

## Tunisia Between the Elections in 2014

*Martin Beck*

**News:**

In a way unprecedented in the Arab Middle East, on October 26, 2014, Tunisians caused the electoral defeat of the party that had won the first free elections three years ago, thereby paving the way for the establishment of a government that will be led by a secular party. With Presidential elections to follow in November 2014, Tunisia appears to be a lighthouse of democratic transition in the Arab World and beyond.

**Keywords:**

Tunisia, Transition, "Arab Spring".

**Summary:**

The present article analyzes the Tunisian Parliamentary elections in the light of a new political diversity, which has been a major feature of the Middle East since the Arab Uprisings in 2010/11. A comparison between recent political developments in Egypt and Tunisia respectively shows how much more advanced Tunisia is in terms of the democratization. Yet, also in Tunisia many obstacles are yet to be removed from the way to a successful transition process.

**Analysis:***Tunisian development and political diversity in the Arab Middle East*

Currently, media coverage on the Arab world is dominated by reports on civil war situations in Syria, Iraq and Libya and the attempts of the Islamic State to establish a “caliphate.” Against this background, the peaceful democratic elections in Tunisia on October 26, 2014, pale in the minds of many observers of the Arab Middle East. However, in light of the paradigm of Middle Eastern Exceptionalism—the Middle East is the only world region on which none of the major waves of democratization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a major impact—it is to be considered a real milestone that Tunisia witnessed two regular free and democratic Parliamentary elections in a row. Moreover, for the first time in Arab history, a new government was elected in a peaceful, democratic way: The government headed by Ennahda had, as a result of the first elections after the Tunisian Revolution on October 23, 2011, stepped down in January 2014 in order to pave the way for the establishment of a technocratic interim government and to hold early elections under the new constitution. On the day after the October 2014 elections, when still only few results had been released, the head of Ennahda, Rashid al-Ghannushi, called Beji Caid el Sebsi, the leader of Nidaa Tounes, to congratulate him with his victory over Ennahda.<sup>1</sup>

When putting Tunisia’s political development after the Uprisings of 2010/11 in a regional context, recent Tunisian elections prove that—as a result of the “Arab Spring”—an unprecedented political diversity of the Arab world has emerged. Up to the Tunisian Revolution, the Arab political systems in general were characterized by consolidated authoritarian regimes. Nowadays we find an unprecedented variety of political systems: Bashar al-Assad’s regime, which for decades seemed stable, is heavily challenged by an opposition who in the course of the uprisings in Syria turned increasingly authoritarian—and, with the territorial expansion of the Islamic State: oppressive itself. Libya after Muammar Gaddafi increasingly appears to be in danger of becoming a “failed state”; in Egypt a transition process had been aborted or at least interrupted, when the military as a protagonist of the “*ancien régime*”—an appropriate term

---

<sup>1</sup> Carlotta Gall, Islamist party in Tunisia concedes to secularists, *New York Times*, October 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/world/africa/nidaa-tounes-ennahda-tunisian-parliamentary-election.html>.

(only) if we still consider the Egyptian uprisings of 2010/11 as “revolutionary”—took over power by a coup in July 2013.<sup>2</sup> Amman and Rabat responded to the Arab Spring by accelerating a reform process, which, particularly in Jordan, however, hardly exceeds the limits of cosmetics if analyzed in more depth. Last but not least, notwithstanding some differences between them, the leaderships of the Gulf monarchies hardly make an effort to even claim substantial reform processes. In contrast to that, Tunisia appears to be on the path of genuine transition despite rather unfavorable economic conditions and a *kulturkampf* like situation between Islamists and Secularists.

#### *Similarities and dissimilarities between developments in Tunisia and Egypt*

Anti-Islamist actors replaced Islamist governments in Egypt in 2013 and one year later in Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> However, although outcomes are similar, the means how they were achieved vary: a military coup versus democratic elections. How can this difference be explained?

A major institutional difference between the current political systems of Egypt and Tunisia respectively is that the military in Egypt is much politicized and enjoys a high degree of economic and political autonomy. In contrast, as one of the legacies of the *ancien régime* in Tunis, the military in Tunisia is depoliticized and does not control financial means beyond access to the civil administration.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite the fact that both the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party and Ennahda share some ideological ideas rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, there are significant differences in their capabilities and readiness to compromise with liberal and secular forces. As Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz show, the genuine acceptance of non-Islamist actors was already part of the ideology of

---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Beck 2013: The July 2013 military coup in Egypt. One normative clarification and some empirical issues, *Resource Center of the Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark*, <http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles//A/D/3/%7BAD3D4AD4-2CE1-4C46-90ED-81FDD82DF7B3%7DMB0913.pdf>; Mervat Hatem 2013: The debate on the July 2013 military coup in Egypt. It is about much more than the definition of a coup (Part I), <http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles//3/2/3/%7B32343A2D-841B-4B69-954B-674C41C8CF6D%7DMH1013.pdf>; Mervat Hatem 2013: The debate on the July 2013 military coup in Egypt. It is about much more than the definition of a coup (Part II), <http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles//3/7/B/%7B37BCEEAA-C02D-4EA0-94DC-3C3F70F67C35%7DMH1113.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ennahda refrained from putting a candidate for the Presidential elections in November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Zoltan Barany 2011: The role of the military, *Journal of Democracy* 22(4), 27.

Ennahda when it was legalized in March 2011, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt back then still stuck to its highly undemocratic platform of the 2007 elections.<sup>5</sup> Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi pushed through a new constitution by hastily setting up a referendum in December 2012, whereas Ghannushi successfully opted for a painstaking bargaining process with the secularist opposition, in the course of which Ennahda accepted many far-reaching compromises, before the constitution was finally adopted in January 2014.<sup>6</sup>

We do know much more about the ideological differences between Morsi and Ghannushi and their parties than about those of the new political strongmen in Egypt and Tunisia, Abdul Fatah al-Sisi and Sebsi. Both of the latter were members of the establishment of the old authoritarian regime. However, since political procedures often shape political socialization and convictions, there are good reasons to assume that Sebsi and his party will be more inclusive towards Islamists than Sisi and his entourage: For Sisi elections were just a manipulative instrument to gain some legitimacy of a reign he seized by force, whereas for Sebsi democratic elections were a genuine means for empowerment. Still, the future government headed by Nidaa Tounes has yet to prove its democratic maturity, firstly by respecting the democratic rights of Ennahda as the major opposition party (unless a unity government will be formed). Secondly, as thus far mainly the process of electing the government has been democratized but many state institutions haven't been so, and a major task of the new legislative period is to narrow down the gap between the standards of the new constitution and constitutional reality.

*The normative dimension: Are there democrats and if so, who are they?*

As Monica Marks argues in a convincing way, it would be highly misleading to assess the Tunisian Parliamentary elections on the basis of a dichotomy between "enlightened secularists versus backwards Islamists."<sup>7</sup> When the

---

<sup>5</sup> Alred Stepan and Juan J. Linz 2013: Democratization theory and the "Arab Spring," *Journal of Democracy* 24(2), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Monica L. Marks 2014: Convince, coerce, or compromise? Ennahda's approach to Tunisia's constitution, *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 10, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/02/10%20ennahda%20tunisia%20constitution%20marks/ennahda%20approach%20tunisia%20constitution%20english.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Monica Marks, The Tunisian election result isn't simply a victory for secularism over Islamism. The battle between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda is more complex than enlightened secularists versus

criterion of democratic inner structure is applied, Ennahda even appears to be much more advanced than Nidaa Tounes.<sup>8</sup>

To put it differently : It is very often overlooked that we do not only have good reasons to suspect the democratic orientation of Islamism but equally good reasons to do so with regards to liberal secularists in the Arab Middle East. In Europe, liberalism made its peace with democracy when it learned to trust that basic freedom and political rights remain unchallenged even if political parties win elections that have mixed feelings about them. This trust is missing in the Arab Middle East. Moreover, decade-long authoritarianism produced a political culture of the winner takes it all.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Challenges for a continuation of the transition process*

The Tunisian transition process is far from having reached a successful end: Its political system is not to be considered a consolidated democracy and there are major challenges ahead that could very well endanger a successful democratization process. Among the most eminent of these challenges the democratic identity of the major political forces is not yet consolidated: Not all wings of Ennahda have abandoned the idea of curtailing political and liberty rights without which a democracy cannot function. At the same time, liberal and secular parties still have to prove that they respect Islamism—which refrains from using violence as a means of politics and accepts electoral results even if they are not in their favor—as a legitimate political force. Moreover, political platforms of all major parties tend to be populist and politics are highly personalized. At the same time, nostalgia for the “good old days” of the regime of Ben Ali is growing, as it provided people “at least” with security and stability.<sup>10</sup> According to recent polls, currently only 59 % of all Tunisians believe that democracy is the best political system as opposed to 78 % in 2012; 75 % of the population do not trust political parties, and nearly half of Tunisians

---

backwards Islamists, *The Guardian*, October 29, 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/29/tunisian-election-result-secularism-islamism-nidaa-tounes-ennahda>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Beck 2013 (Footnote 2)

<sup>10</sup> Monica Marks (Footnote 7).

sensed that they are worse off than before 2011.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, major reform projects have been of limited success only, for instance a re-organization of the security forces,<sup>12</sup> which appears to be of utmost importance due to the fact that Tunisia under Ben Ali was a police state.<sup>13</sup> However, the most pressing issue is to deal with the ongoing socio-economic crisis of Tunisia since it appears to be very difficult to consolidate the transition process if many people experience deterioration in socio-economic terms. The low turnout among the young generation in the Parliamentary elections is an alarm signal that calls for generating sustainable economic growth to the benefit particularly of the comparatively well-educated young generation.<sup>14</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Tunisia is by far the most advanced Arab country in terms of democratization. However, Tunisia is not a consolidated democracy and there are difficult hurdles in the way of becoming one. Ennahda did some remarkable attempts to foster a democratic political culture, particularly by giving into the pressure of liberal secularists to accept early elections and to admit and accept its electoral defeat in October 2014 without ifs and buts. It remains to be seen whether the successful Nidaa Tounes will now do its part for a sustainable change of Tunisian political culture by accepting Ennahda and its islamist approach as a legitimate competitor in the Tunisian political system. Moreover, a successful transition process requires that political institutions will be democratized in the new legislative period.

---

<sup>11</sup> Lindsay Benstead, Ellen Lust, Dhafer Malouche and Jakob Wichmann, Tunisian elections bring hope in uncertain times, October 27, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/27/tunisian-elections-bring-hope-in-uncertain-times/>.

<sup>12</sup> Haykel Ben Mahfoudh 2014: Security sector reform in Tunisia. Three years into the democratic transition, <http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Mahfoudh%20-%20Tunisia%20SSR%20-%20July%202014%20-%20ARI.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> For the contested issue of transitional reconciliation see Christopher K. Lamont, Transnational justice and the politics of lustration in Tunisia, *Middle East Institute*, December 26, 2013, <http://www.mei.edu/content/transitional-justice-and-politics-lustration-tunisia>.

<sup>14</sup> Eileen Byrne, Tunisians vote in first Parliamentary election under new constitution. Turnout estimated at about 50% in poll taking place almost four years after the uprising ousted Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, *The Guardian*, October 26, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/tunisia-vote-parliamentary-election-new-constitution>.

**About the author:**

Martin Beck is a professor at the Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense.