

# Tunisia: General Overview of the Country

## Sarah Yerkes

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,  
Washington

2019 was a tumultuous year for Tunisia. The year saw a transition of presidential and legislative power, persistent economic challenges including rampant corruption, and an ever-growing mistrust of the political class. But there were also signs of hope and progress, as the country prepared for a reset, with many new faces in government and a new president who enjoyed the support of nearly 90 percent of young Tunisians, all under a mostly calm security environment. Nevertheless, the outbreak of Covid-19, which first hit Tunisia in February 2020, days after the formation of the new government, is a massive test for the Tunisian government and people, particularly those in the traditionally marginalized southern and interior regions.

Dominating all areas is the extremely low level of trust Tunisians have in their leaders. In December 2019, 75 percent of Tunisians surveyed by the International Republican Institute (IRI) stated that Members of Parliament do “nothing” to address their needs and 41 percent rated the government’s performance as “very bad.” Each of the major political parties has very low favourability ratings, all around 25 percent, and the party leaders perform on a similarly poor level, with the notable exception of President Kais Saied, whom 84 percent of respondents said they view “highly” or “somewhat favourably.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2019 Presidential Elections: Tunisia Passes an Unexpected Test

On 25 July 2019, the country’s first ever democratically elected president, 92-year-old Beji Caid Essebsi, died in office, setting off an unprecedented institutional and political test. Following constitutional procedure, the Speaker of Parliament, Mohamed Ennaceur, formally took over as acting president within hours of the announcement of Essebsi’s death, and Tunisia managed to avoid the instability in the interim period that some feared would take hold. The first round of regular presidential elections was already scheduled to take place on 17 November 2019, but had to be moved forward by two months to 15 September to meet the constitutional requirement for the interim government’s term limit.

The new electoral calendar put tremendous pressure on the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), who had faced serious challenges in the past, forcing it to delay the May 2018 municipal elections four times over two and a half years and accelerate its timeline for election preparations, which included a massive effort to register new voters. Furthermore, the new calendar entailed flipping the order of the presidential and parliamentary elections, giving presidential candidates less than two weeks to campaign. But, despite the compressed time frame, the ISIE managed to pull off a well-organized and executed election with few irregularities.<sup>2</sup>

In the first round of the elections, 26 candidates were on the ballot, including several establishment

<sup>1</sup> CENTER FOR INSIGHTS IN SURVEY RESEARCH, “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia. December 3-December 15, 2019.” [www.iri.org/sites/default/files/tunisia\\_final\\_slides.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/tunisia_final_slides.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> MISSION D’OBSERVATION ÉLECTORALE DE L’UNION EUROPÉENNE; *Tunisie 2019 Rapport Final Elections Présidentielle et Législatives*, [eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/rapport\\_final\\_moe\\_ue\\_tunisie\\_dec\\_2019\\_fr.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/rapport_final_moe_ue_tunisie_dec_2019_fr.pdf)

figures such as former Minister of Defense Abdelkarim Zbidi, former Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, former President Moncef Marzouki and Abdelfattah Mourou, the former acting Speaker of Parliament who represented Ennahda. But the two men who ended up making it to the October 13 run-off each represented a rejection of the status quo, albeit in different ways.

2019 saw a transition of presidential and legislative power, persistent economic challenges including rampant corruption and an ever-growing mistrust of the political class

### **Robocop versus Don Corleone: The Men Vying for the Presidency**

Nabil Karoui, disparagingly referred to by some as the fictional mafia head Don Corleone, thanks to accusations of corruption, ran as the head of the Heart of Tunisia party and is the owner of a popular television channel, Nessma TV. Karoui is a philanthropist who won the support of many of Tunisia's downtrodden and believed he could provide them with what they needed most – food on the table. In another unprecedented twist, Karoui was arrested on corruption charges days after announcing his presidential candidacy, following a multi-year investigation into his business practices, which severely limited his ability to campaign during the first round of the elections, including preventing him from participating in the country's first ever live television election debate.

Saied, a former constitutional law professor, who ran without a political party and with no prior political experience, has been dubbed Robocop due to his stilted and formal manner of speaking and his legal background. He beat Karaoui by a margin of 73 percent to 27 percent in the run-off. Despite his age of 62 and very conservative stance on many social issues, Saied won the overwhelming support of the country's youth – particularly the revolutionaries, who saw him as someone who would fight the per-

sistent corruption ravaging the country. However, five months into his term, Saied had few accomplishments to his name and had failed to connect with the Tunisian public.

### **2019 Legislative Elections: The End of Consensus Politics?**

The legislative elections were also a clear rejection of the status quo. The small country is home to more than 220 political parties and the 2019 vote saw the election of 31 parties and lists, including 17 with only one seat, to the 217-seat parliament. The two largest parties, Ennahda and Heart of Tunisia, only won 24 percent and 18 percent of seats in parliament, respectively, showing just how fractured the parliament really is. Additionally, the elections brought several new voices to power, including Abir Moussi and her Free Destourian Party party, with 17 seats, made up of former regime figures and holding an anti-revolutionary platform; and the Karama Movement, with 21 seats, a conservative Islamist party that has benefitted from Ennahda's movement away from Islamism.

The government represents a wide variety of ideologies and interests, which make it difficult to come to consensus on controversial issues

Importantly, NidaaTounes, the party of former President Essebsi and formerly the largest party in parliament, only won three seats. The death of Essebsi was the final nail in the party's coffin and marked the end of the political career of the late President's son, Hafedh Caid Essebsi, who had served as Nidaa's leader thanks to his father's intervention. Once one of the most powerful men in Tunisian politics, the younger Essebsi moved to Paris after his father's death and was dismissed as head of the party in December 2019.

The deeply fractured nature of the Parliament brought Tunisia to another unprecedented situation. On 11

January 2020, the Parliament rejected the proposed government of Habib Jomli, appointed by Ennahda to form a government. This forced the President to nominate a head of government, giving the Prime Minister-designate one month to cobble together a government approved by a large enough margin of the numerous parties in power or face a new election. The candidate, Elyes Fakhfakh, succeeded, at the last minute, in forming a government consisting of six political parties and with 13 independents serving as ministers or assistant ministers. The government, therefore, represents a wide variety of ideologies and interests, which is likely to make it difficult to come to consensus on controversial issues. This leaves an unlikely alliance of Karaoui's Heart of Tunisia; Moussi's Free Destourian Party; and the far-right Karama Coalition as the main opposition.

### The Troubled Economy Made Worse by Covid-19

The new government's primary task will be to address the persistent socioeconomic challenges that both brought about the 2010-2011 revolution that unseated President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and have failed to improve. Nine years into the democratic transition, many Tunisians young and old, have lost patience with their leaders. One of the primary reasons for their dwindling trust is the inability of the government to deliver on the promise to improve people's daily lives.

Virtually all economic indicators, including those that fueled the revolution, like high levels of youth unemployment, inflation, regional marginalization and corruption, are worse today than they were in 2010, and each subsequent transitional government has proven either incapable or unwilling to address the root causes of the economic malaise. As a result, the suicide rate has nearly doubled, the country has become a major source of irregular migration to Europe and nearly 100,000 highly skilled workers have emigrated from Tunisia since the revolution.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> YERKES, Sarah "The Tunisia Model." *Foreign Affairs*. November/December 2019.

<sup>4</sup> YERKES, Sarah and MUASHER, Marwan "Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. May 2018: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/17/decentralization-in-tunisia-empowering-towns-engaging-people-pub-76376>.

Virtually all economic indicators, including those that fueled the revolution, are worse today than they were in 2010

Exacerbating the situation is the outbreak of Covid-19. The past year had seen the beginning of some positive economic improvement including the inflation rate, which had fallen to 5.8 percent in February 2020 after hitting a high of 7.3 percent a year earlier; unemployment, which fell below 15 percent for the first time in five years; and tourism revenues, which reached \$2 billion in 2019, with a 13.6 percent increase in the number of tourists over the previous year. However, the virus threatens to devastate the Tunisian economy.

Covid-19 has already had a dramatic impact on the tourism industry, which makes up eight percent of Tunisia's GDP, and which is expected to lose \$1.4 billion in revenue this year. The virus has also shed new light on existing disparities between regions. The traditionally marginalized interior and southern regions have far fewer public resources than the coastal areas. The Tunis region has more than 10 times the number of doctors as 19 of the other regions.<sup>4</sup>

Covid-19 has already had a dramatic impact on the tourism industry, which makes up eight percent of Tunisia's GDP, and which is expected to lose \$1.4 billion in revenue this year

To address these and other socioeconomic disparities, the new government must figure out how to move forward with the decentralization process started in May 2018 with the country's first ever democratic local elections and the adoption of the

Local Authorities Code 10 days earlier. The decentralization process, which is on a 27-year timeline, has yet to bear fruit, and while it has had some positive outcomes, including providing more opportunities for participatory democracy and direct connection between the people and their government, overall the process has suffered. First, local councils do not have nearly enough financial or human resources to carry out even the most basic tasks. Second, while local councils are democratically elected, they are subject to the oversight of regional governors, who remain appointed by the central State, thus severely inhibiting their autonomy.

### **An Improved Security Situation: Cause for Optimism**

One area which is cause for some optimism is the security sector. While the country remains a target of violent extremists, primarily lone wolf attackers inspired by ISIS, tremendous gains have been made in security sector reform, with greatly enhanced counterterrorism capabilities. This is due in large part to investment from the international community (particularly the United States and Europe) in both training and equipment.

On 27 June 2019, two suicide bombers carried out nearly simultaneous attacks in downtown Tunis, targeting security forces and killing two police officers and injuring nine others. But the country recovered quickly, with people returning to the downtown ca-

fes and streets the following day. The level of professionalization of the military is reflected in levels of public trust. In the most recent Arab Barometer survey, 90 percent of respondents said they had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in the army and 62 percent said the same about the police.<sup>5</sup>

**While the country remains a target of violent extremists, tremendous gains have been made in security sector reform, with greatly enhanced counterterrorism capabilities**

Nevertheless, Tunisia continues to face a threat from returning foreign fighters. At one time, Tunisia was the largest global contributor of foreign fighters to ISIS in Iraq and Syria. While many of those fighters are thought to have been killed in battle, thousands more could potentially return home (and more than 500 already have), both leaving the country vulnerable to attack by Tunisians trained abroad and facing a difficult challenge as to whether and how to repatriate the returnees. The country lacks a clear and comprehensive strategy to address the returnees and has failed to develop a deradicalization programme. Meanwhile, the prisons are overcrowding, leaving little room for returning jihadis.

<sup>5</sup> ARAB BAROMETER. “Online Data Analysis.” [www.arabbarometer.org/](http://www.arabbarometer.org/). Accessed 15 April 2020.