

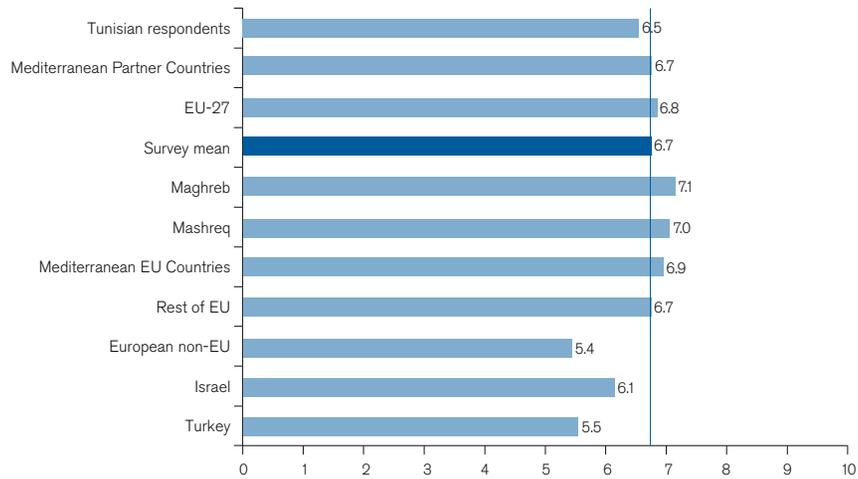
TUNISIANS' PERSPECTIVE ON DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL ISLAM: A MODERATE OPTIMISM

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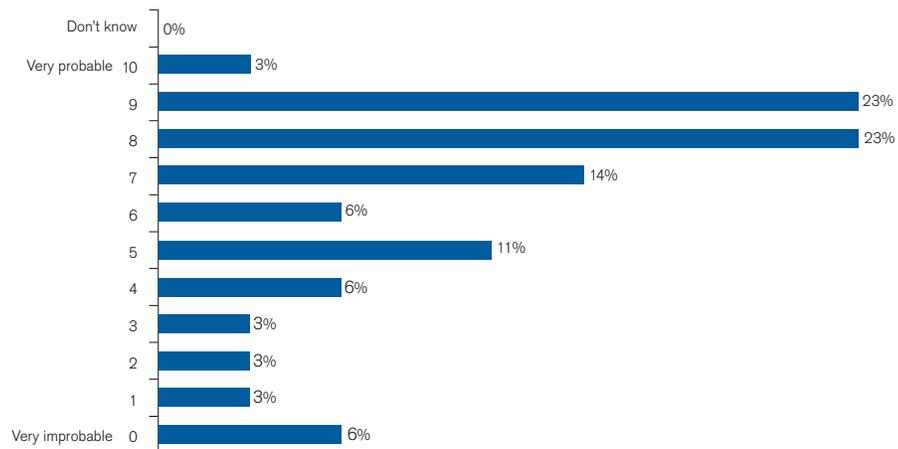
The Survey conducted by the European Institute for the Mediterranean examines, among other issues, the perceptions that diverse northern and southern Mediterranean countries have of the democratisation prospects in the Arab world and the role of political Islam in the region. As the Survey's results indicate, the Tunisian point of view is notable for two particular aspects. Many participating Tunisian experts believe that the prospect for the establishment of a solid democracy in Tunisia is probable or even very probable (6.5 on average on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 stands for "very improbable" and 10 for "very probable").

Graph 1: Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy in TUNISIA
(average on a scale of 0-10)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

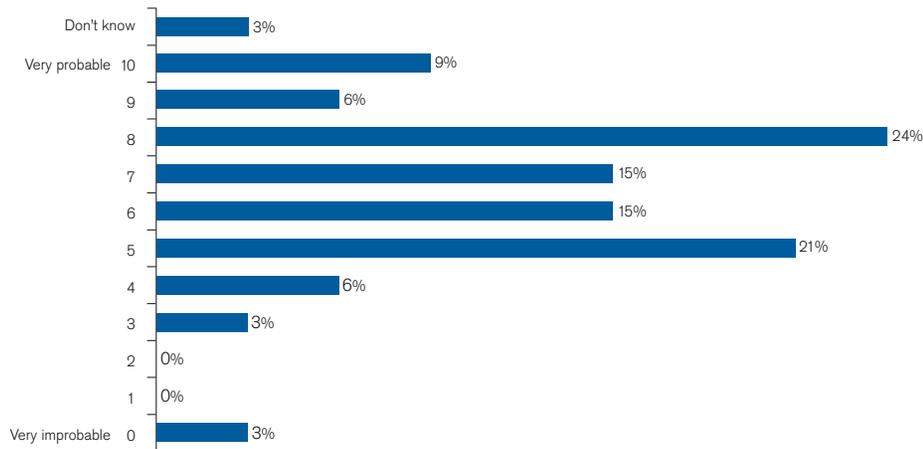
Graph 2: Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy in TUNISIA (%) Tunisian respondents



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Moreover, most Tunisian respondents believe that political Islam will play an important, or even central, role in this democratisation process.

Graph 3: Role of political Islam in the future Mediterranean landscape Tunisian respondents (%)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

These results are in keeping with the characteristics of the Tunisian revolution and the changes that have led to the election of the Constituent Assembly. The revolution developed in a relatively peaceful and non-violent way, in comparison to the protest movements that took place in countries such as Libya and Syria. Tunisia was the first Arab country to remove its dictator, although it is undoubtedly the country where change seemed the least likely to happen. The election of the Constituent Assembly, on 23rd October 2011, took place with relative transparency and the turnout was remarkably high. Finally, the coalition government – the troika that unites two secular parties (CPR and Ettakatol) and the Islamist party Ennahda – which was established after the elections has been generally well accepted. Despite criticism, it is seen as a government of consensus representing the diverse preferences of the Tunisian people. The creation of several committees to investigate corruption and the reform of different sectors, the amendment of the Information Law to make it more liberal, the intensity of the exchanges within the Constituent Assembly, the discovery of freedom of expression and association and the abundance of local initiatives organisations and associations all reflect the trust and involvement of Tunisians in the process under way while also explaining their positive assessment of the democratisation prospects.

The Islamist party Ennahda emerged at once as an unquestionable actor of the democratic transition in Tunisia. The members and supporters of Ennahda, who were the main victims of Ben Ali's repression, have had a positive image since the events of December 2010 and January 2011. When they returned from prison or exile, they were seen as uncorrupted figures who could play a key role in the moralisation of political life. Insofar as the rejection of the corruption (*fasad*) of Ben Ali's clan was one of the triggers of the revolution, Ennahda's "clean" image explains the success it enjoyed, at first, among some Tunisian people. This popularity of the Islamist party, and of its historical leader Rachid Ghannouchi, immediately awakened the concerns of numerous commentators and political actors in Tunisia, Europe and the United States. To assuage these concerns, the Ennahda leaders have endlessly insisted on their moderation and firmly committed to not reform the Personal Status Law, to not establish an Islamic state and to work for the development and modernisation of the country. After a stormy debate within the Ennahda movement, it has finally dismissed the idea of including in the preamble of the future constitution any reference to the Sharia. Article 1 of the past constitution, which simply referred to Islam, will remain unchanged. This anti-corruption image and these reassuring statements explain why a majority of Tunisians affirm that political Islam will play an important role in the construction of a democratic regime. It is also worth mentioning that most

Tunisians associate Ben Ali's regime with the imposition of an authoritarian and feigned state secularism and the ferocious repression of any form of autonomous religious activity. One of the essential elements of the consolidation of Ben Ali's power has indeed been the exploitation of the so-called Islamist threat. Today, the relative acceptance of the Islamist actors is therefore explained by the rejection of state interference in civil society affairs, whether religious or otherwise. Many accept the Islamist presence in power, not because they share the ideas and values of Ennahda but as a rejection of a restricted pluralism.

However, these positive results cannot conceal the important concerns and doubts that exist within the Tunisian population in terms of the establishment of a lasting democratic regime and the role of political Islam. Two main challenges therefore emerge for the different political actors and the Islamist party in particular. International commentators have largely insisted on the risk posed by the presence of an Islamist party in the government for religious freedom and freedom of expression. The case of the burka at the University of Manouba, the trial of the Nessma TV channel following the screening of the film *Persepolis* or of the trial of two atheists in Mahdia are mentioned as proof of the risk of restricting individual freedoms. Even if these fears are justified, the main challenge for the Islamist party lies elsewhere. The Tunisian revolution was born out of social demands, focusing on the living conditions of unemployed graduates, the rejection of corruption, and dignity. However, after their arrival to government, Tunisian Islamists seem more interested in the political game than in rapidly implementing solutions to these *social* demands. One of the major challenges for Islamists is, therefore, how they can establish and construct themselves as a credible party, while contributing effective responses to social demands. The second essential challenge facing the Islamist party concerns the construction of a moderate image. Given the very strong concerns of the international community and the Tunisian public, Tunisian Islamists insist that they choose moderation in all respects. However, although this insistence on moderation is reassuring when it refers to the relation between religion and politics, we can wonder what it means in terms of the Islamists' capacity to make decisions and, in short, to govern. Since their coming to power, Islamists have been criticised by Tunisians not so much for their ideological radicalism but rather because of the slowness with which they make decisions on the most urgent matters: economic and social issues. Therefore, remaining loyal to this commitment to ideological moderation, while making the often radical and urgent decisions required by politics, is indeed the second challenge facing Tunisian Islamists.