

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

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Since the revolution that led to the end of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011, Tunisian women have obtained political parity and participated, for the first time, in the writing of the country's new constitution. With just a few weeks remaining until new elections that will determine the country's political orientation over the next five years, a look at the experiences of women who have been involved in formal politics can help us understand the political culture of a society in the process of a democratic transition.

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Starting October 26, Tunisia will be holding parliamentary and presidential elections over the course of several weeks that will determine the political orientation of the country for the next five years. A question haunting all political parties is how women are going to vote in this democratic transition. These women have benefitted from the most progressive personal status code in the region with regard to women's rights since Tunisia's independence in 1956; this code abolished polygamy, instituted judicial divorce, established equal pay for equal work, and improved healthcare and access to education. Women gained the right to vote in 1959, and since the Tunisian revolution, they have conquered fear, exercised their freedom to hold meetings and demonstrations, and contributed to a new constitution that enshrined "equality" between men and women, rather than a "complementarity" relationship.

Tunisia's political parties have learned to accommodate the political parity adopted in March 2011 by the High Authority for the Realization of the Aims of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition. This decision obliged the parties to alternate women and men on their election lists, despite the parties having relatively few women among their members.

For the 2014 elections, women voters outnumbered men among newly registered voters. Among the 13,000 parliamentary candidates, 47 percent are women. Under the pressure of feminists and women's associations, the political parties were pushed to put more women at the head of their election lists; women constitute 11.26 percent of the heads of lists in 2014 compared to 7 percent in 2011. This increase of more than 50 percent seems to indicate that the parties have understood that the presence of women as the heads of lists might attract women voters.

Data for 13 major political parties show the number of women at the heads of the lists of these parties to be, in decreasing order, 10 for the coalition called the Union pour la Tunisie (UPT), 7 for Congrès pour la République, 6 for Courant Démocratique, 5 for Afek Tounes, 5 for Front Populaire, 5 for Ettakatol, 4 for Al Joumhour, 4 for Al Mubadara, 3 for Ennahdha, 3 for Nidaa Tounes, 2 for Mouvement Destourien, and 1 for Alliance démocratique. None of these parties had a woman as heads of the lists in the 6 districts of Le Kef, Kairouan, Tataouine, Kasserine, Gafsa, and Tozeur. And Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes – the two strongest and politically polarizing parties – are among those with the fewest number of women as heads of lists, contrasting with their discourse that aims to attract women.

Overall, women who have been active in associations that were feminist, cultural, and/or social have become increasingly politicized. They have joined political parties but then left them when the parties did not respond to their aspirations. They have also publicly supported a candidate and then withdrawn their support in favor of another, have chosen parties that offer better opportunities for leadership, and have become candidates in legislative and presidential elections.

Yet some aspects of recent political behavior toward women are similar to those observed under former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and even during the elections of 2011. This included widespread misogyny that was reflected in attacks on women by political parties and

the media, including the absence of women in the media and on television programs, and the lack of discussion of economic questions.

Among recent developments causing concern, in part because they contribute to political tensions, are:

- political polarization between the two main political parties;
- a “political nomadism” that has seen many figures switching parties;
- a scattering of votes among the many smaller political parties;
- the high number of acts of political vandalism related to the elections – in one week more than 700 were counted in greater Tunis and approximately 100 in the Kef region – a number that is likely to increase in the coming weeks during the election period;
- the return of youth who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq raising the fear that this will lead to attacks within Tunisia; the risk of paralysis in economic and political life, in part as a result of pressure put on the transitional government by trade union groups demanding wage increases and also a general disaffection of Tunisians toward the political process, which may lead to a low election turnout;
- and finally, the threat by some political parties that they will not accept the election results arguing that corruption and secret agreements delegitimize the process.

And all this is taking place in a context where the media, the judicial system, and the police are still in the hands of people from the former regime.

However, there are significant new aspects that are grounds for some optimism. Among these are the increase in the number of women candidates who are the heads of lists; the resignation of women and youth from political parties that did not express values of dignity and democracy, which were central demands of the revolution; and the appearance of the niqab on election posters and/or the absence of photographs for some women candidates and in some cases for all candidates.

We also see efforts made toward a more inclusive political system. Ennahda has abstained from presenting a presidential candidate despite being the strongest Tunisian party because it says it wants a consensus government rather than a government dominated by one party. And there are several presidential candidates from Le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, who were prohibited from political activity in 2011. All these factors, including perhaps above all, the greater political activism of women, testify to the cultural and political upheaval that has occurred since the onset of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia. Such factors provide Tunisians with some hope that the transition will indeed lead to a democratic form of government.

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