



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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TUNISIA'S PRESIDENTIAL BAZAAR

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More than fifteen candidates have already announced their candidacy for the November 2014 presidential election.¹ However, the final list of potential pretenders to the Carthage presidential palace is still to come.² Set within a deeply fragmented and polarized political arena, this election has come to be seen as a kind of horse race where the contenders have focused most of their time and energy on their right to be elected –denied under the fallen dictatorship– and their own *image de marque* with their peer rivals, rather than on offering realistic political agendas for the country and addressing its monumental socioeconomic challenges. The absence of such an agenda is of paramount significance in light of the lack of any serious debate on the key issues affecting Tunisians. Meanwhile, proxy-biased media outlets run talk shows where candidates and their supporters favor the populist approach of “going negative,” a *modus operandi* dedicated to personal attacks viciously framed in defamatory and denigrating narratives.³

¹ Among these candidates are [Emna Mansour](#), President of Democratic Movement for Reform and Construction; [Abderraouf Ayadi](#), Secretary General of [Wafa](#) Movement; [Béji Caïd Essebsi](#), President of [Nidaa Tunis](#); [Kalthoum Kannou](#), judge and former President of the Tunisian Association of Magistrates; [Ahmed Néjib Chebbi](#), President of the High Political Authority of [Al Joumhour](#)i Party; [Abderrahim Zouari](#), former Secretary General of the dissolved-banned Ben Ali's party the Democratic Constitutional Rally and candidate of the Destourien Movement.

² Candidates for the 2014 presidential election not backed by at least 10 members of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) must get 10,000 signatures for sponsorship by citizen-voters in at least ten electoral constituencies. The filing of nominations for the presidential election starts on September 8th and will be closed on the 22nd of the same month. Already nearly 40 personalities have publicly announced their intention to run for the highest office, most of whom are independent personalities. However, it is difficult for them to secure an endorsement from 10 members of NCA and the only other way open to them is to seek the 10,000 signatures required.

³ Prior to the fall of Ben Ali's regime the Tunisian media was the most censored across the region. The main purpose was to depict a positive and flattering image of the regime. The new media landscape which emerged post-uprising lacks appropriate training and adequate professional standards. The quasi absence of investigative journalism made the media outlets resemble a tabloid style concerned with financial survival rather than being dedicated to objective reporting. Furthermore, the new media are used as a personal platform for political opponents to discredit each other on personal level rather than on political issues.

Despite the promising nascent democratic process that culminated with the adoption of a new constitution in January 2014, the average Tunisian citizen is quite likely to disregard the upcoming election. Voters may be indifferent to the election because of the dysfunctional nature of Tunisia's politics, characterized by the failure of all post-uprising governments to fulfill the peoples' legitimate aspirations. This trend was noticeable during the elections to the National Constituent Assembly in 2011, when only 50 percent of the country's eight million eligible voters registered to vote. This pronounced apathy became increasingly obvious, as only around 761,000 out of the remaining 4 million potential voters had registered by the end of the first registration period on July 29, according to the 2014 Independent Election Authority.⁴ Thus, nearly five million voters will be expected but not committed to cast their ballots in November 2014.⁵ This disinterest reflects the disenchantment of Tunisians who are tired of the sterile political game run by an inadequate leadership. Those in power are seemingly unable to balance between electoral calculus seeking to secure the vote of the majority and the prerequisites for a successful and inclusive political transition.

This disenchantment and resentment amongst a population originally yearning for freedom and democracy has been generated by more than three years of uncertainty marked by endless political negotiations, latent violence and poor economic performance. In fact, post-uprising macroeconomic indicators have become worse as economic dislocation has led to poor economic growth incapable of creating enough jobs. The rise in the fiscal deficit and the increase in the public debt have negatively impacted investment promotion and prevented the country's economy from engendering sustainable growth. Rising unemployment among the youth has reached an all-time high of 40 percent and is even higher in the countryside.⁶ Corruption, cronyism and nepotism have marginalized large segments of Tunisian society, chiefly among the

⁴ Monia Ben Hamdi, Tunisie : Possibilité de s'inscrire entre le 5 et le 26 août à condition de ne pas être candidat aux élections, *Huffington Post Maghreb*, 31 July 2014. Online at: http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2014/07/31/tunisie-elections-inscription_n_5636999.html?utm_hp_ref=maghreb-politique

⁵ Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections, *Précisions à propos des chiffres relatifs aux listes des électeurs*. Online at: <http://www.isie.tn/index.php/fr/2014-06-10-04-24-01/111-precisions-a-propos-des-chiffres-relatifs-aux-listes-des-electeurs.html>

⁶ The World Bank (Office of the Chief Economist), "Predictions, Perceptions and Economic Reality – Challenges of Seven Middle East and North African Countries Described in 14 Charts," *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief*, Issue 3 (July 2014): 12. Online at: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/08/06/000470435_20140806105353/Rend/Red/PDF/898440REVISED00ue030JULY020140FINAL.pdf

youth, “36 percent of which believe that corruption is widespread in government while 83 percent believe that knowing people in high positions is critical to getting a job.”⁷

After nearly two years in power, the Ennahda (Renaissance Party)-led transitional coalition has neglected Tunisia’s most glaring social and economic grievances. Political economy has never been a priority for the Islamist party and its secularist-leftist partners in power. Rather, the neoliberal economic model of the fallen regime has been nurtured and emboldened. Thus, the Islamist ‘economic approach’—if indeed there is one—has failed to renegotiate the social contract between Tunisians and their state. Nothing has been offered as a means of providing the economic opportunities required to create an environment conducive to shared economic development, where agents of change such as women, youth, trade unions, and private initiatives could play major roles in fostering a new economy. Instead, the Islamists have fallen short of delivering the dignity and social justice that most Tunisians have been calling for and instead perpetuated social and regional inequalities. The absence of major debates on the country’s economic and social policies indicates that most candidates do not have credible economic agendas. Rather, their attention is focused more on the presidential office, seen as a coveted prize rather than a leadership position that requires being ultimately responsible for policy making and being held accountable to the citizens of Tunisia.

In Tunisia’s pre-electoral fog, ordinary citizens who have never been close to the essence of political activity are struggling to understand the difference between the superficial and the substantial, the futile and coherent, the rational and unreasonable, the worthlessness of rhetoric and the inconsistency of reflection. Unlike in other democratic societies, where voters know every last detail about their candidates’ leadership, careers, programs, and campaign finance, the voters of Tunisia have not had access to the same type of basic information. They are blinded by the empty rhetoric of candidates’ slogans gravitating around “accountability, transparency, and popular sovereignty.” There is no relationship between the elected and the electors, nor is there any substantial debate or dialogue—formal or informal—of the kind which usually develops between the one who stands for election and those who participate in the vote. The gap between the few individuals who permanently occupy the political stage and the people is immense and looks filled-in only because of the overwhelming propaganda from the media and social networks. Unfortunately, these candidates give illusion to their *raison d’être*, but neither have

⁷ Ibid., 15.

electoral stance, nor carry specific messages. In short, they lack any political coherence and credibility.

Today, Tunisia's politics is trapped within personal rivalries without reflecting the concerns of local forces on national issues. On the one hand, Ennahda, although it has been pressured out of office, continues to work more than ever towards returning to power and aspires to be the backbone of the next government and the kingmaker of the next president. On the other hand, Nidaa Tunis (Call for Tunisia), a hybrid aggregation of followers without an explicit unifying call other than their fear of Islamism, is unable to agree on the fundamental interests of the country and acts more as a centralized cartel made up of remnants of the former regime, leftists, unionists, and independents, rather than a party with a cohesive structure or a coherent ideology.

Political statements that accompany and feed the discourse of these two players do not target the principal concerns of the Tunisian people. Both offer the same stale political platitudes: curbing unemployment, mitigating social exclusion, fighting terrorism, and providing people with security, but no strategic vision of how these challenges will be tackled has yet been articulated. Their audiences are often the same people; those who attend the various meetings, and opportunists who seek to rebuild their lives with a career to achieve and positions to conquer and who have joined these parties without ever having been involved in politics.

The first rule of democracy involves the choice of the majority. However, given the likely rate of abstention, the most powerful majority in November 2014 will be the abstainers. Tunisians have to accept that the minority who will go to the polls, as was the case in October 2011, will end up choosing for the silent majority once more. In this case, voters have the responsibility to elect a president who will not tell them what to do, but instead to opt for a rallying leader who can help them form a consensus on the most controversial and contentious issues in order to overcome the muddle of the populist bazaar.

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