

Viewpoints
No. 65

A Bloodless Transition: Tunisia's Legislative Elections

Robert Worth

Public policy scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center,
and journalist, *New York Times*

The Tunisian parliamentary election that took place on October 26 has been widely hailed as a rare and heartening success story. It was a moment of bloodless democratic transition in a broader Middle East that appears to be crumbling daily into anarchy, from the lawless militia zone of Libya to the killing grounds of Syria and Iraq. The election went off peacefully, without accusations of fraud, and even the principal losing party – the Tunisian Islamist group known as Ennahda – held a celebration to honor the event as a “victory for all Tunisians.”

November 2014

Middle East Program





The Tunisian parliamentary election that took place on October 26 has been widely hailed as a rare and heartening success story. It was a moment of bloodless democratic transition in a broader Middle East that appears to be crumbling daily into anarchy, from the lawless militia zone of Libya to the killing grounds of Syria and Iraq. The election went off peacefully, without accusations of fraud, and even the principal losing party – the Tunisian Islamist group known as Ennahda – held a celebration to honor the event as a “victory for all Tunisians.”

Yet in some ways the electoral story that captured the headlines is less impressive, and perhaps less important, than the popular response to it: a mandate for political compromise, and an array of energized civic groups who seem determined to hold their government accountable in ways that are almost unheard-of in the Arab world.

For anyone who has covered flawed elections in Iraq and Lebanon – as I have – it was thrilling to discover iWatch and Muraqiboon, new outfits full of young Tunisians who did (by all accounts) a spectacular job of monitoring the elections and forecasting the results. Another group, Marsad Budget, gathers budget information on all of Tunisia’s government agencies and makes it available online. Their volunteers have attended every session of Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly since the first post-revolutionary elections in 2011, live-tweeting the debates and later posting and collating information about how the country’s money is being spent. A new crop of independent journalists and bloggers, writing in French and Arabic, has published impressive reports (mostly online) on the government’s failures and the challenges it faces in the coming years, from garbage collection to fighting terrorism.

The election itself seemed straightforward enough, at least from the outside: a big win for the main secularist party, Nidaa Tounes, which took 85 seats in Tunisia’s 217-seat Assembly. Nidaa Tounes capitalized on popular discontent with the Islamists, who were widely blamed for assassinations, strikes, and disarray in the years since the 2011 revolution.

That result should not have been a surprise; surveys had predicted a victory for Nidaa Tounes. Yet oddly, few in Tunisia seemed to believe them, and one high-ranking member of Nidaa Tounes told me just before the vote that he feared the Islamists would triumph again. Those conflicting expectations hint at the uneasy dance between Tunisia’s two main political factions over the past year, and the determination of many voters to hold both of them in check.

Traveling around Tunisia during the week before the election, I found it hard to escape the feeling that Ennahda, the Islamist party, was the strong horse. They had sent volunteers knocking on doors in every part of the country, and their frequent political rallies were brilliantly organized and full of wildly enthusiastic crowds. By contrast, Nidaa Tounes’s rallies seemed lackluster, and emanated a lack of discipline and confidence. The party, founded in mid-2012, is a rattle-bag of politicians and businessmen united only in their antipathy for the Islamists. Nidaa Tounes’s rallies had a heavy aroma of nostalgia, and included frequent video clips of Habib Bourguiba, who ruled Tunisia as a (mostly) benevolent autocrat from 1959 until 1987, when Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took over.

In a sense, Nidaa Tounes is a one-man party: it was founded by Beji Caid Essebsi, an 87-year-old *eminence grise* who held several top posts under Bourguiba, and presented himself as the man who could restore Tunisia to the harmonious *laïcité* of the post-independence years. Essebsi is running in the presidential election scheduled for late November, but the lawmakers elected last month all ran under his banner. Even supporters of the party express unease about what would happen if Essebsi were to die or fall ill; there are few obvious heirs to his mantle, and many diverse agendas within the party. And many Tunisians – not just the Islamists – seem anxious about the possibility that members of Ben Ali’s clique could return to power under the Nidaa banner.

Yet Tunisians handed this party a decisive victory. My sense, based on interviews with dozens of people before and during the election, is that many of the party’s supporters were suspicious of it, but keen to punish the Islamists, or at least to ensure that they are forced to share power. (Scores of parties and coalitions competed in the vote, but Nidaa Tounes was widely seen as the only credible alternative to Ennahda.) Many of these people had voted for Ennahda in the first post-revolutionary election, in 2011, partly because it had no track record and its leaders elicited sympathy with their record of opposition to the Ben Ali regime (many of them spent years in prison). Ennahda’s leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, is far more sophisticated than his ideological peers in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and more willing to compromise. But Ennahda’s popularity collapsed in 2013, when jihadists assassinated two prominent leftist politicians and the party seemed unwilling to confront the hardline Salafists at its margins.

To some extent, the vote ratified the results of a process of political reconciliation instigated jointly by Essebsi and Ghannouchi in late 2013, with a series of “National Dialogue” meetings. Nidaa Tounes may have won the biggest share in the election, but it is not strong enough to govern without partners, and may even end up governing jointly with Ennahda.

Inevitably, many of the young protesters who helped to kick-start the Tunisian revolution in December 2010 are now disgusted with the country’s politics, and feel that the choice between the Islamists and Essebsi is no choice at all. But the despair is far from universal. And some of the same people who grimace when asked about the vote are also working hard to build Tunisia’s democratic institutions. Among the most impressive, I thought, was a new venture called al Khat (the line, or calligraphy, in Arabic). It has three wings: a website that produces long-form civic journalism, a for-profit media lab, and a training division that teaches investigative journalism and promotes higher standards in the field. These people, working in a small suite of offices for almost no pay, embody the spirit you’d hope to find four years after the start of what was once called the Arab Spring: resignation about the slow pace of political change, but intense dedication to creating new institutions that will – if all goes well – help make those changes sustainable.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation

Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections

Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies

Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power

Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?

Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy

Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demons Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?

Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?

Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right in Elections Across the Mideast

Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray

Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013) by Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013) by David Ottaway

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election

Viewpoints No. 18 (January 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Future

Viewpoints No. 19 (February 2013) by Caryle Murphy

Sanctions and Medical Supply Shortages in Iran

Viewpoints No. 20 (February 2013) by Siamak Namazi

The Nuclear Issue: Why is Iran Negotiating?

Viewpoints No. 21 (February 2013) by Bijan Khajepour, Alireza Nader, Michael Adler

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is Pushing Lebanon to the Brink

Viewpoints No. 22 (February 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties

Viewpoints No. 23 (March 2013) by Marina Ottaway

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintry

Viewpoints No. 24 (March 2013) by Adeed Dawisha

Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition

Viewpoints No. 25 (April 2013) by David Ottaway

Learning Politics in Tunisia

Viewpoints No. 26 (April 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Morocco: "Advanced Decentralization" Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative

Viewpoints No. 27 (May 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani's Surprising Election

Viewpoints No. 28 (June 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon's Existential Threats

Viewpoints No. 29 (June 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani

Viewpoints No. 30 (June 2013) by Various Authors

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent

Viewpoints No. 31 (July 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Mohamed ElBaradei From Vienna to Cairo: A Transition

Viewpoints No. 32 (July 2013) by Michael Adler

Can Rouhani Resolve Iran's Economic Conundrum?

Viewpoints No. 33 (July 2013) by Bijan Khajepour

Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon

Viewpoints No. 34 (August 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis

Viewpoints No. 35 (August 2013) by Jubin Goodarzi

Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hope for U.S.-Iran Dialogue

Viewpoints No. 36 (September 2013) by Barbara Slavin

Back to the Drawing Boards

Viewpoints No. 37 (September 2013) by Nathan J. Brown

The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq

Viewpoints No. 38 (September 2013) by Joseph Sassoon

American Policy in Lebanon: Stabilization Through Dissociation

Viewpoints No. 39 (September 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.-Saudi Ties to the Test

Viewpoints No. 40 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?

Viewpoints No. 41 (October 2013) by Mark N. Katz

American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough

Viewpoints No. 42 (October 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Tunisia's Islamist-Led Democracy Founders

Viewpoints No. 43 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

Confrontation Over Iran's Nuclear Program

Viewpoints No. 44 (November 2013) by Michael Adler

Breaking Taboos

Viewpoints No. 45 (November 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Iraq's Kurdistan Takes a Giant Step Toward Independence

Viewpoints No. 46 (December 2013) by David Ottaway

The Egyptian Constitution: Mapping Where Power Lies

Viewpoints No. 47 (December 2013) by Marina Ottaway

A Dream Constitution

Viewpoints No. 48 (December 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Can the Iranian Nuclear Issue be Resolved?

Viewpoints No. 49 (January 2014) by Bijan Khajehpour

The Hague Tribunal and the Hariri Assassination

Viewpoints No. 50 (January 2014) by Amal Mudallali

Egypt's Referendum: The Constitution is not the Issue

Viewpoints No. 51 (January 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Reflections on Iran's Tumultuous Revolution: 35 Years Later

Viewpoints No. 52 (February 2014) by Shaul Bakhsh

Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections

Viewpoints No. 53 (March 2014) by Joseph Sassoon

Iranian Nuclear Talks Plow Ahead

Viewpoints No. 54 (March 2014) by Michael Adler

Egypt: The Closing of the Political Space

Viewpoints No. 55 (June 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani: Mixed Bag One Year Later

Viewpoints No. 56 (June 2014) by Shaul Bakhsh

Lebanon without a President: Can Lebanon Weather the Neighborhood Storm?

Viewpoints No. 57 (June 2014) by Basem Shabb

The Jordanian Regime and the Muslim Brotherhood: A Tug of War

Viewpoints No. 58 (July 2014) by Tareq Al Naimat

Turkey after Erdogan's Non-Victory

Viewpoints No. 59 (August 2014) by Henri J. Barkey

Barbarians: ISIS's Mortal Threat to Women

Viewpoints No. 60 (August 2014) by multiple authors

Rouhani and the Potential Failure of Nuclear Talks

Viewpoints No. 61 (September 2014) by Farideh Farhi

A New Chapter in the Tangled U.S.-Saudi Relationship

Viewpoints No. 62 (September 2014) by David B. Ottaway

We Bomb ISIL: Then What?

Viewpoints No. 63 (September 2014) by Marina Ottaway

The Coming Tunisian Elections: What Will Be the Role of Women?

Viewpoints No. 64 (October 2014) by Lilia Labidi

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Julia Craig Romano
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars