as a tool for democratic consolidation, while simultaneously recognizing the growing influence of global powers and the challenges posed by regional rivalries. The United States can become more effective at advancing its interests in North Africa and supporting the long-term aspirations of the people who live there. But doing so will require a [more holistic and adaptive approach \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/north-africa-era-great-power-competition-challenges-and-opportunities-united-states\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/north-africa-era-great-power-competition-challenges-and-opportunities-united-states) that focuses on providing targeted electoral support; robustly addressing economic, social, and institutional challenges; managing regional dynamics; and engaging strategically with global competitors.

*Sabina Henneberg is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. Amine Ghouli is a geopolitics and security researcher at King's College London.* ❖

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