

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

October 25, 2004

TUNISIA'S ELECTIONS: THE LONG ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

Daniel Zisenwine

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Tunisia's October 24 presidential and parliamentary elections brought few surprises. As expected, President Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali, who has ruled since 1987, was reelected by an absolute majority of 94.48%. His ruling RCD (Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique) party maintained control over the country's parliament. Accordingly, Tunisia's government-recognized opposition parties will remain marginal and largely ineffective. The Tunisian government championed the elections as an important stepping stone towards political pluralism. In addition to the incumbent, voters were able to choose between two other competing presidential candidates. Seven parties participated in the parliamentary race. But despite these trappings, the entire campaign process and election results are a far cry from a pluralistic democratic framework.

Situated in a politically turbulent region, Tunisia has long distinguished itself from neighboring Libya and Algeria with its moderate, pro-western foreign policies and its progressive social and economic programs. Tunisia's per capita income is the highest in North Africa (excluding Libya), reflecting investments in education and vocational training. Its annual population growth rate is also low -- just over 1%, thanks to an ambitious birth control program initiated in 1966. Tunisia's nearly 10 million residents enjoy a relatively high standard of living and

form one of the few Arab societies with a strong middle class.

Tunisia's political system, however, has remained stagnant. The ruling regime remains repressive and authoritarian and has recorded little change since Tunisia's independence in 1956. Ben 'Ali rose to power in a bloodless coup in 1987 against former ailing president Habib Bourguiba and was expected to usher in a new era of political pluralism. While the "change" (as Ben 'Ali's coup is known in official parlance) did not mark a significant departure from previous policies, it initially sought to implement a number of innovations.

Ben 'Ali promised to make greater strides towards democracy and allowed officially recognized opposition parties a greater degree of participation in political life. Over the years, the Tunisian government introduced several measures aimed at enhancing political pluralism. A 1997 amendment to the country's electoral code reserved a minimum of approximately 20% of the seats in parliament and municipal councils for opposition candidates. The 1999 presidential election included, for the first time, two other candidates who ran against Ben 'Ali as part of an effort to reform the voting process. Official censorship of the media was abolished in 1997 and Ben 'Ali repeatedly exhorted journalists to assert different viewpoints in their work.

These new measures proved to be largely

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

ineffective and did not alter Tunisia's political landscape. There appeared to be a troubling gap between government rhetoric and policy. Opposition parties, already weakened by personal rivalries and internal disputes, were not in any position to offer a viable alternative to the regime and its well-oiled political machine during the election campaign. The strict limits imposed on presidential candidates (who were required to be veteran leaders of parties with parliamentary representation) minimized the impact of their presence, which remained largely symbolic.

The media's role also remained problematic. Although official censorship had been abolished, most of the media remained under some degree of government control, leaving little room for a lively debate on current affairs. Some journalists seem to have exercised self-censorship, fearing government retribution. Although all candidates were given equal air time during the election campaign on national radio and television, they were at a clear disadvantage given the regime's ability to mobilize large segments of the public and trumpet its achievements.

The elections did little to dispel the government's authoritarian and uncompromising image. Over the years, opposition parties have been subjected to harsh repression. Their leaders were periodically arrested arbitrarily and party activists complained about government restrictions. These measures further clouded Tunisia's checkered human rights record. Tunisia's opposition parties have been so effectively muzzled that several of them even endorsed Ben 'Ali's presidential candidacy, casting doubt on their ability to serve even as symbolic alternatives to the regime.

The government's conduct prior to these latest elections has been equally troubling. President Ben 'Ali is largely recognized in Tunisia for his economic achievements. Yet despite his popularity, he has shown no sign of curbing his authoritarian rule. In preparation for this election, he initiated a constitutional amendment, annulling a previous limitation of two presidential terms that would have barred him

from running again. Under the new rule, a president may serve an unlimited number of terms, provided that his age does not exceed 75. Ben 'Ali, at age 68, remains at the epicenter of Tunisian politics; there are no other political figures who command a similar degree of authority. The question of a potential successor to the president, often raised in other Arab countries, is naturally unclear. Ben 'Ali has never appointed a vice president, and he periodically reshuffles his cabinet in an effort to prevent ministers from enhancing their political stature. Reports of high-level corruption have also tarnished the regime's image among an increasingly wary public.

The threat of Tunisia's Islamist opposition is often cited by government officials as the reason for their gradualist approach in promoting pluralism and democracy. As in other countries, the government faced vocal Islamist opposition - - mostly from al-Nahda, a banned Islamist party, in the early 1990s. Many Tunisians, fearful of a possible spillover of neighboring Algeria's internal strife between Islamist extremists and government forces, did not dispute the regime's uncompromising stance against them. Since then, Islamist presence has largely receded from public life. Nevertheless, concerns about a possible resurgence of Islamist activity remain and undoubtedly affect the government's democratization policies.

This week's elections do not reflect any change in the contours of Tunisian politics. Ben 'Ali and his government show little inclination to abandon their authoritarian politics, and the country's recognized opposition parties are not in any position to serve as a viable alternative to the regime. Most of Tunisia's western allies, in an attempt to preserve stability, will prefer to view the elections as another step along the long road to democracy and will mute their criticism of the regime. Ben 'Ali himself has admitted that "a lot remains to be done" in the area of civil liberties. But in the aftermath of the elections, his willingness to do a lot remains questionable.

Keyword: Tunisia