

Tunisians Vote in a Runoff

by [Sarah Feuer \(/experts/sarah-feuer\)](/experts/sarah-feuer)

Dec 19, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Sarah Feuer \(/experts/sarah-feuer\)](/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 Tunisians deserve widespread recognition for achieving a peaceful transfer of power, the need for continued U.S. engagement will only increase after this weekend's ballot.

On December 21, Tunisians return to the polls for the third time in as many months to choose their next president in a runoff between the top two vote getters in round one, held November 23. Veteran statesman Beji Caid Essebsi won that round with 39 percent of the vote, while longtime human rights activist and interim president Moncef Marzouki came in second with 33 percent. If observers were surprised by the small spread between the candidates last month, Sunday's vote -- the final step before the long-awaited formation of a new government -- will likely be even closer.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

While Essebsi and Marzouki have been in campaign mode, important developments in the legislative branch have continued to shape the context in which the new president will govern. Following the closing session of the National Constituent Assembly -- the interim body that governed the country after the 2011 uprising and oversaw the promulgation of a new constitution -- the newly elected People's Representative Assembly (PRA) chose its president and two vice presidents. Five blocs will dominate the nascent parliament: Essebsi's own Nidaa Tounes (Tunisian Call) Party with eighty-six seats, the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance) Party with sixty-nine seats, the centrist Free Patriotic Union with sixteen seats, the leftist al-Jabhat al-Shabiyah (Popular Front) coalition with fifteen seats, and the liberal Afek Tounes (Tunisian Horizon) Party with eight seats. Independents will fill the remaining twenty-three seats. In a vote mirroring the breakdown of parties, the PRA's new president, Muhammad Ennar, is a member of Nidaa Tounes, while the two vice presidents, Abdelfatah Mourou and Faouzia Ben Fodha (a woman), hail from Ennahda and the Free Patriotic Union, respectively. The PRA has also begun forming key committees, most notably on finance and internal affairs.

Meanwhile, Essebsi and Marzouki have secured a handful of campaign endorsements from various parties and prominent individuals. The Free Patriotic Union and Afek Tounes have thrown their weight behind Essebsi, along with former Central Bank governor Mustapha Kamel Nabli, former National Elections Commission director Kamel Jendoubi, and longtime labor activist Adnan Hajji. The social democratic Tayyar Demoqrati (Democratic Current) Party is backing Marzouki, along with several prominent members of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, a secular party that governed in coalition with Marzouki's Congress for the Republic Party and Ennahda throughout the transitional period.

Arguably of greater consequence has been the lack of endorsements from Ennahda and the Popular Front, both of which continue to contemplate joining a Nidaa-led government after the runoff. Following round one, Ennahda's main decisionmaking body met twice to debate a possible endorsement, but consensus remained elusive after divisions surfaced between the party's leaders, who appear inclined to conditionally support Essebsi, and the party's base, which remains staunchly opposed to a president with ties to the former regime. The Popular Front is similarly divided between members advocating an endorsement of Essebsi in return for entry into the government, and those wary of backing a candidate whose economic orientation seems more liberal than their base would like.

TWO FACES, IF NOT VISIONS, OF TUNISIA

Ennahda and the Popular Front's inability to formally endorse a candidate partly reflects a broader debate in Tunisia over what this election represents. For some, the contest between Essebsi and Marzouki is a choice between returning to the old regime or continuing the revolutionary momentum unleashed in 2011. For others, it is a contest between the economically dominant north, where Essebsi did well in the first round, and the traditionally neglected south, where Marzouki won strong support. For others, Marzouki's alliance with Ennahda throughout the transitional period renders the election a choice between Essebsi's "modernism" and Marzouki's Islamism-by-association. And for what is likely a critical mass of citizens, ideology is less salient than basic questions of governance, social justice, and economic reform.

Each of these interpretive lenses brings the candidates' liabilities into focus, even if no single lens adequately captures the dynamics at play. Essebsi, who is eighty-eight years old, did serve as a minister under the Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali regimes; his campaign rhetoric has emphasized notions of "modernism" and "the prestige of the state" (*haibat al-dawlah*) that conjure the prospect of a heavy-handed central government; and he has been critical of Islamists, Ennahda in particular. For Marzouki's part, his record as a democracy advocate and opponent of the former regime may be his greatest asset, but his governance as interim president over the past three years -- with or without the Islamists -- was widely deemed ineffectual at best and dangerous at worst, particularly when it came to his handling of the economy and his inability or unwillingness to crack down on certain violent groups. Such liabilities have raised concerns about low voter turnout, particularly among youths, though registered voters defied such predictions in the previous two elections and reached nearly 70 percent turnout each time.

More important, the numerous interpretive frames obscure a more basic point: that Essebsi and Marzouki actually do not differ that much on most key policy questions. On the economy, for example, the greatest divergence is between the Popular Front's leftists and Ennahda's free-market liberals, not between Essebsi and Marzouki. Likewise, in the national security arena, where the incoming president will wield considerable power, there is little evidence to suggest they would take the country in radically different directions.

One possible exception is in the realm of foreign policy, where Essebsi could decide to reinforce Tunisia's traditional alliances with Europe and forego ties with Turkey and Qatar in favor of engagement with anti-Muslim Brotherhood governments in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Marzouki, by contrast, has stated that he considers Qatar a friend of Tunisia, and he has characterized relations with Egypt as neither good nor bad. Still, both

candidates have been at pains to emphasize Tunisia's aspirations for positive relationships around the globe -- relationships on which any incoming president will undoubtedly lean in soliciting badly needed foreign investment.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A successful election on Sunday will mark Tunisia's second peaceful transfer of political power since the 2011 uprising, a milestone all the more remarkable given the tumult engulfing the region. But in many ways, the greater tests of Tunisia's nascent democracy -- and of America's commitment to the birthplace of the "Arab Spring" -- will come afterward.

The political leadership's first major task will be to form a government, the configuration of which will affect the country's short-term political stability and its ability to tackle key economic challenges. The winner of Sunday's race will set important precedents on several fronts: in the negotiations for government formation, in the appointment of members to the Constitutional Court, and in the emerging tenor of the relationship between the president and prime minister, to name just a few crucial tasks facing the next president. Given the closeness of the race, the incoming head of state is unlikely to enter Carthage Palace with a broad mandate, and the imperative to govern inclusively will be that much greater. Tempting as it may be to declare Tunisia a success story, Washington will need to build on its constructive partnership of the past three years and work with an Essebsi or Marzouki presidency to ensure that the country's delicate transition to democracy stays on track.

Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)