Tunisians Elect a President

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Regardless of who enters Carthage Palace in January, a free and fair election will represent an achievement worthy of international recognition.

On Sunday, November 23, Tunisians will return to the polls to elect a president nearly one month after voting in a new parliament. The parliamentary election, widely praised by international and domestic observers, brought in a legislature dominated by the anti-Islamist Nidaa Tounes (Tunisian Call) Party, which won 85 of the parliament's 217 seats. Tunisia's main Islamist party, Ennahda (Renaissance), came in second place, garnering 69 seats -- a notable decline from the 89 seats it obtained in the 2011 election for a transitional assembly. Three smaller blocs -- the leftist Popular Front coalition, the centrist Free Patriotic Union, and the liberal Afek Tounes (Tunisian Horizon) Party -- will occupy a combined 39 seats, while a host of independents will fill the remaining 24 seats. Against this backdrop, the presidential election will mark another milestone in Tunisia's promising, if precarious, transition to democracy. In a region plagued by failing states, resurgent authoritarianism, and violence, the mere fact that Tunisia is holding a peaceful presidential election should give the United States and the international community reason to celebrate and, more important, lend assistance moving forward.

WHY THE PRESIDENCY MATTERS

Tunisia's new constitution, adopted in January, divides executive power between the government, to be led by a prime minister, and the presidency. As head of state, the president will be commander-in-chief of the armed forces and will be responsible for setting defense, national security, and foreign policies. In consultation with the prime minister, the president will also nominate the governor of Tunisia's central bank, thereby exerting at least indirect influence over the nation's fiscal policy -- a key domain, given the country's dire economic predicament and the strong likelihood of economic reforms in the coming months. Under certain conditions, the president may also propose laws in parliament; dissolve the legislature and call for new elections; and declare a state of emergency. More than simply being the public face of the country, then, Tunisia's president will wield political power.

THE CONTENDERS

When Tunisians enter the voting booths on Sunday, they will choose from a list of twenty-seven candidates approved by the national election commission. (In the event that no candidate receives a majority, the top two vote getters will meet in a runoff election no later than December 31.) Noticeably absent from the ballots will be any representative of Ennahda, following the Islamist party's decision not to field a candidate. At a recent meeting of Ennahda's executive body, the party announced it would also refrain from formally endorsing anyone, although certain prominent party members have publicly voiced support for non-Nidaa candidates. Of the individuals running for president, four have emerged as leading contenders.

Beji Caid Essebsi. The leader of Nidaa Tounes, Essebsi formerly ran the Ministries of Interior, Defense, and Foreign Affairs under the regime of Habib Bourguiba (r. 1957-1987) and later served as president of the Chamber of Deputies under Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (r. 1987-2011). Essebsi's most recent stint in government was as interim prime minister following the January 2011 uprising that overthrew Ben Ali and sparked the regionwide events known as the Arab Spring. He has built his campaign around notions of progress, modernism, and restoring the prestige of the state -- vocabulary aimed at invoking the Bourguiba era. To his supporters, these echoes of Bourguibism are precisely Essebsi's appeal. To his detractors, an Essebsi presidency would constitute a worrisome return of the old regime, especially since Nidaa Tounes has attracted members of the former ruling party. Critics also point out that Essebsi, who is eighty-seven and reportedly in poor health, has failed to create democratic structures within Nidaa Tounes.

Moncef Marzouki. A neurologist by training, Marzouki has been active in opposition politics since the late 1980s, when he became head of the Tunisian League for Human Rights. In 2001, he founded al-Muatamar min ajl al-Jumhouriyah (Congress for the Republic Party, or CPR by its French acronym), which the Ben Ali regime refused to recognize. That same year, Marzouki exiled himself to France, where he remained for a decade. In 2011, following the Tunisian revolution, Marzouki returned to his home country, where his party later won twenty-nine seats in the transitional assembly. When the CPR joined a governing coalition with Ennahda, Marzouki became president. Until last month, his chances of retaining the presidency seemed slim, given the lack of public enthusiasm for him and a general frustration with the incumbent parties' performance over the past three years. However, the strong showing by Nidaa Tounes in last month's parliamentary election has given Marzouki a bump in visibility and support, as factions look to prevent Nidaa from dominating both the legislative and executive branches.

Hamma Hammami. A longtime political activist, Hammami is the spokesman of the Popular Front, a coalition of eleven leftist parties that won fifteen seats, the fourth largest bloc, in the most recent legislative election. Since the 1970s, Hammami has been associated with the far left, and in 1986 he founded and became chief spokesman of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT by its French acronym). For his political activities, he was imprisoned, tortured, and forced into hiding on numerous occasions throughout the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras. In 2012, the PCOT, a founding member of the Popular Front, renamed itself the Tunisian Workers' Party and Hammami became its secretary-general. Echoing the Popular Front's legislative priorities, Hammami's campaign has focused on unemployment, social justice, and regional economic disparities.

Slim Riahi. The surprise of the recent parliamentary election was the third place finish, with sixteen seats, of a previously little-known party, al-Ittihad al-Watani al-Hurr (Free Patriotic Union, or UPL by its French acronym). The party's founder, Slim Riahi, is a wealthy businessman who grew up in neighboring Libya and reportedly made his fortune through investments in oil, energy, aviation, and real estate. Since returning to Tunisia in 2011, he has been financing several large-scale development projects, and in 2012 he became president of Club Africain, a popular Tunisian soccer team. Riahi's wealth is perhaps his biggest asset as well as his greatest liability: supporters are convinced he would spread his riches -- and be less likely to steal from citizens -- while skeptics accuse him of

buying voters' support.

BEYOND NOVEMBER 23

For Tunisians, the immediate impact of the upcoming election will be to determine the political division of power among their branches of government, and the outcome will undoubtedly influence negotiations over the formation of a government. For the United States and other outside observers, the election results -- whether announced next week or next month -- will also offer clues to Tunisia's foreign policy direction in the coming years. An Essebsi presidency, for example, may prompt greater engagement with countries -- such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- thus far reluctant to lend support to an Islamist-led government in Tunis.

But regardless of who enters Carthage Palace in January, the free and fair election of a president will in itself represent a significant achievement, and as the contours of Tunisia's incoming government crystallize, U.S. policymakers should continue to demonstrate strong support for the country's political transition. Alongside existing economic and security assistance programs, near-term measures such as sending a high-level delegation to attend the presidential inauguration, hosting Tunisia's new president at the White House, and inviting the incoming legislature to join the U.S. Congress's House Democracy Partnership would signal American resolve to remain a key partner.

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

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