



Looking Beyond Election Day, Tunisia's Transition Remains Fragile

By Ariella Viehe

November 20, 2014

On October 26, Tunisians made headlines by shifting their post-Arab Spring politics in favor of a secular party. With more than 60 percent turnout,¹ Tunisians elected the Nidaa Tunis party and pushed the leading Islamist party, Ennahda, into second place.² Some Western analysts quickly cited this outcome as evidence of Tunisia's political evolution, equating secularism with more predictable, stable, and less ideological governance.³

But the U.S. government should not rush to check Tunisia's transition as complete just yet. This election-day optimism belies the complexity and fragility of Tunisia's political and governing landscape. Presidential elections on November 23 and parliamentary coalition building could still shift the political balance. More worrisome is the very real threat of exclusionary, divisive politics or of subtle co-optation of state institutions—as seen in Egypt and Libya.⁴ The people's central election mandate—demand for economic and security reforms that will jump-start job growth and counter terrorism threats—also underestimates complex, difficult trade-offs among Tunisian interest groups. The challenges resulting from coalition and opposition politics could slow these desperately desired reforms and disillusion Tunisians with the democratic process.

Recognizing these fissures and responding to them—with diplomatic and financial assistance—will advance U.S. interests for stability and democratic transition in Tunisia and in the region. The United States should continue as a strong and guiding support for Tunisia, but Washington should be alert to backsliding, particularly in the name of security, expediency, or reform. Washington should use its support to bolster short- and long-term institutional and developmental efforts that reinforce democratic values—such as political pluralism and tolerance, the rule of law, economic access, and equitable economic reforms.

The election results: A return to prerevolution politics?

In many ways, Nidaa Tunis' parliamentary victory, with 85 seats to Ennahda's 69, returned Tunisian politics to familiar roles, with the Islamists in opposition—though now accepted in the mainstream—and a secular, political elite governing the country. But Nidaa's primacy is still far from certain. Presidential elections on November 23 could strengthen or dilute Nidaa's influence, depending on whether Nidaa's leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, wins. Secondly, Nidaa Tunis has two months to form a coalition to meet the 109-seat majority:⁵ Forming a coalition will require negotiations between secular, Islamist, leftist, and business-oriented parties. Even then, the coalition's ability to achieve an electoral mandate for sweeping economic and security reforms will require complex negotiations and compromise. In short, coalition formation will dominate the next few months as political parties negotiate to remain influential during the permanent government's first five-year term.

Nidaa's electoral success highlights two critical aspects of Tunisia's democratic transition—one positive and one of concern. First, Nidaa Tunis exists because the Tunisian Parliament rejected a draft law to prevent former regime officials from participating in politics.⁶ Access to the political process allowed Nidaa Tunis founder Essebsi and his colleagues to remain within the political system, rather than seek connections around it. This inclusive approach is a positive development and stands in contrast to the approach in Iraq and Libya, where former regime officials are excluded from involvement in the new governments.⁷

Second, dissatisfaction with the lack of progress—the primary motivation behind the 2011 revolution—inspired older Tunisians to vote for Nidaa's old guard but caused younger Tunisians to question voting altogether. For the United States and other supporters of democratic reform, this youth shift away from democracy is a worrisome sign for the sustainability and legitimacy of democratic transition in Tunisia. Older and female voters turned out to vote, while young voters abstained in large numbers,⁸ frustrated by Ennahda and uninspired by Nidaa. A 2014 Pew Research Center poll found that 30 percent of Tunisian youth felt the system of government “doesn't matter,”⁹ and only 13 percent were “satisfied with the country's direction.” In general, polls consistently report a sense that life was better under the dictatorship of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali,¹⁰ particularly for the 2 million government workers,¹¹ because there was stability and institutional coherence. After a flurry of revolutionary change, Tunisians appear to crave predictable government that meets their security and economic needs.¹²

Nonetheless, Ennahda's strong second place demonstrates that those Tunisians who did vote did not reject the party outright. Indeed, it will be important for Nidaa and its parliamentary coalition to recognize Ennahda as a powerful minority party and to resist any urge to bypass or marginalize its platform. How Nidaa balances itself among the ideological spectrum of political parties will be critical to Tunisia's stability. Tunisia's successful transition to date has occurred precisely because of the overriding effort to achieve pluralism in some form, to include as many Tunisians in the political system as possible, and to reduce their incentive to seek alternatives.

The necessity of coalition building and the reality of Ennahda's strong second place can restrain Nidaa in the parliament. The outcome of the presidential election, however, could further alter this dynamic.

The presidential election: Why it matters

The November 23 presidential election is an important transition from the pre-2011 regimes. The winner will be the first openly contested and democratically elected president in Tunisia's history.¹³

In light of the parliamentary results, however, the elections take on another role. With Nidaa's leader on the presidential ballot, Essebsi's win could create a powerful electoral mandate, as well as support for the experience and policies of Nidaa's former regime officials. In contrast, Ennahda opted not to run a presidential candidate.¹⁴ However, the other 21 candidates¹⁵ are looking to November 23 to balance out Nidaa's political influence.

The new Tunisian president and prime minister will share executive powers over the country's security and economic levers, two areas where voters are frustrated and demand progress. The president and prime minister are linked from the start; the president will request that the majority party—in this case, Nidaa—form a coalition government and therefore appoint the prime minister.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Tunisian president will have direct control over foreign policy, defense, and national security,¹⁷ while the prime minister will lead the public administration and manage the ministries.¹⁸ Generally, the new constitution limits the presidency—not surprising, given Tunisia's history with an authoritarian president. But the new president and prime minister will be the first under the new constitution. How these powers are shared and implemented will depend greatly on the personalities and parties in power.

Core issues for Nidaa Tunis: No quick wins

Regardless of which party won the parliamentary elections, the challenges for the first permanent government would be daunting. Nidaa, however, faces some particularly difficult trials ahead.

First, Nidaa's internal dynamics are obviously weak. Essebsi's son acknowledged that Nidaa “might unravel if Essebsi either fails to be elected in the ... presidential vote or dies while Nidaa is in power.”¹⁹ But even if Essebsi survives, the party's coherence appears to rely on his decrees,²⁰ rather than on deep adherence to an ideology or platform.²¹ Such concerns may be common in a nascent party and political system, but Nidaa's—and indeed, Tunisia's—ability to cement democracy relies on clear

platforms that respond to constituents, not personalities. In the face of difficult decisions, Essebsi's leadership may not be enough to impose greater coherence on Nidaa's members. Many of these members defected from other parties in 2012 and may have little compunction about declaring independence if their interests are not met.

Coalition building will be Nidaa's first test. A coalition of only secular parties will highlight the Islamist-secular division central to Nidaa's identity and could deepen Tunisia's political polarity. As a result, some U.S. analysts have called for a Nidaa-Ennahda super-coalition.²² But Nidaa and other secular parties deeply fear Ennahda's Islamism, seeing it as another form of authoritarianism.²³ That being said, the other winning parties with significant numbers—the Free Patriotic Union and the Popular Front—are not clear partners either. The Popular Front campaigned against Nidaa's former regime members. The Free Patriotic Union may be a possibility, but its millionaire leader, Slim Riahi, is considered unpredictable.²⁴ The presidential election may still shift these calculations, but whatever the coalition, it will struggle for common ground.

Weak internal party cohesion and a weak parliamentary coalition do not bode well for swift economic reforms. So far, the parties agree that reforms are needed.²⁵ How the reforms are structured—and, principally, who they may benefit or harm—will be critical to Tunisia's stability. Nidaa's old guard will need to avoid the perception of pushing for reforms that favor the old regime or economic elites, many of whom are the same.²⁶ Furthermore, subsidy reform will be challenging to the middle class, which disproportionately benefits from the lower prices. In January, for example, Tunisian farmers immediately protested tax reform that raised new licensing requirements for them, including fees on public and agricultural vehicles.²⁷ Broader tax and labor reform is needed, but it will affect the powerful trade unions that are generally supportive of Nidaa. Even if reforms can be agreed upon and implemented, their positive results will take years to affect voters, leaving little immediate political payoff in return for Nidaa taking these difficult steps.

Furthermore, Nidaa's coalition will need to act decisively on security; it must combat internal and cross-border terrorism and develop the security ministries. Decisive moves in the security sector could offset slow economic reforms. Nidaa claims that Ennahda, when it controlled the Ministry of Interior, appointed "incompetent" supporters as civil servants throughout the Ministry during its 2012–2014 tenure.²⁸ The Ministry of National Defense claimed to resist Ennahda appointees, and Nidaa may capitalize on this infiltration fear among bureaucrats—many of them from the Ben Ali regime days—to reassert secular and, specifically, Nidaa-linked control over the security apparatus.

Nidaa will be inheriting a bureaucracy and economic system that are both weak and accustomed to single-party control. It will need to avoid prerevolution habits and seek compromise for acceptable economic reforms and sustainable security.

Next steps for Ennahda: Playing the long game

Ennahda seems comfortably positioned, either as part of a coalition or as a strong opposition party to Nidaa's coalition. This role may have been intentional. Ennahda leaders appear to want to focus on the party's internal needs and on strengthening it for future elections:²⁹ Their time in government exposed weaknesses, including a lack of technocrats and midlevel leadership and minimal youth engagement. Furthermore, Ennahda needs to reconnect with its base, which saw concessions in its Islamist platform in certain governing decisions, such as accepting the new constitution without reference to Sharia, or Islamic law. For Ennahda, this loss could offer an opportunity to focus inward to determine how to pursue its political future as an Islamic party, competing between Salafist trends and strong secular traditions. Ennahda clearly believes that time is on its side and that its political agenda remains possible in a democratic system.³⁰

Next steps

The United States, too, must now shift from focusing on Tunisia's elections to supporting inclusive government and reform. U.S. assistance will be critical to building the institutions and government capacity necessary for a balanced democracy. But this building will take time, and the United States must fill in those gaps with better short-term economic and security efforts, as well as strong support for an inclusive government and constitutional adherence. Without those two pillars of political life, fracturing becomes more likely as Tunisians seek alternatives outside the system. The United States should both publicly and privately encourage adherence to democratic value and needed reforms in the following ways:

- First and foremost, the United States should remain vigilant publicly and privately about active or passive slips by Nidaa and its coalition into authoritarian tendencies. Even if economic and security needs are in high demand, it is the democratic structure that makes them possible and sustainable. The United States must urge Nidaa both publicly and privately to remain inclusive in its political and economic decisions as a governing party.
- Tunisia should use U.S. assistance to strengthen checks and balances, particularly in the security and justice sectors and in civil society, to guard against authoritarian tendencies. The United States already provides more than \$135 million to the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of National Defense,³¹ but more needs to be given to the Ministry of Justice, particularly for training for judges and for prisons and court processing. The Security Governance Initiative, announced during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in August,³² offers an opportunity to bolster this justice-sector support.

- On the economic reform front, growth stagnation remains the biggest challenge to Tunisia's transition.³³ Here, the United States and international community need short- and long-term approaches. In the short term, the United States should support U.S.-Tunisian business ties, underwriting skills training through nonprofits such as Education for Employment;³⁴ continuing the U.S. Small Business Administration's support program;³⁵ and considering new programs in mentorship, apprenticeship, or internship in larger companies. This may more quickly engage Tunisians, particularly youth, in the economy. Reforms will take years to affect economic decision making, but U.S. support can help speed up the process.
- There is no substitute for the long-term reforms that are needed to restructure the economy. The United States should continue working with European partners to leverage the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and bilateral development agencies to provide advisors to the Ministries of Economy and Finance, Trade and Handicrafts, Agriculture, and others overseeing reforms in order to design comprehensive, sustainable reforms and to encourage public transparency that makes them acceptable and credible.
- Finally, the United States needs to encourage political-party development to deepen the parties' policy acumen and overcome their reliance on political personalities. In the period between elections, parties often neglect institutional development, but now is the time for Tunisia's political parties to strengthen their positions and platforms for the next election. The United States should pledge to develop a long-term political-party training program that builds party institutions, platforms, and policies in order to build toward Tunisia's next election cycle.

Tunisia is on the right path. Compromise and long-term thinking have gotten it through the transition phase. The first permanent government must now continue that trend and meet Tunisians' demands for a better life. With U.S. support, that reality becomes even more possible.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government.

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