

Tunisia's general election. Islamists to the fore

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An Islamist party, Nahda, has won a handsome victory at the polls. But it seems determined to govern, at any rate at first, together with a host of secular parties

Like many Mediterranean peoples, Tunisians are said to be prone to excesses of joy and despair. So it was scarcely surprising that the stronger-than-expected performance of Islamists in the country's first-ever open and fair election, and the first free exercise of political rights thanks to the Arab spring, prompted an emotional response. Fans of Nahda (Renaissance), the long banned and persecuted Islamist party that has secured at least 41% of seats in the constitutional assembly, cheered and tooted as results were announced. But many liberal Tunisians mourned the end of an era. This most secular of Arab states, they sighed, had forsaken its cherished traditions of boozy beach-going tolerance.

Yet the results of polling on October 23rd, following an impressive turnout by an estimated 60% of eligible voters, were not as dramatic as they may have seemed. In a real victory for democracy, Tunisia appears to be set not for a period of Islamist domination but for a healthy bout of barter and compromise between newly legitimised political forces. Rather than serving as a warning of the dangers of popular empowerment when political Islam dominates discourse across the Arab world, Tunisia's elections make a compelling argument for letting the people choose.

What the polls do caution, however, is that seeming technicalities and political immaturity can make a huge difference to electoral outcomes. There is no doubt that Nahda, led by the 70-year-old Rachid Ghannouchi, deserved to outpoll its rivals, which included half a dozen small, nearly indistinguishable secular parties, as well as scores of independent groups. The Islamist party ran an exemplary campaign, exploiting sympathies for its history of resistance to the hated previous regime as well as for its identification with working-class authenticity in contrast to Tunisia's traditional Francophone elite.

Yet because of a system of strict proportional representation, exacerbated by what in some districts were as many as 100 choices on ballots, a third or so of all votes cast actually

counted for nothing, having been wasted on small local lists that failed to garner enough numbers to return a seat.

Playing by the rules, Nahda appears to have secured 88 seats in the 217-seat assembly, clearly entitling it to lead a new government, while gaining at least a quarter of actual votes. Failure to unite cost its secular opponents what should have been a clear majority. "All they had to do was pluck the fruit of their opponents' mistakes," commented Ridha Kéfi, the widely read editor of Kapitalis, a Tunisian news website.

The voting produced other, smaller upsets. To general shock, the populist Petition Party, or Aridha, hitherto unknown and led by Hachemi Hamdi, a London-based owner of a low-budget satellite television station, emerged with 13% of seats, the third-largest showing. Mr Hamdi appears to have cashed in on a mix of his folksy notoriety as a native of Sidi Bouzid, the provincial town where riots by jobless youths last December first sparked Tunisia's revolution, promises of immediate handouts to the poor, and a willingness to recruit among members of the disgraced former ruling party.

Two small secular parties, meanwhile, confounded opinion polls. The Congress for the Republic (CPR), run by Moncef Marzouki, a prominent human-rights man, emerged as the second largest with 14% of seats, surging ahead of predictions. Tapped to do better, the Progressive Democratic Party, co-led by Nejib Chebbi, a lawyer and veteran politician, instead slumped to barely 7%. Commentators attributed the scores of these two secular outfits to Mr Chebbi's strident attacks on Nahda and Mr Marzouki's declaration that he would be happy to work with it. A third progressive party, the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, better known as Ettakatol, run by Mustafa Ben Jaafar, a doctor and former health minister, also did well to get 10%. A dozen smaller parties and local coalitions hold the remaining 16% of seats; 44% will be held by women.

Under Tunisia's so-far-smooth plan for its transition to full democracy, the new assembly is charged with drafting a constitution and appointing a government, including a prime minister and president. Nahda's leaders have hastened to insist they are open to forming a coalition with any party—and have implied that they would not overturn Tunisia's liberal laws on alcohol and women's clothing. Its secretary-general, Hammadi Jebali, says he expects to be proposed for the premiership. Nahda people deny they seek the presidency, and say they will instead propose either Mr Marzouki, Mr Ben Jaafar or the current popular interim prime minister, the 84-year-old Beji Caid Sebsi.

Despite some misgivings at the Islamist surge, most Tunisians appear relieved and satisfied by the results, convinced that they broadly reflect the popular will. Even among dedicated secularists, a common post-election refrain is that the next few months will prove a welcome test, with Nahda obliged to take responsibility and thus blame for policies rather than criticise from the sidelines. Given a sagging economy and a well of social grievances, the immediate test will be hard. Once a new constitution is in place, and elections are held next year for a proper parliament, Nahda may start to look a bit less shiny.