

Lessons from Tunisia's Municipal Elections

by [Dhia Otay \(/experts/dhia-otay\)](#)

May 24, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/aldrws-almstfadt-mn-alantkhabat-abldyt-altwnsyt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Dhia Otay \(/experts/dhia-otay\)](#)

Dhia Otay is a Tunisian journalist and political activist located in the United States.



Brief Analysis

On May 6, 2018, municipal elections in Tunisia -- the one country often hailed as the Arab Spring's sole success story -- were finally held, after being postponed several times. Just a few months ago, many observers were really skeptical about the feasibility of such an event. Supporters put forward the role of these elections in launching the long-awaited decentralization process. But on the other side, old regime nostalgists claimed that the political and social structures of the country were not ready yet for that kind of change, which could lead to the disintegration of the state. At the grassroots level, the political, social, and economic situation is so difficult that many Tunisians are extremely pessimistic about the future of their country, and do not see any concrete social and economic project that could tackle the current crisis.

And, indeed, the electoral results announced by the Independent High Authority for Elections show a high level of abstention among the population, especially the youth. Approximately two-thirds of the electorate did not go to vote. This was predicted by political commentators who underlined the strong frustration of Tunisians still facing harsh economic difficulties, political stagnation, and social disarray, more than seven years after the ousting of former president Ben Ali. But this unprecedented high number of non-voters was a strong shock for local politicians, who are blamed by the public as disconnected from reality and popular demands.

None of the political parties got a majority, which is a tradition in Tunisia since 2011. The results show a major defeat of the liberal Nida Tounes. It had the biggest parliamentary bloc after the 2014 legislative elections, but was now ranked first in just a few municipal councils. The disengagement of its constituency was so high that its executive director -- the son of Tunisian president-Beiji Caid al-Sebsi -- made a call for the mobilization of his supporters less than four hours before the polls closed. The rival Ennahdha movement, whose leaders now like to call themselves a "Muslim Conservative Party" instead of an Islamist party, announced its victory via its spokesperson -- who nevertheless emphasized its commitment to the "consensus policy" with its partner Nida Tounes.

Tunisian politics have been ruled since 2014 elections by this consensus policy, which was one of the outcomes of the national dialogue held in the fall of 2013 and the famous meeting in Paris between Sheikh Rached Ghanouchi, the head of Ennahdah, and al-Sebsi, the head of Nida Tounes, who would later be elected as president. But this stabilizing consensus between the two biggest parties was soon seen as a stagnation factor since it did not develop any social or economic initiatives. Moreover, the official narrative of both the government and the major political

parties dangerously limits the democratic transitional process to the formal aspect of organizing elections, which are presented as the only available form of democratic practices. It is one of the triggers of the growing boycott among the Tunisian public.

One of the surprises of these elections, as a result of this popular disenchantment with both major parties, was the victory of independent candidates, who won an aggregate score higher than any political party. In fact, however, many of them are former members of different political parties who resigned after ideological or personal differences; and several local commentators speculate that these “free electrons” still keep close ties with their former parties. Another interesting fact was the rise of the new Attayar party led by M. Abbou. It presented candidacy lists in only a fifth of the total number of municipalities -- but was ranked second in at least two-thirds of those jurisdictions where it competed.

A generational cleavage is another key feature of Tunisia’s struggling democracy. The old generation of politicians, especially those coming from the privileged regions and families have monopolized the public sphere in both the government and opposition for more than five decades. The Tunisian youth, not only in the marginalized regions but in the whole country, which represents more than the half of the population, feel excluded from the decision-making process, and denied access to financial opportunities, mainstream media, and even higher education. Nevertheless, since the municipalities will be involved in local investments according to a new law, Tunisian young entrepreneurs are closely monitoring the post-election developments. Last April, they pushed the adoption by the parliament of the “Start-Up Act,” which posits the decentralization process as a sine qua non for the successful launching of new companies – in contrast to the highly centralized-and corrupt banking and administrative system.

Ironically, the same feeling of frustration toward old politicians exists even among the old generation. Those who were educated during President Bourguiba’s reign, beginning with independence in 1956, were contemporaries of the first “democratic opening” during the early 1980s. At that time, the Tunis bourgeoisie split from the ruling Destour party to found the MDS, and forced the organization of the first multiparty elections. The public declaration a few years ago of current President al-Sebsi, that he was personally involved in the falsification of the results of the 1980 elections, did not help to build trust. This generation of “experienced seniors” underlines the fact that the same people involved in that first Tunisian spring, way back in the early 1980s, are still supervising the democratic transition in 2018. These same people were responsible for the political and economic crisis during the mid-1980s, which led to the dictatorship of Ben Ali starting 1987.

Generational differences are also apparent in the media dimension of Tunisia’s emerging political life. The traditional media provided pale coverage of May 6 elections, probably due to the complicated rules enforced by the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communications. This authority, which supervises TV and radio channels, was focused on maintaining the neutrality of media during the electoral campaign. It authorized severe sanctions for bias, so most media preferred to avoid any trouble and did not provide extensive coverage. That vacuum was filled by social media, which made a premiere splash a few months ago by boosting political newcomer Y. Ayari to get elected as a deputy representing the Tunisian community living in Germany. However, the coverage provided by social media included a huge amount of disinformation and fake news, thus forcing the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute office in Tunis, for example, to issue a public denial about alleged electoral straw polls.

Looking ahead, the May 6 municipal elections are widely seen as a prelude to the presidential and legislative elections planned for 2019. The quality of management of municipalities will be a decisive criterion that will influence the voters’ decisions. The Nahda party will face a campaign of meticulous scrutiny by its opponents. One of them, a recently retired high-ranking security officer, has already called for the cancellation of the results of the municipal elections, claiming that they are false! In fact, many secularists fear that Nahda’s local deputies will enhance Islamist propaganda in the public sphere of their districts. That was the trigger of the civil war in Algeria

next door, during the 1990's. On the other side, Nida Tounes's defeat in the municipal elections could be an opportunity to liberate the party from the strong influence of its well-connected mercantile lobbies and highly corrupt private interests. Civil society organizations, independent of the part, could help in reversing this unhealthy drift.

Overall, however, a major lesson of these elections is that the classic narrative of countering Islamists cannot be effective anymore in Tunisian local politics. The Ennahdha party multiplied its symbolic gestures to refute that narrative. For example, one of its candidates now aspires to become the first female mayor of the capital Tunis, and its candidate list in the of Monastir included a Tunisian Jew. Secular parties, in contrast, failed to build a new political and social vision, and are still prisoners of their old ideology. Nida's public support for the Assad regime in Syria, and official meetings with Chinese communist party leaders, are but two of the numerous examples of the confusion that reigns at Nida headquarters.

As a result, leading up to next year's national elections, the independent candidates elected in municipal councils will be approached by both Nida and Ennahdah. Or they could be, with the new Attayar party, an alternative to Nida in building a new bipolar political balance for the next elections, at the national level. In either case, the non-Islamist parties and candidates have the coming year in which either to band together, under a revived agenda, and swing the political pendulum back in their direction – or to continue their drift and fragmentation, and watch the “reformed” Islamists of Ennahdha return to the fore. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)