The streets, the ballot box and consensus: high-stakes elections in Tunisia

By Hamza Meddeb

■ Executive summary

The October 2014 parliamentary elections will be crucial for Tunisia. The political polarisation that began in the streets between the Islamists of Ennahda and the parties rooted in the old regime could be confirmed in the polling booth. The fierceness of any ensuing conflicts is likely to be commensurate with the issues: access to state resources, the consolidation of electoral bases and the strengthening of political footholds across the country with a view to the next elections. Negotiations on forming a stable coalition government will be as decisive as the vote result itself. Only a consensus on forming a government of national unity will allow for the rehabilitation of the political process and the consolidation of the transition to democracy.

On October 26th 2014 just over 5 million Tunisian voters will elect their 217 representatives in a vote that will be crucial in more ways than one in the transition to democracy. Firstly, there is the risk of massive voter abstention, which would reflect Tunisians' disenchantment with the political process and political parties' failure to mobilise electors who are discouraged by the slow pace of changes and the crisis into which the country has slid. Secondly, Tunisians will be voting in a political context of polarisation between the Islamist movement Ennahda and an opposition grouping led by the Nidaa Tunis (Call of Tunisia) movement that is part of the secular movement that comprises figures and networks linked to the old regime and certain business sectors. The risks of destabilising the democratic transition process are so great that how the winners of this vote handle their victory will be as critical as the electoral verdict itself. In a broader sense, these elections are part of a political process that is playing out as much in the streets and at the ballot box as at the negotiating table.

Elections, abstention and rehabilitating the political process

Far from falling within a pre-set political time frame, the organising of the elections constitutes the final phase of the roadmap negotiated between the political parties, one of the high points of which was the adoption of the

country's new constitution in January 2014. Rather than the product of a shared vision of the country's future, the consensus reached results more from a balance of power that found in the polls a way to settle an acute political crisis triggered by the July 2013 assassination of Member of Parliament Mohamed Brahmi. Faced with wide-scale protests that lasted for two years, the Ennahda party had to turn the reins of government over to a team of technocrats in exchange for the holding of elections before the end of 2014.

The pragmatism of the Tunisian Islamists certainly lies in targeting this vote as a step towards consolidating their integration into the political system. The Ennahda party agreed to relinquish power because it was unable to continue to lead a country that had become ungovernable owing to its slide into an economic and security crisis, the crumbling of popular support, the weakening of support from foreign partners and funders and, above all, the shifting of the conflict with the opposition from the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) to the streets. For its part, the secular opposition led by Nidaa Tunis, which for months had limited itself to denouncing "Ennahda's nascent dictatorship" and calling for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly born of the October 2011 elections, was unable to impose itself through street-level activism. Without being the product of a convergence of political viewpoints, the organisation of this vote thus constitutes

a pragmatic solution reached by parties seeking to avoid a zero-sum political game – an outcome likely to spare Tunisia an Egyptian-type scenario.

Furthermore, the October 26th vote constitutes a test of public participation and an opportunity to rehabilitate the political process. The forming of a crisis-exit government was accompanied by the glorifying of technocrats presented as competent, apolitical and able to meet Tunisians' demands for reforms. These figures were portrayed as being the only ones able to respond to the various social and economic challenges, stand above partisan divisions and interests, and create a vision adapted to the challenges posed by the transition and to the people's aspirations. In reality, the spreading of this discourse rested largely on marginalising the popular demands made by the social movement that was behind the fall of the dictatorship, as well as by restricting public debate to a binary vision between "Islamism" and "modernity", leading progressively to disaffection with the political process among a portion of the general public. The resulting exasperation contributed to an anti-political (Schedler, 1997), hostile, negative view being disseminated in the political arena among the media, civil society and even the political class – a view supporting the arguments of those who have an overwhelming nostalgia for the Ben Ali dictatorship and defenders of an authoritarian restoration. Thus, the extent of voter participation will be a key indicator with respect to the rehabilitation of the political process and the public playing a central role in the transition to democracy.

The polls and the electoral weight of parties rooted in the old regime

Because the NCA did not adopt the political exclusion bill, the upcoming elections will see the participation of personalities and networks rooted in the old hegemonic party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), which ruled during the Ben Ali dictatorship. Thus, knowing the electoral weight of these parties is one of the key issues of the impending vote. In the absence of transitional justice – deferred until the post-election period – Ennahda and its allies are counting on voters to sanction them and whatever vague intentions they may have to return to business via the polls. For their part, the Neo-Destour parties are seeking to draw support from those disappointed with the two Ennahda governments' poor performance and those dissatisfied because of the socioeconomic crisis and, more generally, to benefit from the sense of concern caused by the security situation and the weakening of the state. With the backing of much of the business sector, these parties are stressing their knowledge of how the state runs, their administrative and political experience, and their ability to get things going again. While able to unite the street opposition to the Ennhada-led governments, these parties rooted in the old regime are nonetheless disorganised

heading into the elections. The RCD's dissolution in 2011 following a judicial ruling resulted in the scattering of its partisan and patronage networks that had been firmly embedded in the state administration and created a rivalry among them worsened by their leaders' personal ambitions.

The issue in the upcoming vote is not simply acquiring electoral legitimacy to govern for the next five years. The winner will have access to resources to reward its militants and consolidate its electoral bases and its political foothold throughout the country. The experience of the Ennahda governments following the October 2011 elections has been double-edged: it has shown the importance of state control during this transition period but, at the same time, has demonstrated the limits of exercising power. Much of the electorate is more interested in greater redistribution, better access to public sector jobs and more economic opportunities than in purely ideological considerations. Certainly, the Islamist movement has benefitted from its passage to power to reward its supporters, but in doing so has cut itself off from a portion of electors who voted for it in 2011 and have not benefitted from state largesse.[1] The make-up of Ennahda's electoral lists, which include businessmen and candidates with profiles more in keeping with the modernist segments of the population, reveals a party as much concerned with polishing its image, pursuing its moderate line and continuing its shift towards a conservative model as with profiting from its candidates' prominence to aim beyond its traditional electorate.

The future of the transition process: between conflict and consensus

The negotiations phase that will form a post-election government coalition is essential to the success of the democratic transition. The partisan groups continue to proclaim their commitment to the principle of consensus without, however, identifying the specific means to implement it after the vote and at the risk of limiting it to a simple profession of faith. While ensuring representation in the National Assembly of a large number of parties and movements, the voting method will not help to obtain a government majority but, instead, promotes the fragmentation and dispersal of votes. Although the Ennahda movement says it is in favour of a government of national unity, its detractors do not seem to share this view, arguing that it is incompatible with their social projects. Certainly, the party that wins at the polls will have a decided advantage with regard to forming a coalition government, but the danger of polarisation between Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis in the face of the marginalisation of the small parties will present them with a difficult choice between joining forces, at the risk of alienating part of their respective electorates, and opposing one another and thereby jeopardising the chances of forming a stable majority.

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1   In the October 23rd 2011 election the Ennahda party won 37.04% of the vote and 89 seats, followed by the Congrès pour la République (the party of the country's president, Moncef Marzouki), with 8.71% of the vote and 29 seats.

The future of the democratic transition will definitely depend on the level of consensus that can be reached on the key questions of governing jointly and the scope of the coalition that will support and implement this consensus. Voting arithmetic can legitimately produce a majority – even a simple 51% majority – but is not enough to satisfy the imperatives of the key step now being taken in Tunisia. Certainly, identity and societal issues have been dealt with in the constitution, preventing ideological hegemony from being exercised by any one party. However, the upcoming political agenda – the presidential and municipal elections, and the Decentralisation Act – together with economic and security issues (the battle against unemployment, the budget deficit, the national debt, inflation, the fight against terrorism) will require a broad consensus that encompasses the political parties, employer organisations and, of course, unions. Division and confrontation are to be expected because the losers, unless they are included through consensus and cooperative effort, will seek to move the conflict into the streets in order to change the post-vote balance of power.

Following the vote, a fierce confrontation between the opposition and the majority, whoever the protagonists are, will imperil the transition to democracy and plunge the country into uncertainty. In fact, an Ennahda victory – in which it leads a government coalition that replicates the experience of the governments between 2011 and 2013 – might trigger virulent opposition from the secularist parties and mistrust among neighbouring regimes, notably Algeria, which would look unfavourably on Islamists winning power in Tunisia for the next five years, given the risk of a spillover effect. On the other hand, a victory by Nidaa Tunis, which in taking power would exclude its Islamist rival, would raise the threat of a return to authoritarian rule through the emergence of a dominant party. In short, this would constitute an electoral coup d'état that would evoke a remake of the Egyptian scenario at the polling booth. Therefore, reaching a consensus on forming a government of national unity is absolutely essential not only for government stability, but also – and above all – in order to consolidate the democratic transition process.

Reference

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