

Tunisia's Upcoming Elections amid Strategic Reshaping of Coalitions

Written by Pietro Longo

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PIETRO LONGO, AUG 5 2014

So far, we can identify three fundamental steps in the Tunisian democratic transition. Firstly, in January 2014, a new Constitution was adopted. Secondly, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) has appointed the members of the Independent High Instance for the Election (ISIE), headed by the well-known scholar of Constitutional Law, Shafiq Sarsar. And thirdly, the NCA, in close cooperation with ISIE, has scheduled the legislative and presidential elections. The legislative elections are supposed to be held on October 26th, while the first round of presidential elections will take place one month later.

The precise order of the elections has been a matter of harsh discussion among the parties, with the Islamists of al-Nahda pushing for having legislative elections first, while the secular opposition supported the opposite. Even the electoral law has been vehemently discussed because it can have a decisive impact on the upcoming Parliament.

At present, the Tunisian political arena is polarized into two main groups: on the one hand, there are the secularists of Nida Tounes, while on the other, the Islamists of al-Nahda. According to some scholars, Nida Tounes could open to an alliance with al-Nahda in case the next elections do not produce a definite majority, as stated by the party chief and old veteran of Tunisian politics Beji Qaid Essebsi. By the same token, Rashid al-Ghannushi, prominent leader of al-Nahda, said that Tunisia must be governed with consensus over the next years, so to anchor democratic procedures and improve practices of good governance. Indeed, Nida's decision to leave the Union for Tunisia [1] and not to run coalitions with other non-Islamist parties for the legislative elections, and to open to potential alliances with the Islamists of al-Nahda, is a matter that deserves attention by political analysts.

As the presidential elections are concerned, a fierce competition between several likely candidates is expected: the head of Nida Tounes Beji Qaid Essebsi, the current President Moncef Marzouki, the Republican Party chief Nejib Chebbi, and the leader of Tayyaral-Mahaba Hachmi Hamdi have already stated their candidacy. Al-Nahda has not revealed its candidate or its endorsement yet. As elections approach, deal-making procedures have started, especially between the two biggest poles. Al-Nahda proposed a 'consensual candidate' for the presidency, someone shared by all parties. This proposal has been perceived as an implicit admission of weakness by the Islamists, but seen as a wise way to secure democracy in the country by other parties.

The Upcoming Elections: A Short Overview

According to the Tunisian research center Sigma, legislative elections could be dominated by al-Nahda, which is likely to get 45% of the votes, followed by Nida with 15.6%, and the Popular Front with 10.1%. The same opinion poll puts Congress for the Republic (CPR), the party of the interim President Moncef Marzouqi, in the fourth position with only 2.0% of votes.

This opinion poll corroborates the idea that the Tunisian political arena is now dominated by two parties, but none of them is able to reach the numbers required to create a single party government. Al-Nahda and Nida together could occupy 60% of parliamentary seats and could enter into a big coalition, even though this is not an easy option and is opposed on the ground of ideological reasons. This 'rapprochement' is problematic, particularly because Nida knows

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that, if the forecasted numbers are correct and al-Nahda gets a relative majority, a potential coalition government would be an advantage for the Islamists who would claim the most important ministers (the interior, foreign affairs, the economy) as it happened at the NCA elections.

While at the legislative elections al-Nahda seems to be ahead, according to Sigma polls, this is not the case for the presidential elections. According to Sigma polls, Essebsi (from Nida) seems to be the favourite with 29.8%, followed by Hamadi Jebali (from al-Nahda) with 11.2%, in which case a deal between Nida and al-Nahda is necessary because, following this scenario, the upcoming elections will result in an al-Nahda-led Parliament and a President from Nida Tounes.

Moreover, the 2014 Constitution would not accommodate this scenario. In fact, it gives the President some prerogatives, such as that to dissolve the Parliament, and establishes strong working ties between the President and the Parliament who, for instance, jointly appoint the Mufti [2] and the Governor of the Central Bank (in partnership with the Prime Minister). Under the new Constitution, the President can oppose the laws approved by Parliament, refusing to issue them and addressing them back to the chambers. Indeed, the new Constitution works in favour of a unified government where Parliament and President are from the same political side.

The geographic distribution of al-Nahda and Nida Tounes endorsement is also a matter of strategy: the Islamists are more rooted in the historical headquarters of the south east and west, like the governorates of Kebili, Medenine, Gabes, Touzer. Nida is stronger in the governorate of Tunis (23.9% against 12.9% of al-Nahda) and in the north and centre east governorates, such as in Mahdia and Monastir.

The distribution of presidential preferences is quite similar: Essebsi is favourite in the major cities and industrial centres, while the al-Nahda's candidate is more likely to receive consensus in the south. Al-Ghannushi said anything about his willingness to run for presidency and more likely Jebali or Laraayedh will do so.

Who is Nida Tounes?

Nida Tounes is generally seen as a pro-business party, but thanks to Taieb Baccouche, former leading trade unionist who is serving as secretary general, also as a workers-friendly party. At the same time, Beji Caid Essebsi appointed as his advisor the last secretary general of Ben Ali's party Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR), Muhammad Ghariani. For this reason, Nida is conventionally depicted as a collage of pieces of the ancient regime and is supported by that part of the Tunisian society which asks for stability, security, and, above all, the end of economic turmoil. According to its manifesto, Nida Tounes is a progressive party that looks at the Bourghibian reformism as its referent point. Mistakenly depicted as strongly secular, Nida is not a monolithic entity and is a mix of several ideologies. [3] When it was born, Nida included supporters of the Dusturian [4] movement, trade unionists, leftists, and independents, as well as former members of Ben Ali's RCD party. Despite Nida's members have ideological differences they all agree to unite to counterbalance the Islamists.

Under the leadership of Bourghiba, the national State has been at the hearth of historical dynamics between the elite and popular forces that eventually have delivered the Tunisian societal model, which includes women's emancipation, the unification of the justice system, widespread free and compulsory public education, improved health services, birth control programs, and nationalization of lands. However, this modernizing drive was perverted by authoritarian and paternalistic impulses of leaders who have quickly monopolized decision-making processes and excluded any democratic participation in public affairs. Nida, on the one hand, recalls this Bourghibian path, but on the other hand declares its willingness to inscribe itself into a more democratic framework.

The narrative which describes Nida as the reconstituted ancient regime is an unsophisticated one: while it is true that members of the former regime joined this party, it is important to note that some other ex-RCD members have joined other parties, including al-Nahda. In fact, when Nida was formed after the 2011 revolution, al-Nahda has integrated several members of the former regime into its ranks to secure them a role in the aftermath of revolution and strengthen its position vis-à-vis other political forces. This is the case of Habib Essid, long-standing politician during the 1990s, who was appointed Minister of the Interior during the transitional phase led by Mabazza and Essebsi, and

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then advisor of the Prime Minister during the first al-Nahda's government led by Hamadi Jebali.

Rumors also report that Nida is facing some internal troubles due to its umbrella-nature for different ideological streams, and single personalities centred on the old veteran Essebsi. Moreover, there are harsh tensions between the two major wings, the one of Essebsi himself and that of Baccouche, about the necessity to convene the founding congress and give the party a formal structure. According to Anne Wolf, Essebsi's proposal to hold the founding congress before the elections was perceived by Ridha Belhaj and Taieb Baccouche – referent of many independents, leftists, and trade unionists – as a potential attempt to reinforce the power of RCD members within the party. Party leaders finally agreed to postpone the congress to June 2015.

Conclusions

Nida's path towards election is proving to be quite unconventional. Its decision to leave the Union for Tunisia and its announcement to potentially start alliances with the Islamists deserve careful attention. One of the reasons why al-Nahda did well in the 2011 NCA election was the fragmentation of the opposition. This time, the non-Islamist opposition cannot repeat the same mistake because it risks losing its political credibility. The opposition has never been compact, but it has demonstrated enough unity to counterbalance the rise of Islamism. Now that the new Constitution has been adopted, and it is less 'Islamic' than any expectation, paradoxically the anti-Islamist front is weaker than ever and has lost its glue.

Running alone means that Nida is concretely thinking at starting post-electoral negotiation with al-Nahda. The Islamists may agree on having Essebsi as President if they win the legislative majority. But if they lose ground in Parliament, al-Nahda will play the card of consensus, calling for its increased participation in the government.

For post-authoritarian democratic sedimentation, it is recommended that Parliaments host a multiplicity of parties rather than just two, whereby the consensus-building scenario is more appropriate than a "majority vs. opposition" politics (Lijphart, 2004). At present, Tunisian politics is going towards bipolar politics, but the next Parliament should avoid being so strongly divided in two halves, and should strive to be highly representative as the NCA is. At the same time, though, to govern a country in transition that is facing several internal problems, stability is highly needed. Under the present scenario, stability could be reached only by a deal between the two biggest parties. In case al-Nahda and Nida will concretely enter a post-electoral deal, the problem is to figure out the possible consequences and contradictions that this could produce over the respective electoral bases and policies.

Notes

[1] The secularist electorate alliance formed in 2013.

[2] Scholar and interpreter of the Islamic Law.

[3] Personal interview with Press Officers and militants of the party.

[4] The first single-party since Tunisian independence.

References

Lijphart, A. (2004), "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies", *Journal of Democracy*, 15(2): 96-109.

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