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The Tunisian Berlusconi

The first round of the presidential elections shows the biggest threat to democracy is no longer political Islam, but populism

This surprise was paradoxically predictable: when the Tunisian election booths closed and first exit polls were published on Sunday evening, neither the secular parties' established candidates nor their Islamist opponents were celebrating. Instead, the top spots were taken by Kais Saied and Nabil Karoui, two types of anti-establishment politicians that gain support all over the world these days.

His opponents depict Saied, a lecturer in constitutional law, as a cold-blooded Islamist. In reality, he is rather a fervent advocate of the translation of the 'will of the people' into political mechanisms, including condemning homosexuality and advocating for a referendum on the extension of the death penalty. With a strong finish, he managed to double his predicted results within a week's time. Karoui, on the other hand, had been considered the favourite for these elections in the past weeks. In any case, these results are the climax of an election campaign that started with a bang on 23 August.

From a soap opera

A spectacular event occurred in otherwise tranquil Tunisia on that day: right in the middle of a motorway, a large police contingent arrested the most colourful personality in the country. Presidential candidate Karoui, media mogul and self-proclaimed saviour of the poor, was taken to the notorious Mornaguia prison in connection with a years-long investigation of tax evasion and money laundering.

Clearly leading the polls, Karoui stood to win Sunday's first round of the Tunisian presidential election – from prison. Thus he could have written the next chapter of a drama even more thrilling than the popular Turkish soap operas that brought fame to his 'Nessma TV' station. In a country that prides itself on its stability and proper political etiquette, this amounts to an unusual and even sensational turn of events.

And the left? Even while now largely marginalised, it contributed its share to political demobilisation.

This dramatic state of affairs has to do with an election campaign that reflects the political stalemate of recent years. Nearly nine years after the start of the Tunisian revolution, its people are experiencing the same seemingly inevitable frustration with parliamentary democracy seen elsewhere in the world. Established actors are losing their ability to mobilise, societal certainties are no longer operative, and affiliations and alliances are dissolving. 'Anti-system politicians' are gaining in popularity while they freely mix political life with their unorthodox personal style. The established parties are at a loss to deal with this phenomenon and look increasingly desperate for a way out of this impasse.

The disintegration of the establishment

The Tunisian elite in particular has a hard time digesting the end of an era they had dominated. Ever since the time of Habib Bourguiba, independent Tunisia's first president, this elite has presented the country as a special case in the Arab world – a secular, western-oriented and socially enlightened ally of Europe. But this was only part of the story, as shown by the post-revolution success of the Islamic Ennahdha party, which received the highest number of votes of all parties in 2011 and still represents the largest faction in parliament today.

The Tunisian establishment reacted with a secular consensus coalition: a united opposition to the Islamists, the Middle Ages and regression. With this rough rhetoric, Beji Caid Essebsi managed to win the 2014 presidential elections and to make Nidaa Tounes, the ruling party, the strongest group in parliament at the time. His polarising campaign, however, didn't keep him from entering into a 'grand coalition' with Ennahdha immediately after the elections.

Since then, this coalition has been governing the country, albeit with little success. The results are sobering: while unemployment stagnates at a high level and the middle class' purchasing power continues to decline, the secular-conservative parties are preoccupied with infighting and becoming increasingly divided. With Essebsi's death on 25 July – he had essentially confined himself to defending the 'heritage of Bourguiba' – the extent of secular-conservative self-destruction and the lack of discussion about actual political issues became obvious.

In this first round, a handful of candidates from the secular camp that broke away from Nidaa Tounes contended to become Essebsi's successor. But they find themselves no longer able to determine society's narratives to the same extent as the late president did. The dichotomy of secular-conservative versus religious-conservative is clearly no longer enough to win majorities. Populists, Islamists and reactionaries are threatening to take the place once held by Nidaa Tounes.

The failing left?

And the left? Even while now largely marginalised, it contributed its share to political demobilisation. More so than the secular-conservative camp, it sees itself as the absolute opposite of the religious factions. Ever since the unsolved murders of the two left-wing politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013, there's an antagonistic position toward the Ennahdha party in particular.

Necessary debates on social justice and regional cohesion, both major driving forces of the revolution, have been overshadowed by discussions about societal models and lifestyle. The dogmatism inherent in these positions prevents the emergence of a broader left-wing force to this day – it thus plays into the hands of secular-conservative forces. The Tunisian left has already reached the point that the European left has long been heading for: by overemphasising identity politics as a first line of political demarcation, it has deprived itself of any realistic chance for power.

So we'd have an Islamist as the candidate of the secular establishment. Who would have thought.

There are indications that some political actors are aware of the cul-de-sac they've manoeuvered themselves into. One example is Mohammed Abbou, Secretary-General of the left-wing 'Courant Démocratique', who managed to obtain about 4 per cent of the votes in Sunday's election. Abbou consistently refuses to be involved in identity-political conflicts and emphasises the need for social progress. While a similar approach in 2014 rendered the social-democratic Ettakatol party politically insignificant, the Courant Démocratique is currently able to stabilise an authentically left faction at a modest level. This was obviously not decisive for this year's presidential elections, but it shows that a force beyond conservatism, Islamism and populism can indeed emerge.

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As a result of this sobering analysis of the Tunisian political landscape, it's barely surprising that a phenomenon like Karoui could appear on the scene. With the weakness of the secular camp and the self-imposed irrelevance of the left, some space has opened up alongside the religious bloc. Having used every available media resource to polarise the 2014 campaign in favour of the secular forces, he has never missed an opportunity to present himself as a benevolent advocate of the poor. His TV channel promotes him nonstop; on his ubiquitous campaign posters he either embraces young mothers or hands out food to elderly ladies, while denouncing state failure and corruption.

The fact that the multimillionaire is being convicted of tax evasion and money laundering does not diminish his popularity among his followers. Similar to his Italian role model, this 'Tunisian Berlusconi' commands enough personal charisma to win over a potentially decisive part of the populace. Even his voters would likely not attest to his integrity – but neither would they do so regarding the other candidates. Karoui's popularity embodies the crisis of confidence in the political establishment, as well as the legitimacy crisis of parliamentary democracy and the mute democratic actors.

The strong showing of Karoui and Saied's result show: the country has embarked on the path of democratic transformation, but is still far from its goal. And we should move away from a long-standing would-be certainty: the greatest threat to democracy in Tunisia is no longer political Islam but populism.

What now? The results are still not published officially, but assuming Karoui and Saied are confirmed, we face two possible scenarios. The first scenario sees both candidates facing off in the second round of the presidential elections in three weeks. Most established parties will then probably support Saied over Karoui and give him a head start to become Tunisia's next president.

The second scenario sees an accelerated trial of Karoui and a possible sentence ahead of the run-off ballot. In that case, the third-seeded Abdelfattah Mourou from the Ennahdha party would take the vacant position and change the dynamics of the campaign dramatically. Between the unpredictable Saied and Mourou, most secular parties would be inclined to speak out in favour of Mourou.

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