

FOUR KEYS TO UNDERSTAND TUNISIAN POLITICS AFTER THE ELECTIONS*Nadia Marzouki**

The elections of the Constitutional Assembly that took place in Tunisia on 23rd October 2011 have triggered a series of forced congratulations, alarmist predictions, and veiled threats. The success of the Islamist party, Nahda, which won 90 seats (41.7%) has come as a major surprise or source of concern to a large part of the public in Tunisia and abroad. Questions such as "should we fear Islamisation of Tunisia?" or "is Tunisia going to turn into a Sharia state?" proliferate in the European media and among policy circles. Some commentators suggest that women will be forced to wear headscarves, others contend that Sharia law is going to be installed in Tunisia. French pundit Caroline Fourest went as far as to openly regret the fact that the electoral process had not been more closely monitored by the French government.¹ Mockeries about how the Islamist winter is succeeding the democratic spring flourish.

This avalanche of alarmist and disparaging comments has completely obliterated the fact that the organisation of the first democratic elections in the history of the country has been a great success: only eight months after the departure of the former president, transparent elections were organised and these were characterised by a massive turnout of 90% of the voters. Recalling these important achievements does not mean that one should indulge in a Panglossian apology for the electoral outcome. Dismissing the concerns of the secularist Tunisian elite or of the European policymakers as irrelevant fantasies is not an appropriate answer either. At the time of writing, it is much too early to draw any firm conclusion or to speculate about the future of political debates in Tunisia. It is important, however, in the context of increasing panic surrounding the outcome of the elections, to stress four key aspects of the current situation, which can help to frame discussions of Tunisian post-electoral politics in a less emotional perspective.'

Plurality, Not Duplicity

Anti-Islamist commentators and policymakers insistently cling to their argument according to which Islamists use a form of double-speak. From this perspective, the Nahda leadership resorts to the democratic language as a mere strategy aimed at establishing its "real" purpose, the implementation of the so-called Sharia state. The reiteration of this accusation is theoretically unsound and politically

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1. Caroline Fourest, "Le printemps, c'est fini", Le Monde, 28th October 2011.

inefficient. The elements that are produced as evidence of the supposed duplicity of Islamists are a mere consequence of the wide variety of Nahda's constituents. Nahda's supporters are not a homogenous community, characterised by similar social backgrounds, lifestyle and aspirations. There is of course a common insistence among them on a number of principles – moralising politics, struggling against corruption, breaking up with the former state policy of monitoring religious activities. But Nahda's voters are also extremely diverse in terms of age, economic background, religious practice, and political and economic views. For example, while some advocate the construction of a welfare type of redistribution of resources, others support a more liberal type of economic programme. Likewise it is possible that a number of Nahda's constituents believe that Tunisia should become a Sharia state, but there is also a significant group who think the opposite. The challenge, then, is to know how Nahda will strike the balance between these various expectations and demands. No matter how dramatic the situation may seem in a context when anything related to Islam sparks passionate debates everywhere, this type of challenge is actually a very banal problem that all political parties and social movements face. Most parties and movements need to simultaneously avoid two major risks, maximalism and absorption. They need to refrain from adopting an uncompromising agenda, which will prevent any possibility of coalition and, hence, of governing. But they also need to avoid diluting their ideological message in order to maintain their capacity to mobilise.² There is no predefined recipe for the development of this balance. Politics is about the contextual construction of this equilibrium, not about the utopian implementation of genuine beliefs. From this perspective, as Tarek Masoud has shown, the question of the sincerity of Islamist beliefs and commitment to democracy is irrelevant. What matters is the institutional setting in which they operate. "Instead of worrying whether Islamists are real democrats, our goal should be to help fortify democratic and liberal institutions and actors so that no group – Islamist or otherwise – can subvert them."³

Majority, Not Hegemony

Contrary to what is assumed by a number of secularist analysts, the outcome of the Tunisian elections of 23rd October is in no way comparable to the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) victory in Algeria in 1991,⁴ which then led to the cancellation of the electoral process and triggered the beginning of the civil war. Islamists have secured a comfortable majority, but they do need to build coalitions to be able to govern, and they have expressed their commitment to do so as early as 24th October. A key issue that will be discussed by the members of the Constitutional Assembly in the upcoming months is the type of regime and the type of voting system that will be chosen. Since January 2011,

2. Murray J. Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, Chicago, Markham, 1971; William Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest*, Homewood, Ill., Dorsey, 1975.

3. Tarek Masoud, "Are They Democrats, Does It Matter?", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 19, No. 3, July 2008.

4. In the first round of the 1991 elections of the National Assembly, the Islamic Salvation Front won 188 out of 231 seats (47.3% of the votes).

Islamists have advocated a parliamentary type of regime and a majority electoral system. Admittedly, in the present context of the wide popularity of Nahda, opting for a parliamentary type of regime and a majority system would translate into a large victory for Nahda, who would then be the main master of the game. But the present situation is quite different, and the debates that will take place in the Constitutional Assembly will give all parties an opportunity to discuss the future electoral rules and to develop the tools that are the most appropriate to protect Tunisian nascent democracy.

The Danger of Status Quo

Pressures and warnings of Western policymakers and diplomats on Islamist members of the Constitutional Assembly and of the future government may have a counterproductive effect. Confronted with such pressure and veiled threats, Islamists may end up supporting forms of policy that are too “modernist”, rather than too “traditionalist”. In the political history of Tunisia, especially during the Ben Ali regime, “modernism” has often described authoritarian policy that was consistent only with the interests of the predatory elite and the Western powers. The reform of justice, of political police, of media, agriculture, and so on, is a necessary step in the implementation of a democratic polity. A context where Islamists and their partners are constantly pressured and intimidated will hinder the development of such reforms. Conceiving and implementing new policy, rather than constantly having to prove their pro-Western bona fides, needs to be the priority of the future government. Although concern over how Nahda’s moral views will impact individual rights is understandable, it is also important to remain critical of the way in which the anti-Islamist or double speak argument will be used. Indeed labelling any policy that does not suit the interests of Western powers as obscurantist may prove a very efficient tool of intimidation and indirect monitoring of Tunisian affairs. It is time not only for Tunisians to fully appropriate the new democratic context, but also for Western powers to accept Arab countries as partners, with potentially conflicting interests, and not as sub-altern clients.

Reimagining State-Society Relations

While most commentators obsessively gloss over the compatibility between Islam and democracy, a more decisive challenge lies in the reimagining of relations between state and society. Ever since independence, the Tunisian state has always closely monitored and governed Tunisian society. While major social movements such as unions or human rights movements have developed from the grassroots level and achieved major results, the state has always closely monitored and hindered the development of a free and dynamic civil society. The state granted society a number of rights concerning education and gender equality in order to construct a docile and cohesive national body, not to promote social and political freedoms. The uprisings that took place last winter break with this pattern and express the will of Tunisian people to regain control over their own destiny.

However, the claims and fears expressed by secular people right after the victory of Nahda suggest that the tendency to delegate the responsibility of defining people's future to state officials has not completely disappeared. "What is the state going to do to protect us against the pressure of bigots and extremists?" the secularists have relentlessly asked since 24th October. The assumption on which this question is based belongs to the time of Ben Ali. Bigots and extremists have not won the Tunisian elections. It is now each and every one's responsibility – not solely the state's – to propose dissenting views, to participate in public debates, to organise and mobilise, in order to defend their own hopes and beliefs.

Simultaneously published as a Focus article at the Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean policies, www.iemed.org