

Supporting Tunisia's Moves Toward Local Governance

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

While successful local elections would mark a milestone in Tunisia's democratic transition, the vote's tangible impact will largely depend on the powers of local authorities, which have yet to be defined.

On May 6, Tunisians will go to the polls in the country's first local elections since the 2011 uprising overthrew autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and sparked a wave of revolts across North Africa and the Middle East. The election of 350 municipal councils will be followed by polls for regional and intraregional governing bodies, collectively representing a long-awaited step in Tunisia's democratic transition.

DELAYS LEAD TO UNCERTAINTY

Under the highly centralized Ben Ali regime, policy decisions affecting Tunisia's localities were largely left up to legislators in Tunis—a dynamic that produced gross regional disparities and fueled resentment in peripheral communities. In the last budget passed prior to the uprising, lawmakers allocated 82 percent of funds to the coastal region around the capital and only 18 percent to the interior, despite the fact that the three largest coastal towns only comprise around 20 percent of the total population.

Conscious of the need to rectify this imbalance, members of the transitional legislature enshrined a commitment to local governance in the new constitution of 2014. Title VII of the charter called for extensive delegation of political, administrative, and budgetary authority to elected municipal, regional, and intraregional bodies. The task of governing the election of those bodies and delineating their precise responsibilities was left to ensuing legislation.

But it would take another three years for parliament to pass a local elections law, with the delays eliciting criticism from civil society activists increasingly skeptical of lawmakers' commitment to decentralization. A more controversial innovation of the law—one which held up parliamentary debate for six months—was to grant military

and law enforcement personnel the right to vote in local elections despite the constitution's stipulation that security apparatuses remain politically neutral. (These personnel are currently scheduled to vote on April 29, prior to the general public vote on May 6.)

Meanwhile, parliament promised to pass a law specifying the rights and responsibilities of local authorities in advance of the May vote. As of this writing, however, the law has yet to be approved, meaning next week's winners could find themselves scrambling to define their roles.

Such frustrations notwithstanding, the election law passed early last year garnered praise for its socially progressive underpinnings. In addition to imposing vertical and horizontal gender parity for electoral lists, it required that at least three members of each list be under the age of thirty-five, and that at least one of the first ten be a person with a physical disability.

NUTS AND BOLTS

The election law also allowed Tunisia's independent election monitoring body to begin preparing for this year's vote. Twenty-two parties and coalitions are presenting electoral lists across the country, but the three largest parties reflect the dominant blocs in parliament: the Islamist Ennahda ("Renaissance") Party of Rached Ghannouchi, the secular Nidaa Tounes ("Call of Tunisia") Party of President Beji Caid Essebsi, and the leftist Popular Front. Ennahda is the only party fielding lists in all 350 municipal districts, but Nidaa Tounes is close behind with 345, while the Popular Front will field candidates in 119.

Reflecting the electoral law's demographical regulations, 52 percent of candidates are under the age of thirty-five, 30 percent of the electoral lists are headed by women (a jump from 13 percent in the 2014 national elections), and eighteen lists are headed by candidates with physical disabilities.

Although reports of relatively minor campaign irregularities have emerged in recent days, the prospect of severe voting irregularities is unlikely—several hundred international and domestic election observers will be present, and the two rounds of voting held since 2011 were free and fair. Even so, a poll released in January by the reputable Tunisian firm Sigma Consulting suggested that abstention rates could reach as high as 62 percent. Of the 5.3 million Tunisians who were registered to vote by early April (out of a total population of 11.4 million), those who do venture to the polls will be responsible for electing 7,212 municipal council members.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For Washington, Tunisia's elections will provide a useful indicator of where Islamist politics are headed in the "post-Spring" Arab world. Specifically, the results will show the relative strength of the leading contenders—Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes—nearly four years after national elections propelled them to dominant positions in the legislature, and just over one year before the next round of parliamentary and presidential elections.

Ennahda in particular has invested heavily in broadening its base of support since 2014. In addition to entering a coalition with the leading secular party, it has built up a presence across localities, disavowed (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/from-political-islam-to-muslim-democracy-tunisias-annahda-changes-course>) the label of "political Islam" in favor of "Muslim democracy," begun separating its religious and political activities, and generally eschewed overt references to religion in its public discourse. Likely inspired by a desire to avoid the fate of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, many of these moves were hotly contested within the party, reportedly costing Ennahda support among certain younger activists frustrated by the perceived dilution of the movement's Islamist identity and its commitment to the original aims of the 2011 uprising. To the extent the election vindicates or undermines Ennahda's pragmatic wing, it will likely influence the near-term political strategy of one of the region's few remaining Islamist parties in government.

Successful local elections would also represent another significant step in Tunisia’s transition to democracy—one that the Trump administration should publicly applaud. The country has registered many important achievements in the past five years, including the establishment of broadly representative, relatively well-functioning national institutions such as the parliament, along with substantial improvements in managing security threats from neighboring countries and **within its own borders** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-state-targets-tunisia-ahead-of-elections>).

Yet the political and security gains have not been matched by progress in the economic realm, where persistent unemployment, high inflation, and a dizzying currency drop over the past two years have left many Tunisians worse off than they were before Ben Ali’s ouster. These problems are especially acute in the interior, where the 2011 uprising began and where demonstrations have since erupted on a nearly annual basis to protest the lack of jobs, slow progress on infrastructure development, and general neglect from lawmakers in Tunis.

Ultimately, the vote’s tangible impact will largely depend on the powers delegated to the elected bodies. To the extent the election lays the foundation for local mechanisms of governance and accountability, it could also usher in improvements for marginalized communities, thereby helping to stabilize pockets of unrest.

Washington should reassure its ally that it intends to remain a partner in that process. It can do so by redirecting the bulk of its governance assistance away from political party development at the national level and toward capacity building with local councils, as well as with programs that facilitate coordination between municipalities and relevant ministries in Tunis. In this respect, the Trump administration’s recent proposal to cut assistance to Tunisia from \$180 million to \$85 million warrants reconsideration.

*Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (Cambridge, 2018).* ❖

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