

Viewpoints
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Learning Politics in Tunisia

Marina Ottaway,
Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center

Two years after the uprising that forced President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali into exile, Tunisians are slowly coming to grips with the reality of politics in a pluralist system where opposition is real and the outcome of political contestation is not predetermined. The process is slow and somewhat uncertain, and it would be premature to conclude that Tunisian politicians have fully embraced not only the concept of democracy but also its concrete implications.

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Ben Ali's Tunisia had a multi-party system, but the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) was so dominant that opposition parties were little more than props used by the regime to blur marginally the sharp edges of an authoritarian political system. Competitive politics was essentially a make-believe game that did not affect the allocation of power. Since the ouster of Ben Ali, politics has become a serious business with real impact on who gets what, when, and how, to quote Harold Lasswell.

The elections for a constituent assembly held in October 2011 were judged honest by Tunisians and foreigners alike, and this is not surprising because no faction had enough control over the political situation to engineer fraud, even if they had wanted to. There was no incumbent regime to manipulate the process and no political party that could impose itself in the name of revolutionary legitimacy – the uprising has not led to the formation of a mass political party nor has it propelled forward a new charismatic leader. Election results confirmed the absence of a dominant political faction. Ennahda received 37 percent of the vote and was forced to form an alliance (the troika) with two smaller secular parties, Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol, in order to form the government. Had the opposition been less fragmented, Ennahda's position would have been much weaker. Indeed, conscious that their divisions increased Ennahda's advantage, opposition parties have been trying to form broader coalitions. As a result, the next elections in Tunisia, now scheduled to be held between mid-October and mid-December 2013, are likely to be highly competitive. True, Ennahda this time has the advantage of incumbency, but its control over institutions, thus its capacity to manipulate elections if it wanted to do so, remains weak. Furthermore, in a country with a weak economy, high unemployment, and an uncertain security situation, incumbency may be more of a handicap than an advantage.

The Political Spectrum

The political spectrum in Tunisia remains quite broad, with both a radical right, represented by Salafi groups and a fringe of Ennahda, and a radical left, represented by the small parties in the Popular Front, which still appear committed to classic communist positions. Each of the two extremes is deemed to have the support of about 10 percent of the population (estimates are most unreliable concerning Salafis, who are not organized in political parties competing for elections and are, thus, not included in public opinion surveys). In between the two extremes is a fluid, rather conservative or centrist segment of the population which does not appear strongly committed to any political party. At least two recent public opinion polls conducted on

behalf of the Washington-based International Republican Institute and by 3C Etudes in Tunis conclude that about 40 percent of Tunisians still do not know for which party they will vote in the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

The major contenders for the votes of those in the middle of the political spectrum are Ennahda and a new political organization, Nida Tounes. Launched in June 2012, Nida Tounes is now running almost even with Ennahda in all public opinion polls. Both organizations, however, have internal problems, adding an additional element of uncertainty to the situation.

Nida Tounes is an alliance of different groups rather than a true political party. What holds the organization together, and explains its extraordinary rise to become a major contender in nine months, is the leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, whose political career covers the entire span of Tunisia's existence as an independent country. He served in many high positions under President Habib Bourguiba, including as minister of interior, of defense, and of foreign affairs, and ambassador to France and Germany. He sat largely on the sidelines under Ben Ali, serving for a few years in parliament, including as president of the chamber of deputies, but retiring from active politics in 1994. Untainted by close association with Ben Ali and with his notable experience in government, Essebsi was named interim prime minister after the uprising, leading the country to the October 2011 elections.

Essebsi, as a result, has been able to gain the trust of many conservative or centrist Tunisians who look for an alternative to Ennahda. He deliberately plays up his association with Bourguiba, who was militantly secular and championed the most progressive personal status code in the Arab world, recognizing rights for women almost equal to men's. In his speeches, Essebsi represents the Bourguiba period as Tunisia's golden age, glossing over the fact that the country in that period was dominated by a single party and that civil and political liberties were seriously curtailed. Instead, Essebsi stresses the "modernist" and secular character of the regime. Tunisians worried about the rise of Ennahda have responded readily to this glorification of Bourguibism.

The centrality of Essebsi's role was crucial to the rise of Nida Tounes, but it could also be its downfall. He is 86-year old and it is not clear whether he could or would want to be the party's presidential candidate. His second in command, Secretary-General Tayyib Baccouche, is not the commanding figure necessary to keep together an inchoate coalition of secularists, conservatives, liberals and former members of Ben Ali's RCD. A former professor of linguistics, he gives speeches that are more intellectual than political and leave listeners to wonder about the political message. Thus, the decline of Nida Tounes could be as rapid as its rise, with the organization fragmenting as the secular opposition did previously. Already, signs of divisions are appearing. Not all secular parties have rallied to Nida Tounes, despite their low level of support indicated by public opinion surveys. Furthermore, on April 12, six small political parties, funded by former members of Ben Ali's RCD and claiming to be pursuing Bourguiba's nationalist and modernist project, announced the formation of a new Constitutional Front. The new organization is difficult to distinguish from Nida Tounes in terms of its orientation.

Ennahda is a much more structured, coherent organization than Nida Tounes, but it, too, is beginning to show signs of strain as the practical challenges of governing create a tension between pragmatism and principles. Ideologically, under the guidance of Chairman Rachid

Ghannouchi, the organization has long embraced the idea that the principles of democracy are not in conflict but actually complement those of Islam. Indeed, Ennahda was certainly more committed to democracy than was the Ben Ali regime, which in 1991 unleashed a wave of repression against the organization, imprisoning its leaders or sending them into exile. But Ennahda is also an Islamist party, and this creates tensions not only between secular Tunisians and Ennahda but also within Ennahda itself: how far is Ennahda willing to embrace principles of civil and political rights derived from the Western tradition and now deemed to be universal, and how much will it insist that Islamic principles be respected? It has become quite clear that Ennahda's position on such difficult issue is neither clear-cut nor monolithic. Rather, the organization is divided and positions are evolving.

Divisions within the leadership of Ennahda forced the party to postpone its long-announced congress until July 2012 in order to renew the leadership after its years of exile and imprisonment. The congress exposed the divisions rather than solve them – the party's leadership includes moderates as well as individuals who some deem Salafis. Rachid Ghannouchi, who had expressed the desire to step down as party chairman and return to his religious studies, agreed to stay on although for a curtailed two-year term. He appears to be playing a crucial role as arbiter in the organization and this makes him unpopular with secular Tunisians, who simply do not trust him and accuse him of doublespeak. Indeed, in a recent opinion poll, 30 percent of respondents expressed approval for Ghannouchi while 57 percent expressed disapproval, putting him second behind the leader of the extreme left Hama Hammami in terms of disapproval. Many Tunisians consider him the leader of the radical wing of Ennahda, with positions close to those of the Salafis. This writer's conclusion, based on several meetings over a period of two years, is that Ghannouchi is not a radical, but that as an Islamic theologian, he needs to find a root in Islam for all reforms that the party embraces. He is also trying to mediate among different currents in the party. As a result, his statements often come across as opaque and ambiguous.

Ghannouchi's positions are difficult to characterize clearly. He speaks openly of the need to dismantle the Bourguiba model, which the secular opposition interprets as his intention to do away with the secular state. Pressed on this point, Ghannouchi explains that what needs to be dismantled in Bourguiba's authoritarian model, not secularism. In fact, he has endorsed the Constituent Assembly's decision not to embed *shari'a* in the new constitution either as "the" source of legislation or "a" source of legislation. This means Tunisia will remain the only Arab country with a constitution that does not mention *shari'a* – even the Iraqi constitution written under American tutelage does so. However, Ghannouchi dismisses the decision not to embed *shari'a* in the constitution as not very significant – a general reference to *shari'a*, he argues, means nothing since there are so many interpretations of *shari'a*. Adding to the confusion about his position, Ghannouchi has been extremely tolerant of Tunisian Salafis, who are proving to be violent and intolerant and have made no effort to integrate into the legal political process. His justification is that they are misguided children who need to be led back to true Islam and that Ennahda must not treat them the way Ben Ali treated Ennahda. Similarly, he has dismissed calls for Ennahda to take a firm stand against the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LRPs), groups many Tunisians view as a dangerous militia taking orders from Ennahda. Ghannouchi defends the LRPs as local self-protection organizations set up by local communities in the unstable aftermath of the uprising and argues they will disappear as security in the country improves.

Hamadi Jebali, the party's secretary-general and until recently prime minister, is usually seen as the representative of the more pragmatic wing of Ennahda, less impeded by ideological considerations and more attuned to political reality. He is less controversial with the Tunisian public than Ghannouchi—in the survey mentioned earlier, 39 percent of respondents held a favorable view of him, while 49 percent had a negative view. (It is worth mentioning that Tunisians have a negative view of almost all politicians and that the only public figure with a strong positive image is the chief of staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces, Rachid Ammar, who refused orders to suppress demonstrations by force before Ben Ali's overthrow). Jebali's reputation has been enhanced by his resignation in the wake of the assassination on February 6 of Chokri Belaid, a leader of the extreme left and a vocal critic of Ennahda. The assassination, for which much of the opposition blamed directly or indirectly Ennahda, became the catalyst for all discontent with the slow progress of constitution-writing, with a cabinet seen as both incompetent and insufficiently representative, and with what many perceived as Ennahda domination. Jebali suggested defusing the crisis by disbanding the cabinet and replacing it with a government of technical experts backed by all political parties. The party leadership turned down the suggestion—Ghannouchi in an interview with the author even declared that a government of technocrats is against nature, because in a democracy the government must be elected. With his proposal rejected by the party, Jebali resigned as prime minister, although he retained his position as secretary-general of the party and member of its Shura Council. In fact, Ali Laarayedh, the new prime minister, is close to Jebali and endorsed by him. Although Jebali remains part of the Ennahda leadership and can hardly be considered a dissident, his resignation from the cabinet has increased his popularity, and he is now perceived as the head of the moderate wing of Ennahda, in contrast to Ghannouchi.

Divisions within Ennahda are real, although it is not altogether clear whether Ghannouchi belongs to the radical group or is the arbiter. But as long as Ennahda maintains the plurality of support, thus control over the government, it is unlikely to split. Typically, parties in power do not divide—it is opposition parties, particularly those with little support, that tend to split as a result of personal ambitions or ideological differences. Parties in power tend to stay together, even when there are internal divisions. Right now, Nida Tounes faces a much greater challenge than Ennahda in maintaining cohesion and, thus, competitiveness.

The other parties that comprise the Tunisian political spectrum are small. Even the Popular Front, which has at least a distinctive ideological stance, hovers around 10 percent of support, while support for the parties that occupy the space between Nida Tounes and the Popular Front, usually defined vaguely as center-left, is in the single digits. As long as Nida Tounes holds together, the political battle will revolve around the two major parties.

The Issues

Like all Arab countries in the throes of transition, Tunisia is facing an almost endless number of challenges. The economy, while not in free fall, is recovering slowly, hampered by the recession in the European countries that are Tunisia's main trading partners and by the caution of investors in committing to a country still perceived as unstable. The economy grew by 3.6 percent in 2012, according to the World Bank, but unemployment remains at 16.7 percent—it

was 13 percent before the uprising. Security also remains a concern at many different levels. Borders are porous, as they have always been, but the unsettled situation in Libya and Algeria make the problem worse, with fuel being smuggled in openly and arms secretly, and Tunisian food products being smuggled out, driving up domestic prices; domestically, police forces that disappeared from the streets during the uprising are making a comeback, but they are facing growing problems as violent Salafi groups become more active and aggressive (as David Ottaway discusses in his paper, "Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition," Viewpoints No. 25).

Tunisians are deeply concerned about the economic situation and about security, but the issues at the center of the political debate at present are the political ones relating to the writing of the constitution and the forthcoming elections.

Compared to other Arab countries in the throes of revamping their constitutions, Tunisia has by far the best organized and most participatory process. The Constituent Assembly was elected and organized itself into six commissions, each with representation from all parties in proportion to the vote they received. The commissions have consulted – insufficiently the opposition claims – with organizations outside the assembly. As a result of discussions and consultation, the commissions are now in the process of finalizing the third draft of their respective chapters. The entire Constituent Assembly will then discuss each article of the new constitution and vote on it, and no article will be accepted that does not receive at least a simple majority of the votes. The Constituent Assembly will then vote on the constitution as a whole. If it is approved by a two-thirds majority, nothing else is required, but if it does not get the required approval after two attempts, the constitution will be submitted to a popular referendum. Ennahda seems determined to get the two-thirds majority so the constitution will be a consensual rather than divisive document.

As a result, Ennahda has been willing to compromise on many crucial points. Although the opposition has chosen to focus on some of the initial suggestions made by Ennahda in an attempt to show the organization is extremist and bent on taking Tunisia back into the Middle Ages, the most controversial suggestions have been withdrawn. The constitution does not mention *shari'a*, as discussed, but has retained the wording of the Bourguiba 1958 charter concerning Islam. The suggestion that women should be defined as partners of men, which drew a storm of protest, was quickly dropped, and the latest draft recognized full equality of men and women. In other words, the evidence shows that the desire for consensus has prevailed.

Ennahda has even compromised on the choice of political system: it favored a parliamentary system, while the opposition wanted the presidential system to be maintained; the two sides have now agreed on a semi-presidential system, with executive power shared between a president elected by the voters and a prime minister chosen by the parliament and responsible to it. The details of the division of executive power between president and prime minister are still being worked out, however. Not all problems are solved, but the pattern of discussion and compromise has been established.

The downside is that this process of bargaining and fording compromises has been painstakingly slow. The assembly was originally elected for a one-year term and should have

completed its work in October 2012. The present calendar calls for the final discussion and approval of the constitution to take place before the end of July. Elections will then be held between mid-October and mid-December, although it has not been established whether presidential elections will precede the parliamentary ones, or vice versa.

Critics of Ennahda, including Essebsi, have accused it of procrastinating, illegally prolonging the mandate of the Constituent Assembly. Essebsi even states that the Constituent Assembly no longer has a mandate, although he stops short of calling for it to be disbanded. Some critics argue that the Constituent Assembly should not have passed any legislation and just focused on the constitution, but other critics complain that the assembly failed to adopt much-needed legislation. Critics argue that Ennahda still has not issued an election calendar; Ennahda points to the calendar that has been adopted, although not as a law, as some wanted. And, inevitably, accusations are still being traded back and forth about the composition of the Independent High Electoral Commission (ISIE from the French acronym), which critics accuse Ennahda of trying to control in order to manipulate elections.

Beyond Politics

Politics, as it unfolds in democratic countries, is taking roots in Tunisia, with all its positive and negative connotations. On the positive side, there seems to be broad acceptance that all political actors and points of view must be accepted; as a result, most of the secular opposition accepts Ennahda as a legitimate political party – Essebsi in particular goes out of his way to point out that the party has a right to exist even while he attacks it in his speeches. Ennahda is willing to accept both the extreme left and the Salafis, the latter much to the chagrin of the secular opposition. On the negative side, there often appears to be a lack of good will among contending parties, with unfounded or petty accusations being traded, but this lack of good faith does not seem to go beyond what is unfortunately normal in the politics of all countries.

There is still some reluctance on all sides to accept the hard reality that the party that wins elections has more power, in fact is entitled to have more power, than those that lose. The reluctance, not surprisingly, is more evident at present in the stance of the opposition, which accuses Ennahda and the troika of monopolizing power because they control cabinet posts. If Ennahda does not win the plurality in the next elections, it may be its turn to express reservations about majority rule. As long as the political spectrum remains pluralistic and no party dominates, this reluctance will likely dissipate.

This does not mean that the Tunisian transition is out of the danger zone and that democracy is bound to triumph. There is still a threat in Tunisia from the Salafi groups that have opted to remain outside the legal political process. It is difficult to gauge accurately how significant this threat really is. There are armed groups operating in the country, and given the situation in the region, they are probably linked to broader networks that go beyond the country's border. And there is no reliable information about how many Tunisians embrace Salafi or jihadist positions – the commonly used estimate of 10 percent of the population is approximate at best, a guess at worst. And it is not clear how many of so-called Salafis are willing to engage in violence, rather than limiting themselves to a project of reforming the society through *dawa*, or Islamic proselytizing.

But it is clear that many Tunisians are not accepting the political system that is being built through the official political process. And whatever the numbers are now, they could easily increase. There are vast reservoirs of discontent in the country, among youth in general, but also in the interior areas of the country, which were long neglected by both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali governments and have not seen any improvement in their conditions since the uprising.

Thus, while one part of Tunisia appears to be learning democratic politics, another part is still looking for solutions elsewhere, in other ideals and through other means. Encouraging as progress has been in the formal political process, it would be dangerous to ignore the darker side of what has been happening in the country.



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