



Pre-election Analysis

TUNISIA

A pre-election primer: Part 2 – Public disillusionment and the electoral campaign

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It is electoral campaign season in Tunisia. After overthrowing their president and enduring ten long months of uncertainty and political and constitutional limbo, Tunisians are at last to get the chance to put their political transition back on track. On October 23rd they will elect the assembly charged with converting their revolutionary will for change into the institutions of a new Tunisian republic.

Given such auspicious circumstances, one could be forgiven for expecting a wave of national enthusiasm and excitement. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Tunisians enrolled to vote? Barely a majority¹. Public interest in the elections? Relatively low². Public knowledge of the candidates and parties? Even less. Apart from the official billboards located in every town square - on which parties are allowed to display two small campaign posters - it wouldn't be hard to overlook the fact that a campaign is taking place. Newspaper headlines speak of anything but. Even the television and radio are empty of election ads. How is it then that Tunisians' enthusiasm for politics - apparently so intense at the beginning of the year - has nosedived so sharply, and this despite the careful preparation of the country's first real chance at free and fair elections?

In this second part of our pre-election analysis, we look at the reasons for Tunisians' disillusionment and why the campaign is failing to arouse enthusiasm for the decisive political process ahead. For details of the electoral process itself and the political consequences of the electoral framework of these elections, refer to the first part of this analysis.

Ten months is a long time for revolutionaries

One of the first reasons for many Tunisians' disillusionment, is the (too?) long wait between toppling Ben Ali (Jan 14th) and the chance to have a say in determining their country's future (Oct 23rd). In the early days, in accordance with the constitution, Tunisians were promised presidential elections within a two-month timeframe. Consensus from most parties dictated however, that this was insufficient time for credible political parties and personalities to mobilise, so they were put off and, once the constitution had been revoked, changed to constituent assembly elections. After much toing and froing and no little public protest, these were scheduled for July 24th, only then to be delayed again at the insistence of the commission charged with organizing them. The paradox is that although the elections have been postponed in each case so as to guarantee their fairness, the public has reacted with increasing scepticism.

Their impatience is a natural corollary of the high expectations and outpouring of emotions in the first months of the year. But revolutions are complex, protracted affairs that do not end as soon as the Bastille is stormed. In the long months since

¹ Tunisians initially had between July 11th and August 2nd to register to vote but despite an advertising and education campaign, turnout to do so was extremely low. In an attempt to remedy the situation, the deadline was subsequently extended until August 14th by which time 3,882,727 Tunisians or 55% of the potential electorate had enrolled. Given this failure, the ISIE then decided to allow all adults to vote using their ID cards, regardless of enrollment.

² Repeated opinion polls show lack of knowledge and uncertainty about the elections. In May, less than half of those surveyed by the International Foundation for Election Systems could identify the election as a constituent assembly election. See: <http://www.ifes.org/Content/Publications/Survey/2011/Tunisia-Voter-Registration-and-Voter-Confidence-Assessment-Survey.aspx>.

In late September, a poll funded by the German foundation institute Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung in collaboration with several Tunisian news media outlets found that 51% of those surveyed did not care about politics. cf <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/09/29/opinion-poll-for-constituent-assembly-elections/>

January 14th, there has been ongoing dissension between those favouring an orderly transition and those for an immediate *tabula rasa*. And while from an outsider's perspective it is fortunate that the former have prevailed, many Tunisians view the delay with overwhelming suspicion. Some worry that time works against the aims of the revolution, others that it gives members of the *Ancien Régime* time to regroup. Still others believe that the interim government's lack of radical action conceals a determination to hinder the revolution - when in reality its interim nature precludes it from doing anything but act as a caretaker.

Too many politicians - not enough leaders

The second reason for Tunisians' disillusionment is a seemingly paradoxical one: their lack of credible leaders. Paradoxical because Tunisia, at the time of writing, counts an extraordinary 117 political parties - all but eight of which have been authorized since Ben Ali's overthrow. After it liberalized the relevant procedures, the Interior Ministry was assailed with demands for legalization from all and sundry: some genuine (parties never authorized under Ben Ali or ambitious new groups) but the vast majority pointless (like the multiple tiny associations, single-issue parties, self-seeking individuals and opportunists who have created parties without platforms and who are now besieging Tunisians with unrealistic campaign promises). If this were not enough, the public is also faced with thousands of so-called 'independents' - some unionists or civil society activists, others aspiring politicians who have fallen out with their parties over their positions on electoral lists, while still others are members of the *Ancien Régime* now repositioning themselves. The result of this explosion of candidates is overwhelming: with 1,570 lists and more than 11,000 candidates, many Tunisians are logically confused. In a constituency like Ariana on the outskirts of the capital Tunis, voters have a staggering 95 lists to choose from.

Even so, confusion is a lesser evil and can be remedied, as parties and candidates are striving to do during this election campaign. More worrying is the fact that far from quenching a public thirst for politicians, this proliferation doesn't satisfy any popular demand. Many Tunisians complain that although they are spoiled for choice, they don't feel represented by anyone. They see with similar scepticism both the parties that existed under Ben Ali, like the PDP, Ettajdid or Ettakatol, and the new-arrivals. Polls show that over half the population support no political party³. Privately many worry that the lack of leadership augurs badly for the future.

All in all and given the circumstances, these are probably just teething problems. Long decades of dictatorship decimated any attempt at forming alternative poles of leadership in Tunisia and it will no doubt take time for credible leaders to emerge. The Constituent Assembly is the ideal place for this to happen. Nor should it be forgotten that the election itself should sort out the plethora of candidates and parties. The vast majority of the parties competing in these elections stand little to no chance of making it into the Assembly and following the elections many will be forced to merge or face oblivion.

³ This according to one of the last opinion polls published before the elections, that of 3 September carried out by the Institut des sondages et du traitement de l'information statistique (ISTIS) in collaboration with the TAP press agency. cf. http://www.tap.info.tn/fr/images/repertoire/images_articles/20110109_Rapport%20Sondage%20situation%20politique_VF.pdf

An uninspiring campaign

The third and final major reason behind many Tunisians' disinterest is the nature of the campaign itself. Given both the historic nature of the elections and the sheer number of rival lists - it is surprising just how lacklustre it is proving. But instead of being a problem of motivation - either on the part of the candidates (some of whom are leading energetic, if amateur campaigns) or of the public (who display a striking level of politeness and curiosity when approached by campaigners) - in this case the problem stems from the strict legislation restricting the campaign. Intended to ensure the fairest possible elections and prevent those with resources out-campaigning those without, the ultimate result is stifling and counter-productive. Party propaganda around city streets is strictly forbidden - the few official wooden billboards are the only areas allowed. Snappy campaign ads on television or radio are similarly forbidden - instead Tunisian media broadcast hour after hour of mind-numbing 3 minute slots allocated to each and every list. And the news media's parameters are rigidly defined too: no partial coverage of the campaign is permitted; no articles or reports commending or disparaging a party's campaign; no interviews between foreign journalists and candidates⁴. Given all this, it will hardly be surprising if the media coverage fails to motivate any undecided voters to get out and vote.

And that, to conclude, is one of the real question marks hanging over these elections. Just how many Tunisians will ultimately turn out to vote? If they do so massively these elections will constitute a turning point in a transition towards democracy, as well as another tremendous precedent for the wider Arab world. If they do not, or if - and it is unlikely - they are mired in fraud, they could also be a turning point, but in a transition towards something far less positive. This too would have repercussions for the Arab spring.

⁴ Foreign media are forbidden from interviewing candidates, restricting coverage by international news channels like Al Jazeera that are more popular and trusted than local news sources.