

# Elections in Tunisia: Steps Toward Democratic Consolidation

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## Tunisia will need U.S. support for its continuing, fragile transition away from authoritarianism.

**T**omorrow, October 4, marks the formal launch of Tunisia's campaign period for parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled for October 26 and November 23, respectively. These will be the second elections held since the December 2010 self-immolation of an exasperated street vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, sparked protests that led to the overthrow of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and the wider regional upheaval often known as the Arab Spring. The path to the upcoming vote has not always been smooth, but a successful transfer of power in Tunisia would be a crucial next step for the country and a rare bright spot for the region.

## THE BUMPY ROAD TO THE 2014 ELECTIONS

**S**ince January 2011, Tunisia's political transition has gone through four phases. The first began immediately after President Ben Ali's ouster, when a series of interim governments culminated in the country's first free and fair legislative elections in October 2011. Those elections ushered in a second phase, in which the newly elected parliament began drafting a constitution and the country's main Islamist party, Ennahda (Renaissance), agreed to govern in a coalition, or troika, with two smaller secular parties. Against heated debates between Ennahda's supporters and opponents over the place of religion in the new foundational law and in Tunisian public life, this second phase saw increasing violence by radical religious groups, including a September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis. The violence spiked in mid-2013, when two political assassinations and an assault on a military installation in Tunisia's western region -- all perpetrated by indigenous jihadists -- plunged the country into a political crisis. This crisis phase, the third of the transition, extended from mid-2013 to January of this year, when a National Dialogue representing the political parties, labor unions, and civil society oversaw the long-awaited promulgation of the constitution, and the Ennahda-led government agreed to step down in favor of a technocratic cabinet. The installation of an interim government in January launched the transition's fourth phase, during which

key achievements have included the adoption of an election law and a reduction in violence. Still, these gains remain tenuous and the incoming government will be expected to outline much-needed economic and political orientations to guide the country for years to come.

## KEY ISSUES

**U**nlike earlier phases of the transition, when issues of religion and state dominated the public discourse, the prevailing themes in the current campaign cycle will be the economy and security.

*Economy.* Rising unemployment, cronyism, and regional economic disparities fueled the popular uprising that toppled Ben Ali in 2011. According to a recent World Bank study, Tunisia's economy remains plagued by "a financial sector hampered by governance failures, labor rules that paradoxically promote job insecurity, regulatory policies that limit competition, and an industrial policy and agricultural policy that introduce distortions and deepen regional disparities..." As a result, unemployment continues to hover around 15 percent nationally (rising to 30 percent among college graduates); foreign direct investment has decreased by 26 percent relative to this time last year; and the growth rate has not surpassed 2.3 percent since the start of 2014. The U.S. government has provided much-needed economic assistance, including loan guarantees on \$1 billion in Tunisian government bonds; \$40 million toward private-sector business development projects; and bilateral trade to the tune of \$1.5 billion. An International Monetary Fund loan of \$1.74 billion, negotiated in 2013, has also helped keep the country afloat. Still, a heavy burden will fall on the incoming government to begin remedying deep structural impediments to Tunisia's economic prosperity.

*Security.* In contrast to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, Tunisia's initial uprising in 2011 was relatively peaceful. However, 2012 and 2013 saw increasing violence and terrorist activity, a development partly attributable to factors such as a general amnesty granted in 2011 to five hundred political prisoners, some of whom went on to engage in violent acts; the emergence of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like Ansar al-Sharia; a relaxation in state control of mosques; and an increasing flow of weapons through porous borders with Algeria and Libya. This past July, al-Qaeda-affiliated militants killed fourteen soldiers and wounded another twenty in the border region with Algeria. Tunisian officials estimate that 2,500 citizens have traveled to Syria to join rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and a Tunisian jihadist group recently announced its allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- which months ago renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) after declaring a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq. Since 2011, the United States has provided more than \$100 million to the Tunisian military, \$35 million to the Ministry of Interior for security-sector training programs, and twelve Black Hawk helicopters. While such assistance has facilitated the interim government's progress in degrading terrorist cells in Tunisia, the security portfolio will remain a top priority for incoming lawmakers.

## KEY PLAYERS

**M**ore than 1,300 candidate lists will compete in up to 33 electoral districts for 217 seats in parliament. Meanwhile, 27 individuals are running for president. The dizzying number of political contenders can be grouped into four major blocs.

1. *Ennahda.* The Islamist party, whose leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, was visiting Washington earlier this week, captured 41 percent of the votes and a plurality of seats in the 2011 parliamentary election. But its popularity declined during the violence and ensuing political crisis of 2012-2013, and polling suggests the party would capture around 30 percent support if the parliamentary election were held tomorrow, making it likely Ennahda will once again need to govern in coalition with other parties. Still, the party remains the best organized and -- as one of the few parties fielding candidates in all 33 voting districts -- is the odds-on front-runner.
2. *Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia).* Following Ennahda's strong performance in the 2011 parliamentary election, Beji Caid

Essebsi, a veteran statesman from Habib Bourguiba's presidential tenure and an interim prime minister following Ben Ali's departure, created a new party and began rallying Tunisians around a broadly anti-Islamist message. Since 2012, Nidaa Tounes has emerged as the main rival to Ennahda, attracting a mix of secular liberals and former regime supporters eager to counterbalance the Islamists' ascension. Essebsi is also a leading contender for the presidency. Still, while Essebsi has been polling well ahead of the other candidates, large majorities of survey respondents have indicated they remain undecided about their choice for president.

3. *Al-Jabha al-Shabiyah (Popular Front)*. Since early 2013, roughly a dozen secular political parties have formed an electoral bloc known as the Popular Front. Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, the two politicians assassinated by Ansar al-Sharia militants in 2013, were Popular Front members. The coalition, which bills itself as a socialist, anti-Islamist alternative to the troika, could garner enough seats in parliament to check both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes.
4. *Smaller parties and independents*. Since 2011, a host of smaller political parties and independent figures have emerged as an additional group in Tunisian politics. These include the two secular, centrist parties of the troika -- the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (Ettakatol) -- and secular-liberal parties such as al-Joumhour (Republican Party) and Afek Tounes (Tunisian Horizon). With the exception of Essebsi, most of the presidential candidates are affiliated with these smaller parties or are running as independents.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The Obama administration has repeatedly reiterated its support for the Tunisian transition, and U.S. governmental and nongovernmental organizations have played a constructive role in this transition. Since none of the electoral blocs is likely to obtain enough votes to govern alone, the postelection period will be the critical determinant of the transition's success. To ensure that Tunisia consolidates its democracy, U.S. policymakers will need to encourage members of the incoming government to eschew the polarizing rhetoric and behavior that nearly halted the transition last year. Continued security and economic assistance will also be essential. Measures such as assisting the Tunisian government to secure the border with Libya would reduce the threat of militants and arms entering the country, and would help cut down on smuggling that has undermined Tunisia's economic recovery.

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

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