

Tunisia's Islamists Likely to Win Plurality in the First "Arab Spring" Election

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Brief Analysis

A moderate Islamist party governing in coalition with secularists will offer Tunisia a reasonable chance at real democracy.

This Sunday, Tunisia will hold the first democratic elections resulting from this year's regional political upheaval, choosing a new Constituent Assembly with a vaguely defined mandate to govern the country and write a new constitution within a year. The Islamist Ennahdha (Renaissance) Party -- currently led by longtime exiled opposition figure Rachid Ghannouchi, though he has pledged to retire soon -- is likely to become the largest faction in the legislature. Published polls show it garnering around 25 percent support, while some private polls suggest it could win 40 percent or more of the new assembly's seats.

Yet the secular, center-left Progressive Democratic Party, led by veteran internal oppositionist Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, will likely come in second with 15-20 percent. And an assortment of mostly secular small parties or independent deputies will almost certainly win the balance of seats, leaving the assembly without clear direction but with considerable latitude for reaching pragmatic compromises on key issues. If these projections hold, some insiders plausibly predict that Ennahdha would form a governing coalition with the smaller, secular, centrist Ettakatol Party and various independents.

Economic Issues and Corruption Are Key

Although most coverage has focused on the political or technical aspects of this watershed election, a previously unpublished May 2011 survey by Princeton-based Pechter Polls reveals some of the underlying trends in popular sentiment that will likely shape voting patterns this weekend. Most important, the majority of Tunisians who participated in the survey believed that the new government's top priorities should be "reducing bribery and corruption in government" and "managing the Tunisian economy well" (around 73 percent each). Two related priorities -- providing more economic benefits to "ordinary Tunisians" and protecting them against official abuse --

ranked nearly as high (64 and 60 percent, respectively).

At the same time, and despite Tunisia's reputation as a bastion of Arab secularism, the majority of respondents (61 percent) believed that "making sure schools teach girls and boys the value of sharia" should be a top priority as well. A similar number (59 percent) said the new government should not "protect freedom of speech so that people who say unpopular or bad things about Islam are allowed to." These views, along with Ennahdha's efficient grassroots organization and record of resistance to the old regime, help explain the Islamist party's widespread support. An additional factor is that many of the more secular parties are identified with labor unions or even socialist and communist movements, leading some Tunisians to view Ennahdha as better for business.

Nevertheless, Tunisia has a generally tolerant culture. Although its population is almost uniformly Sunni, three-quarters of the poll respondents said that "non-Muslims should have equal rights in every country, including Tunisia." To be sure, one-third said a top government priority should be to "make sure that every Tunisian is a believing Muslim," and one-quarter emphasized giving Muslim scholars and clerics "a lot of influence in the legal system." Yet fully half admitted that they rarely (15 percent) or never (36 percent) attend mosque services. These factors will probably curb any efforts to impose fundamentalist Islam on the country, even if Islamists win a significant share of the vote and assume a prominent role in the new government.

Uncertain Turnout

In interpreting the election's outcome, a number of late-breaking variables will be important. Polling was halted by law in late September, and at the time, "don't know" or "won't vote" still led the pack, accounting for fully half the electorate. Which of these people actually turn out to vote, and how they decide to cast their ballots, are substantial uncertainties.

Recent events not captured in any poll could alter the outcome as well. For example, the October 14 riot by Salafists protesting the "blasphemous" foreign movie *Persepolis* may cost Ennahdha some votes, as might a Tunisian secular party's antifundamentalist commercials on Aljazeera television.

Expatriate Vote Could Yield Surprises

Tunisia's one million registered voters living abroad -- out of seven million total voters -- are another unpredictable element in this election. Surprisingly, some observers estimate that these constituencies, mostly in Europe, will tilt more toward Ennahdha than will Tunisians back home.

The electoral system itself, while close to pure proportional representation, presents an additional complication. The assembly's 217 seats are apportioned among the country's twenty-seven domestic and six expatriate voting districts, rather than nationally, and small-town or rural districts are granted an extra one or two seats. As a result, even if a given party wins by a landslide in certain districts, these "excess" votes would not necessarily translate into greater representation in the national assembly -- or, conversely, a slim advantage in many districts could give a party a disproportionate share of seats compared to its national vote total.

More important, the plethora of small parties and independent lists means that the precise outcome is inherently uncertain. There is no national percentage threshold for entrance into parliament, so these sorts of candidates are widely expected to fill as much as half of the new assembly. Yet at the district level, a candidate must win approximately 30,000 votes to gain a seat, depending on the area's number of allocated seats and local turnout. Consequently, some small factions may wind up with significantly lower than projected representation, ceding more of the field to larger rivals.

Tunisian Women Are as "Islamic" as the Men

Tunisia has long been viewed, correctly, as the most egalitarian of all Arab societies in terms of women's legal rights, personal freedoms, and employment. Even under Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's dictatorship, for example, the U.S. State Department picked Tunis as the venue for a 2005 regional conference on women's empowerment. For Sunday's election, the country has instituted a unique provision for precise parity between men and women, with alternating candidates from each gender on every electoral list.

Women's equality has broad public support: in the May Pechter poll, 58 percent of Tunisian men and 68 percent of women said that this issue should be a high priority for the new government. Even Ennahdha has stated that it will not attempt to roll back women's rights or enforce veiling. Yet questions of polygamy and equal inheritance are still under debate in the campaign.

At the same time, Tunisian women are surprisingly just as "Islamic" as their male compatriots on some key issues -- or even a bit more so. For example, the majority of both sexes (around 60 percent) said that the government should focus on teaching the value of sharia. And 44 percent of women expressed a very positive view of the Muslim Brotherhood, compared to 32 percent of men. Most important at the moment, women were just as likely as men to vote for Ennahdha.

Foreign Policy Not a Major Issue, Though U.S. Unpopular

In the May Pechter Poll, a majority of Tunisians (58 percent) voiced a very negative opinion of the United States -- and, almost certainly not by coincidence, of the killing of Usama bin Laden, which had just occurred. By comparison, Italy and France received 50-60 percent favorable ratings. Views of Iran and Saudi Arabia were decidedly mixed, with around a quarter giving each country very negative scores, and another quarter very positive ones. At the same time, Tunisians gave both Israel and "Qaddafi's government in Libya" overwhelmingly negative ratings (94 and 97 percent, respectively).

Yet as in the January revolution that toppled Ben Ali, foreign policy issues are playing almost no role in Tunisia's current political scene. None of the above countries appears to be an important or even background issue as Tunisians head into the next crucial test of their new, democratic political order.

Policy Implications

Given that Tunisians are paying very little attention to the United States at the moment, there is very little Washington can do to influence the outcome of this historic election. There are, however, several things it can do to earn more friends in Tunisia and help the country set an example of functioning democracy for the region. If Sunday's vote puts Tunisia more firmly on this path -- a likely outcome -- then stronger U.S. political and material backing would be highly desirable, even in these tough economic times. In particular, upgrading Tunisia from a "threshold" to a "compact" partner when issuing Millennium Challenge Account credits would be an excellent investment in regional stability as the Arab Spring turns to autumn. A free trade agreement would make sense as well. As long as Tunisia's new ruling parties stay as moderate in power as they sound on the campaign trail, this fledgling Arab democracy merits determined American support.

David Pollock, the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. In addition, he is the principal advisor to Pechter Polls. ❖



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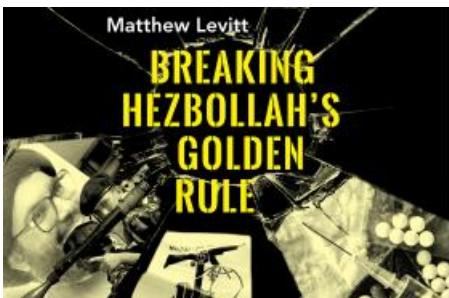
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