

The Tunisian Elections: Hope in Uncertain Times

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It's a new day (again) in Tunisia. On Sunday Tunisians headed to the polls to vote in the second, countrywide elections since former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali left power in 2011. The first elections were filled with excitement; the world watched intensely, and citizens – many unpracticed but euphoric – waited patiently for hours to cast their ballots. They were the first assembly elections in the Arab world after the popular overthrow of a long-standing dictator – ever. No one was sure who would come out on top (although the moderate Islamist Ennahda party was heavily favored), and it was unclear what the future would hold. But it was a moment to remember.

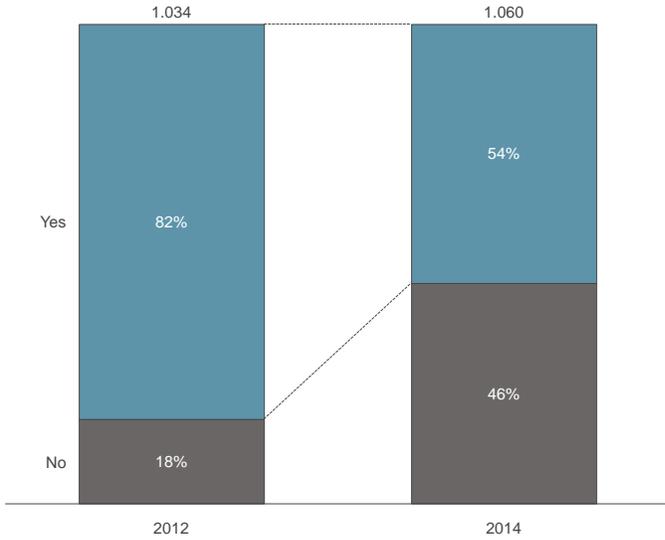
Sunday's elections were equally significant, although the enthusiasm from both the international and local communities in the lead-up to elections had waned. Tunisia's progress has been overshadowed by other concerns. The world's attention now focuses on civil wars in Syria and Libya, the spread of the Islamic State and concerns over insecurity and instability. It is hard to remember three years back, when talk was of the "Arab Spring" and futures seemed bright.

Inside Tunisia, too, the mood had shifted from optimism to concern. The last years have not treated Tunisians well. They weathered political crises, passed a constitution, and organized elections that were widely expected to be free and fair. Yet, they also saw their economy worsen, inequalities persist and frustrations mount. Indeed, a Transitional Governance Project (TGP) poll conducted in June (with funding from the United Nations Democracy Fund) found that 48 percent of Tunisians believed that they were worse off than they were before 2011. This level has remained steady, up only slightly from 47 percent in a 2012 TGP poll.

Tunisians are disillusioned with parties, elections and politicians. Again surveys are telling: 75 percent of respondents did not trust parties, and only 54 percent planned to vote (down from 82 percent in 2012). So too, the percentage of respondents who believed that democracy is the best form of government has decreased – from 78 percent in 2012 to 59 percent. This is not surprising. Many Tunisians viewed the most important characteristic of democracy in economic terms, with 27 percent of respondents in 2014 identifying basic necessities as the most important element of democracy. When economic improvement does not accompany transitions, many lose faith in democracy. The more politically engaged also worry, fearing deadlock, instability and yet another political crisis.

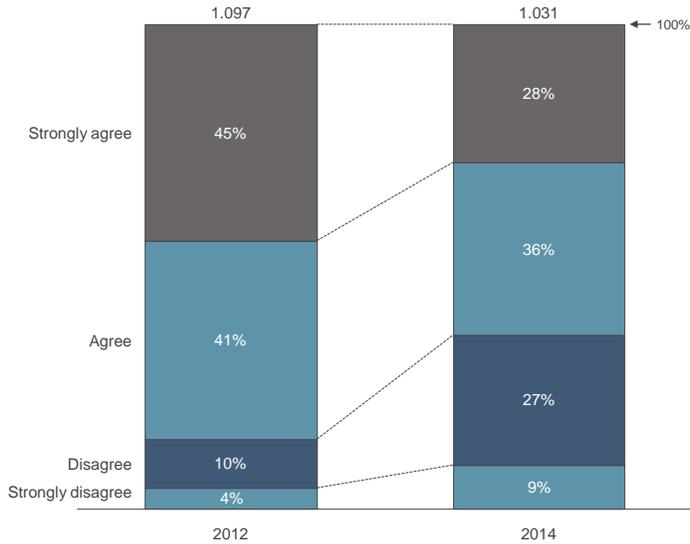
The intention of voting if parliamentary elections were to be held tomorrow was substantially higher in 2012 than 2014

If parliamentary elections are to be held tomorrow, would you vote?



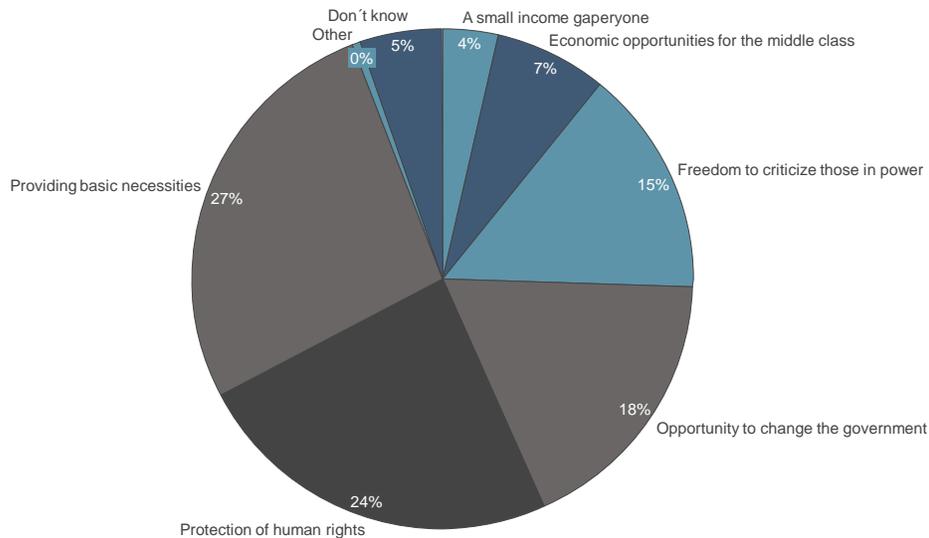
Support for democracy has declined from 2012 to 2014

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Democracy may have its problems but it is better than any other form of government"?



Provision of basic necessities and protection of human rights are viewed as the most important characteristics of a democracy.

People often differ in their views on the characteristics that are essential to democracy. If you have to choose only one thing, what would you choose as the most important characteristic?



But in the midst of the tension, there is reason for hope. Tunisia has a track record of overcoming difficulties. The past three years witnessed ineffective governments, political assassinations, strikes, demonstrations and finally the expulsion of the Ennahda-led coalition, referred to as the Troika. Yet, it also saw a constitution finalized in January approved by more than 90 percent of the deputies, and a technocratic government that maintained popular support as it prepared elections.

Sunday's elections gave yet more reason for hope. The turnout was unexpectedly high, reaching over 60 percent of registered voters. Voting was peaceful, and as strong turnout figures came in, Tunisians exuberant. Additionally, many saw the strong showing of Nida Tunis as turning a new page. This party, led by Beji Caid Essebsi, who served briefly as prime minister following Ben Ali's fall, formed after the 2011 uprisings to rival Ennahda. Its greatest competitor has been Ennahda, a party with roots in the outlawed Islamist movement that had quickly risen to prominence in 2011. In the months before the elections, these two parties were going head-to-head, with each holding about a third of the decided vote in June.

But, the biggest reason for hope stems from the notion that Tunisian politics is increasingly "politics as usual." The political playing field has remained fragmented, with 1,327 lists competing, but it is taking shape. Parties are beginning to represent distinct constituencies and interests. For instance, the TGP polls show that Ennahda voters were much more likely to prefer a role of religion in politics than those of Nida Tunis, and to a slightly lesser extent, the Ennahda voter felt more strongly that the state should play a role in the economy than the supporters for Nida Tunis. Decided Ennahda voters also

were less likely to see torture against suspected terrorists as justified; only 45 percent of Ennahda voters saw torture against suspected terrorists or criminals to obtain information as justified, compared to 63 percent of Nida voters. On the whole, 52 percent of Tunisians thought that it can be justified.) Finally, the polls found that supporters for Ennahda were more likely to be optimistic about the future (or, perhaps, to view the past more negatively) than those of Nida, but were also more likely to see democracy in economic terms. There are also important demographic differences, of course, with Ennahda voters more likely to be male, from lower classes and practicing religion.

This may not seem surprising – parties often draw from different support bases. But, it is a change. In 2011, supporters of Ennahda spanned a large spectrum of voters. They tended to be religious, but they had very diverse views on the role of religion in the state, and the state in the economy. In 2011, when voters turned out to the polls, they had a vague understanding of the issues at hand. Tunisians across the spectrum looked to Ennahda as the party that “deserved” to have power and could most effectively counter the old regime. These sentiments have disappeared. Indeed, Ennahda has the largest disapproval rating of any party, with the TGP polls finding that 60 percent of respondents had negative attitudes toward the party.)

A distinct political scene is emerging in Tunisia. Citizens frustrated with democracy, divided over political parties and engaging in contests over interests are part and parcel of democratic contestation. Far from something to be decried as the end of consensus, or a reason for pessimism, it should be recognized as growing pains for a new democratic policy. The path ahead is challenging and success by no means assured, but today, it seems that Tunisia is up to the challenge. Tunisia’s nascent democratic process stands as a beacon of hope in an uncertain region.

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