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Tunisia, is it Really a Counter-Revolution?

→ Salam Kawakibi



A visitor writes wishes on a wall, onto which is printed in Arabic "Tunisia we love you", on October 22, 2014 in Tunis, during the opening ceremony of the Media Centre to host international journalists covering the Tunisian parliamentary elections. Tunisians vote on October 26, 2014 to elect their first parliament since the country's 2011 revolution, in a rare glimmer of hope for a region torn apart by post-Arab Spring violence and repression. © Fethi Belaid / AFP / Getty Images



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While it did not finish in first, Ennahda scored a symbolic victory in this election, and if they build on what has been achieved in a positive manner, it will have a profound effect on the process of democratic transformation initiated in Tunisia. The earlier withdrawal of Ennahda from the government, and its acknowledgment that many Tunisian constituencies do not share its social and cultural vision, even if they share its “liberal” economic vision, is evidence of its clarity of purpose. While the political/social project of Ennahda remains unclear to a certain extent, its political wisdom was apparent in its participation in the election and its rapid acceptance of the results.

The elections resulted in the emergence of a new impromptu political force: the Union patriotique libre (UPL, Free Patriotic Union), representing members of the old economic guard. As in most newly-formed democracies, the old economic guard was able to ensure it retained a political voice, in this case taking advantage of the poor monitoring of campaign financing and the absence of transparent regulation of the media, which was recently given greater freedom, to put themselves on the electoral map via the UPL and achieve third place.

Ettakatol (The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties) suffered a crushing defeat, as did the Congress for the Republic party. These two parties were members of the previous ruling Troika and appear to have paid a high price for their ineffective alliance with Ennahda. The Popular Front, meanwhile, achieved relatively good results and came in fourth place, partially due to an alliance between leftist parties and nationalistic groups in an effort to prevent Nidaa Tounes from gaining ground among their supporters. The Popular Front was the sole political force that suffered direct violence during the anarchy that followed the downfall of the former regime, leading to the assassination of two of its leaders. This prompted popular sympathy for the party, even in non-leftist circles and other leftist-leaning groups whose policies and methods of struggle were very far from those of the Front.

The retreat of Ennahda, the victory of Nidaa Tounes, and the emergence of the UPL and the political polarization in the post-Ben Ali era come as no surprise to observers of Tunisian politics. As often seen in political transformations around the world, the party that first takes on a legacy such as that left by a corrupt and tyrannical authority in Tunisia, as Ennahda has done, can do no more than clean



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out the remains of the broken dishes, burning one finger after the other in the transformation process upon which the masses have built high hopes. More specifically, it seems that diminishing trust, confidence and popular support for Ennahda was the result of relatively poor administration of public affairs by Ennahda officials, some of whom tried to monopolize influential sectors, as well as of their mishandling of the emergence of violent extremism, which they first attempted to ignore, and later to containing and resist it. These errors were compounded by a severe economic crisis that could not be resolved by their poorly-planned measures. The popular support enjoyed by Ennahda in the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections had come from members of the movement and from independent individuals who saw their support for Ennahda as a step away from ideological convention and the reprisals against political corruption used by leftist and liberal members to woo the former regime.

Some analysts have stated that the new political structure looks like a return to the recent past, calling it a setback to the revolution or a counter-revolution. This is a hasty conclusion based on superficial analysis and without any solid evidence, possibly resulting from the frustrations of the Egyptian arena and the violence in Libya and Syria. The idea that the Nidaa Tounes party is nothing more than a revival of the previous regime or signifies the return of the “deep state” implies a poor knowledge of the political and social history of Tunisia. Nidaa Tounes is a coalition of ideologically heterogeneous components that reflects a temporary joining of forces to take power from a conservative party. This coalition includes trade unionists, intellectuals and academics from both the left and right wing who do not share a clear political, social or economic program. They share a deep-rooted hostility to political Islam without necessarily being classified, for the most part, as secular.

Despite its victory, Nidaa Tounes will need to maintain an alliance with other political forces to obtain the majority required to form a stable government. This alliance could be with small parties that won a limited number of seats. This is unlikely, but could be a sign of an astute understanding of the democratic game. An alliance could also be formed with the parties that came in third and fourth place: the UPL and the Popular Front.

An alliance with the UPL would probably lead to a strengthening of the



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accusations that Nidaa Tounes is simply a replica of the old regime in a new outfit with a few superficial embellishments. It is believed that the political experience of the senior leaders of Nidaa Tounes will dissuade them from this temporary expedient, which would have a devastating impact on the political beliefs of their voters. The Popular Front will not join such an alliance because of major differences in economic and social visions, unless a dramatic interest-related development occurs in its outlook and options. The Popular Front is qualified to play an extremely important role in the opposition alongside active civil society organizations, especially since it is focused on monitoring and amending the social and economic policies adopted by any future government espousing a liberal approach.

A potential alliance with Ennahda in a national unity government would be the culmination of a reconciliatory trajectory, of which the ratification of the constitution was a recent landmark. Just like the process of ratifying the constitution, this new form of joint rule requires important concessions from both sides in order to achieve concrete results and stability. The country cannot afford the luxury of confusion and uncertainty. However, the naïve statements by some unofficial figures from Nidaa Tounes mocking the decline of Ennahda, as well as talk of McCarthyism against the former rulers who played the democratic game and bore its full consequences, will only lead to complications in the near future. Tunisians are yearning for a prosperous phase of active and participatory political and economic activity rather than exclusion or appropriation.

The example of Germany may be instructive for Tunisia. Despite the overwhelming victory of the Christian Democratic Union party in the German parliamentary elections in 2013, it still had to make an alliance with others to form a stable government. Serious and difficult negotiations took place that resulted in the formation of a joint government with its strongest political rival, the Social Democratic party. Both sides chose to offer some concessions to ensure effective and stable government. The Christian Democrats could have formed alliances with small right wing parties close to their own ideology to keep the socialists isolated from power, but they chose the public interest. Hopefully Tunisia's new leaders will also make their political choices based on the public interest.



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