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Wolf, Anne

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Power Shift in Tunisia

Electoral Success of Secular Parties Might Deepen Polarization

Anne Wolf

Tunisia's main secular party, Nidaa Tounes, emerged as the largest force in the October 2014 parliamentary elections. The party's leader has also a high chance of being elected president in a runoff ballot in late December. The results risk to increase polarization between Islamists and secularists, especially if Nidaa Tounes forms an all-secular government coalition. It might also deepen frictions between the country's marginalized regions and the richer Tunis and coastal belt. Already, the success of Tunisia's main secular party has triggered protests in the poor south, as some people accuse Nidaa Tounes of rejecting more conservative sections of society and criticize its close associations with some former members of Ben Ali's regime and the business sector. These ties and vested interests are likely to make it more difficult to launch structural economic reforms. They also risk to foster alienation, especially among young Tunisians, and might trigger radicalization. Europe should continue to support Tunisia's young democracy with financial aid as well as specific economic and security expertise, and, most importantly, promote cooperation between various ideological forces.

Tunisia held its first post-revolution general parliamentary and presidential elections on October 26 and November 23, 2014. The ballots were classified by international observers as being by and large free and fair, thereby reaffirming the democratic process almost four years after the ouster of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The outcome of the elections implies a major shift in political power, which had been marked by a strong Ennahda party and fragmented secularists since the October 2011 elections, when the Islamists had gained 37 percent of the vote, followed by the secular Congress for the

Republic (CPR) with 8.7 percent and Ettakatol with 7 percent.

The main secular party, Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), emerged as the largest force in this year's parliamentary elections, winning 86 of the 217 seats in the legislature, followed by Ennahda with 69 seats. The parties next in line are the Free Patriotic Union (UPL), which lacks any distinct political orientation, with 16; the leftist Popular Front coalition with 15; and the liberal Afek Tounes with 8 seats. It is striking that all of the secular parties that did well in the 2014 parliamentary elections

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did rather poorly in the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections or did not exist at the time, like Nidaa Tounes. Many Tunisians are longing for a new start. They were disappointed with the former Troika government – a coalition of Ennahda with the CPR and Ettakatol. The CPR gained only four seats while Ettakatol was left without any parliamentary representation at all, as many secular Tunisians reproached both parties for having been co-opted by the Islamists.

The first round of the presidential ballot in November 2014 reaffirmed the success of Nidaa Tounes. Nidaa Tounes' Beji Caid Essebsi came first (39.5 percent), followed by the current interim president, CPR's Moncef Marzouki (33.4 percent). A runoff between both candidates will be held in late December. Essebsi has a high chance of winning, especially because he has the support of the business elite and major media outlets.

Nidaa Tounes, which was formed in mid-2012 by Essebsi – former interim prime minister who was also interior minister under Habib Bourguiba and president of parliament under Ben Ali – has promised to unite secular parties around a “modern democratic project” to counter Ennahda. During the first year of the Troika government, internal fragmentation had weakened secular parties in government and opposition and reinforced the dominance of Ennahda. Therefore, many secular Tunisians were keen to join Nidaa Tounes, including former members of the Ben Ali regime, important businessmen, as well as leftists, trade unionists, independents, and members of the Destourian (constitution) Movement. The Destourian Movement had a central role in the fight for Tunisian independence. Under Bourguiba it took the form of the Neo-Destour and later the Socialist Destour Party, while Ben Ali subsequently established the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), which became primarily an apparatus of patronage and cronyism that had very little to do with the original movement.

In the elections, Nidaa Tounes was able to capitalize on the economic downturn and the emergence of political violence in 2012, which reinforced the perception of many secularists that a major political change was needed to keep the transition on track. Ennahda's perceived dominance following the 2011 elections had led to increasing polarization between Islamists and secularists over the past two years. This came to a head after the assassination of two secular politicians in February and July 2013 by radical Islamists, which fuelled popular protests that summer. The simultaneous coup against the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammed Mursi, former president of Egypt, made many secularists believe that Ennahda could also be forced out of office, but mainly through protests. It thus ultimately strengthened Nidaa Tounes. In fact, the Islamist-led government was forced to resign in January 2014 and a technocratic government took over.

Ennahda did not present or support any presidential candidate in the November elections, because it initially assumed that it had a high chance of becoming the strongest force in parliament and did not want to be perceived as dominating politics once again. In Tunisia's system of government, the president has power in the realm of foreign affairs and defense, whereas most other executive tasks remain with the prime minister. The absence of an Islamist candidate in the presidential elections also explains the relative success of Marzouki, for whom many conservative Tunisians voted, especially in the south and interior regions.

However, Ennahda's success in gaining 69 parliamentary seats in the October 2014 elections – despite broad levels of frustration among the public with the former Troika government – still reaffirms the Islamists as a major force in politics. Ennahda's relative success is partially due to the absence of other important conservative parties as well as to the fact that the Islamists tend to be better organized than any other party, have a strong party platform,

and are represented in all regions. Most importantly, however, the Islamist base had created strong bonds during the decades of repression it suffered under Ben Ali, which has led to a level of unity that secular parties lack. Following the Troika government, moreover, Ennahda was quite successful in convincing its constituency that the Islamists were not able to perform better in government because the opposition did not assume a constructive democratic function but rather boycotted many policies.

Changing Priorities

Tunisia's new political landscape reflects how the priorities of many Tunisians have changed. Whereas in 2011 parties with a track record on human rights, strong identity politics, and a history of anti-Ben Ali militancy did well, in 2014 people elected parties they perceived as being able to solve their economic malaise and security concerns. In early recognition of that, even Ennahda, which had in the past harshly condemned Tunisia's economic elite, integrated important businessmen on their electoral lists – including the head of Syphax Airlines – to create the impression that it would provide better governance than under the Troika government.

An increasing number of Tunisians prefer stability and a strong leadership figure over democracy. An October 2014 Pew survey found that only 48 percent of Tunisians think that democracy is preferable to other kinds of government, compared to 63 percent of Tunisians polled just months after the 2011 revolution. Moreover, 59 percent of the population today prefer a strong leader over a democratic government, as opposed to 37 percent in 2012. General disillusionment with parties and their representatives is also very high: 65 percent of those polled think that “political leaders are only interested in power and personal gain.” Given that many Tunisians have been dissatisfied with the democratic process, only 3.18 million of the 8.4 million eligible voters cast a vote in the first round of presi-

dential elections – about one million less than in the 2011 ballot.

Moreover, more than twice as many Tunisians prefer Nidaa Tounes when presented with a list of parties, compared to when they are being asked in an open question about their political preferences. This signals that many Tunisians voted for Nidaa Tounes for lack of a better alternative rather than because they strongly believe in the party. Many Tunisians, including secular voices, have been especially critical of the age of Essebsi (88) as well as the integration of many former representatives of Ben Ali's regime. Many also resent the quick rise of Essebsi's son, Hafedh, who was initially installed at the head of Nidaa Tounes' list for the electoral district Tunis 1, but later had to resign owing to internal protests, given that he did not have any obvious credentials for this position.

Nidaa Tounes' Options

Nidaa Tounes is the only party capable of forming a government. Too many parties in parliament are categorically opposed to Ennahda, which makes it impossible for the Islamists to assemble a coalition. No party other than Nidaa Tounes has this kind of leverage. However, Nidaa Tounes will need 23 more deputies to achieve an absolute majority in parliament. This presents Nidaa Tounes with two main political options: forming an all-secular coalition, or a broad coalition that includes the Islamists.

An all-Secular Coalition

Nidaa Tounes has already contacted several secular parties and candidates to assess the feasibility of establishing a coalition with them. However, its relations with the second biggest secular party in parliament, the UPL, have remained strained, given the rivalry between the parties' leaders. The UPL is centered around the leadership figure of wealthy Slim Riahi, whose comparatively young age (42 years) and economic success through activities in oil production and

property development in Libya led some Tunisians to believe that he could put Tunisia's economy on the right track. Riahi also has strong financial links to the media and owns a football club, which certainly helped him while campaigning. He describes the UPL as a "modernist, non-ideological" party of the center. The idea of "non-ideological" parties has gained prominence in Tunisia as a strategy to denounce opponents such as the Islamists – and to a lesser degree the far left – as "ideologues," i.e., dangerous radicals with impractical ideas. It is essentially used by secular parties – including not only the UPL but also Nidaa Tounes – to appear pragmatic and rational.

The UPL has promised to rebuild Tunisia's interior regions, generate 422,000 jobs, and eradicate terrorism within six months. Yet it will be unlikely to live up to these promises, not least because of the lack of resources to induce large-scale development and job-creation and the absence of a detailed party program. Riahi, just as Nidaa Tounes' Essebsi, also ran in presidential elections, which increased the political rivalry between both candidates. Since the parliamentary elections, leaders of the UPL have met several times with Ennahda, indicating that Riahi is much more flexible with regard to collaboration with the Islamists than the Popular Front. However, on December 5, Riahi officially endorsed the presidential candidacy of Essebsi for the runoff ballot after an agreement between both parties.

The Popular Front has expressed its openness toward being part of a secular coalition. The alliance of leftists and Arab nationalist parties rose in prominence following the two political assassinations in 2013 – in both cases of Popular Front politicians – and in subsequent prominence while staging anti-regime protests as part of the National Salvation Front, a coalition of secular parties and associations that eventually forced the Troika government to resign.

It is open to a secular coalition despite the fact that many of its members and key

leadership figures deeply resent Nidaa Tounes' integration of former members of Ben Ali's regime. Indeed, many leftists had been harshly persecuted by Ben Ali and subjected to torture. The Popular Front itself was created in October 2012 to overcome the increasingly bipolar political landscape between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, which they perceived as a threat to democratic transition. Working with Nidaa Tounes will therefore be difficult for the Popular Front, but is probably still preferable to being left out of an all-secular coalition. Already in the past, the Popular Front has opted to work with Nidaa Tounes, which it still prefers to Ennahda, in order to "contain Islamism." Significantly, the Popular Front and Nidaa Tounes together led the National Salvation Front – although the alliance broke apart quickly after the Troika government resigned. Being part of the government and formulating concrete policies might also prove difficult for the Popular Front, which has relied more than most parties on criticizing rather than trying to find solutions to Tunisia's post-revolution challenges.

On the other side, Nidaa Tounes' former RCD members, who have become very influential within the party, have reservations over an alliance with the Popular Front, because the latter voted on May 1, 2014, in favor of a political exclusion law, which would have prevented former members of Ben Ali's regime from running for office. This wing also propagates a liberal economic program, which is opposed by Nidaa Tounes' leftists as well as Popular Front members.

By contrast, Afek Tounes is open to joining both a secular government as well as a broad-based government. Its success in the election is owed to a combination of strong business links, its niche ideology in Tunisia, as well as a clearly defined political program. Indeed, most secular parties have positioned themselves on the center or the center-left and failed to deliver a clear party platform. Afek Tounes proposes solutions to terrorism and crime; policies to increase the quality of health services and education;

reforms to Tunisia's top-heavy administration; as well as liberal economic policies. An alliance with Afek Tounes could be the basis for a broad coalition dominated by Nidaa Tounes, whose liberal wing is strongly represented in parliament, as well as the Islamists, who also tend to advocate economic liberalism.

A Broad Coalition

A broad coalition would include all major political forces. The option was already presented in the form of a national unity government prior to the 2011 elections by Ennahda, the CPR, and Ettakatol, but it failed to resonate widely among other secular parties. The latter did not believe that secularists and Islamists could work together and maintained that Ennahda would anyway try to dominate politics. As a result, a smaller coalition between secularists and Islamists was realized in the Troika government.

In contrast, a close working relationship between Islamists and Nidaa Tounes would indeed prove difficult. Many members of Ennahda regard Nidaa Tounes as counter-revolutionary and part of the old regime, which committed torture and other human rights violations against the Islamists and other political opponents. Nidaa Tounes, on the other hand, was essentially created to counter the Islamists. Many of its members also accuse Ennahda of complicity with violent Salafists. Working side by side in a unity government would also risk alienating members of both parties, especially at the base. This is likely to be more severe in the case of Nidaa Tounes, whose members have often little more in common than their anti-Islamist stance. By contrast, over the past years Ennahda has been able to retain a certain degree of unity and support even after taking positions that were fiercely criticized by its base, such as when it voted against the political exclusion law.

In the eyes of some Nidaa Tounes members, Ennahda's vote against political exclusion makes them a potentially more reliable

partner than the Popular Front, which voted against it. On December 5, Nidaa Tounes voted in favor of Ennahda's Abdelfattah Mourou as vice-president of parliament, sidelining the Popular Front's candidate.

A broad coalition would still be preferable in both parties to a narrow Nidaa Tounes-Ennahda coalition, which would theoretically also be feasible but certainly alienate even more party members. Before the elections, leaders of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes engaged in a sort of preemptive coalition negotiation, which was strongly criticized by members of both parties. The latter suspected that a "secret pact" was formed between their leaders: with Nidaa Tounes promising to not prosecute Islamists for crimes they may have committed in the past, while in turn Ennahda would not pursue former Ben Ali affiliates. To the frustration of many party members, in practice this deal has already been realized to a certain extent: the vast majority of senior members of the Ben Ali regime were set free from prison and a decreasing number of Nidaa Tounes' members have called for the Egyptian scenario – especially once the new leadership in Cairo had not only cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood, but on all opposition.

Although a broad coalition would be the lesser evil to a narrow coalition for many members of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, forming it might prove difficult because some smaller secular parties would most likely be opposed to joining it. The Popular Front in particular, which is arguably even more critical of Ennahda than Nidaa Tounes, would probably not be willing to join a government in which the Islamists participate, not least because many of its members hold Ennahda responsible for the 2013 assassinations.

Even though there is a risk that a broad coalition would be inefficient, in the case of Tunisia it could help to decrease polarization between Islamists and secularists, which would be a milestone for Tunisia's young democracy. Indeed, polarization is a

key threat to instability in Tunisia, and decreasing it is a precondition for promoting economic growth and undermining security challenges.

Key Disputes and Challenges

Tensions might be aggravated if Essebsi wins the presidential elections, which could foster the perception of an all-dominant Nidaa Tounes. This might promote polarization between secularists and Islamists, many of whom are afraid that Nidaa Tounes might limit their freedoms. Supporters of Moncef Marzouki, a human rights activist and former head of the CPR, maintain that Essebsi entertains a polarizing discourse. They particularly reject Essebsi's accusation that Marzouki voters are Islamists and radical Salafis. This has already led to some protests in the marginalized south of the country, where people tend to be more conservative – foreshadowing the extent of instability that a Nidaa Tounes-led government might trigger if it is perceived as being exclusive and opposed to more traditional sections of society.

Indeed, in socioeconomic terms, most people in Tunisia are worse off than before the revolution, especially in the marginalized interior regions and the south. Almost 60 percent of Tunisians now describe the economic situation as very bad, compared to 20 percent polled in September 2011. Most politicians attribute the economic downturn to a decrease in foreign investment and the number of tourists coming to Tunisia. However, an important factor is that corruption in Tunisia has most probably increased since the revolution and that many of the patronage structures that were established under Ben Ali have been reinforced rather than dismantled. In 2014, the Corruption Perception Index ranked Tunisia 79 out of 177 countries – a drop from place 59 just before the revolution.

In the scenario of a broad coalition that includes the Islamists, a key risk is that the suspected “pact” between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes would prevent structural eco-

omic reforms and rather reinforce the crony capitalist structures established under Ben Ali, thereby further marginalizing the country's interior regions.

As many people struggle to make ends meet, they have become alienated by what they see as ideological battles taking place in politics. An increasing number of Tunisians have thus been withdrawing from politics, while some have become drawn to more destructive forms of opposition, such as Salafi jihadism. Fearing that if Essebsi were to become president, he might further alienate conservative sections of society, Ennahda released a statement on November 27 calling upon Essebsi to remain neutral and avoid dividing Tunisians along religious and regional lines. At the same time, Ennahda itself might contribute to the alienation of conservative Muslims if it appears to be too compromising toward former Ben Ali figures and corrupt businessmen.

Essebsi's presidency would arguably not be in the interest of Nidaa Tounes. Indeed, to date, Essebsi has been Nidaa Tounes' unifying figurehead, capable of keeping the party's diverse ideological currents relatively united. However, as a president, Essebsi would have to abandon all his party responsibilities. This would risk creating disunity among the diverse ideological currents within Nidaa Tounes and could, in the worst case, even lead to the implosion of the party.

Tunisia Needs an Evenhanded Europe

Europe, and especially Germany, should reaffirm their explicit support for Tunisia while remaining realistic about the various challenges the young democracy is facing. In that respect, the EU should be careful when presenting Tunisia as a “model” of a successful democratic transition. It is true that Tunisia represents a lot of hope for many people in the region. But the narrative of the model should not lead Europeans to gloss over difficulties and to downplay the extent of support the EU should still provide.

On the economic side, the EU should continue to encourage investment in the marginalized regions in the interior of the country and reinforce its financial support. It should also reiterate the need for structural economic reforms. Many of the patronage networks established under Ben Ali are still in place and reinforce the marginalization of broad segments of the population. Dismantling these structures of cronyism are key to fostering inclusive economic growth. That might prove difficult, given that all major parties have strengthened their ties to the business elite. It would therefore be reasonable to tie financial aid from Europe to structural economic reforms and concrete measures to curb corruption. In this vein, Europeans should pursue their projects that Germany, for example, had planned to carry out together with the Ministry to Fight Corruption and Promote Good Governance before the latter was abolished earlier this year. The projects, including the establishment of a joint good governance academy, should still be pursued, preferably within an independent framework.

Europe should also help Tunisia to reform and strengthen its security sector. This is especially important because up to 3,000 Tunisians are said to have joined the so-called Islamic State in the war in Syria and Iraq, which may create a security problem upon their return to Tunisia. In addition, the security crisis in Libya is a major challenge for Tunisia, especially because the vast border between both countries is impossible to control, despite recent efforts to increase army patrols and surveillance. Tunisian and Libyan jihadis have prepared joint attacks in Tunisia. The security forces in Tunisia are ill-equipped and -trained to deal with these people and would welcome more external expertise from Europe. At the same time, the EU should try to ensure that any responses to violent Islamists are in conformity with human rights and not used to justify a wider crackdown on conservative Muslims (for details see SWP

Comments 53/2014 by Christian Mölling and Isabelle Werenfels).

Lastly, the EU should reaffirm its willingness to remain a strong and evenhanded partner. In that respect, it should be careful to refrain from being more lenient toward transgressions of human rights that might be committed in the future by secular parties in government. A priority should be to foster dialogue and cooperation between various ideological forces. These actions should go beyond focusing on the main parties, but should also include smaller political forces and civil society, with the objective of improving coexistence and cooperation between all Tunisians. Europeans should offer to support dialogue fora of various sorts, choose inclusive approaches in projects they fund, and back local mediators in cases of political crisis and ideological or regional polarization, which will most certainly reoccur.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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