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DEMOCRATIC LOCAL ELECTIONS ARE A STEP FORWARD

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As they went to the polls in the first ever free local elections in the Arab world after Lebanon, the Tunisian people offered their neighbours in the Maghreb and Europe a lesson in democratic politics. Those who voted inflicted heavy losses on the coalition of two political parties which has ruled the country for just over three years. The lay Nidaa, founded in 2012 by president Beji Caid Essebsi lost one third of its electors (900,000), its partner the Islamist Nahda, led by Rachid Ghannouchi, half (500,000). Independent lists won a plurality of votes, 32.9%. Hope resides in the fact that 47% of new municipal councillors are women and 37% are under 35. The two leading parties presented lists in virtually every one of the 360 municipalities. Many Tunisians hope fresh blood will be injected into a discredited political class as new personalities emerge at local level.

This could be the case in Tunis where Nahda, led by a women, who is a chemist and does not sport the scarfe, Souad Abderrahim, won 21 seats out of 60; in Ariana, a suburb of Tunis the independent Fahdel Moussa, former dean of the faculty of law of Tunis was ahead. In La Marsa, the capital's residential suburb, a respected paedriatician, Slim Maherhi came out on top. The small Parti Destourien Libre, founded by a member of Ben Ali's single ruling RCD, Abir Moussio topped the poll in Siliana, one of the towns that rose in revolt against the dictator in December 2011, a respected the paedriatrician. Le courant démocrate, led by a man well known for his insistence on clean government, Mohamed Abbou won many seats in the south of the country.

It is only when mayors are elected by the new municipal councillors later this month that the shape of new local politics will become clearer. Broader political considerations will weigh heavily as parliamentary and presidential elections are due next year. Will the alliance between Nidaa and Nahda which has delivered such poor governance and weak economic growth since 2014 continue? Will newly elected independent personalities stick to improving management in their respective towns or regions or opt for national politics? More fundamentally how long will it take for the new councillors to get to grips with the new legal framework which defines their role and which has yet to be waved through by the constitutional court? How will new mayors behave if and when strikes affect schools, hospitals or industrial production in their areas? These questions will remain unanswered until the end of the summer. The end of the month of Ramadan is fast approaching, followed by two months of "séance unique", when the country's civil service closes at 1pm and millions of Tunisians head for the beaches.

Foreign observers monitoring the poll, notably for the EU acknowledged that the official body in charge of the poll, the *Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections* (ISIE) worked hard to ensure smooth polling as did civil society organisations and many candidates. The municipalities have the potential to cause a great shift in the balance of power between the centre and the localities in Tunisia. Calling this a “second revolution” is maybe overstating the case but democratically accountable decentralisation is progressing.

People are not yet aware of the significance of this all the more as the cadre governing the allocation of power was only published in the run up to the poll and even then lots of details of respective allocation of responsibilities have yet to be worked out. Then there is the key question of the financing of the whole system as only 4% of the state budget is allocated to the municipalities. The rapid rise in state debt and fairly flat rate of economic growth since 2011 explain why state coffers are empty. That said, addressing immediate concerns of refuse collection and public transport offer opportunities for bold initiatives, especially in coastal towns where taxes on hotels where the tax on hotel activity and rentals offer new councillors means to act which in many towns simply do not exist. Tourist Arrivals are sharply up this year which will bolster such tax receipts.

Pessimists note that voter turnout was no higher than the last time local elections took place in 2010, before the fall of Ben Ali. Those who hope Tunisia will grow deeper democratic roots are worried because only 65% of Tunisians eligible to vote are registered (5m out of 8m) and only 35% of the latter bothered to cast a vote. Those who voted for independent lists won 33% of the vote (they represent 7.5% of those entitled to vote) The respective figures for Nahda are 30% and 7%, for Nidaa 22% and 5%. Such a low turnout robs the poll of part of its legitimacy. It illustrates the profound disenchantment all Tunisians, not least of young people under the age of 30, with a political class whose endless intrigues and apparent refusal to confront the serious economic and social problems Tunisia confronts has left the country with an uncertain future.

In the absence of faster economic growth, formal municipal democracy cannot achieve much. Bold economic reforms will condition the relative success of failure of democratic local government. Fighting corruption at the local level and making the administration more accountable is worthwhile but success here will depend crucially on support from the centre. Mentalities need to change but that is a long term process.

A vastly expanded civil service, the price of accommodating Nahda into the system, explains why over half the state budget is earmarked for wages. A generation ago, the Tunisian civil service was one of the best in the Arab world, today it is often inefficient if not downright obstructive of private entrepreneurs and riddled with petty corruption. The powerful trade union UGTT keeps pressing for higher wages to make up for prices rises - inflation is running at 7% annually. The IMF which has loaned Tunisia \$2.9bn, \$1bn of which has been drawn down, is unlikely to disburse new tranches if the government caves in to demands for state salary increases. This puts the Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, already under attack from Nidaa’s leaders, between a rock and a very hard place. Political turmoil at the centre will can only delay major decisions on state investment and make the life of new mayors more difficult. Yet, despite the low turnout, Tunisia seems a country more at peace with itself than a few years ago when a Nahda led government was encouraging identity debates on the place of religion in and questioning the status of women who, in Tunisia, have had equal rights with men since 1956. Despite painting everything Ben Ali did in the darkest colours, many left wing and Nahda critics of the former dictator admit, sotto voce, that before his family’s predatory instincts ran a mock in the 2000s not all the economic decisions he took damaged Tunisia. They know that petty corruption and the mafia barons fuelled by a growing informal economy risk destroying the economy if they continue unchecked.

As he has switched from Islamic garb to tie and suit, Rachid Ghannouchi seems a less bitter man today than when he returned to Tunisia after years of exile in 2011. The president's long experience of international affairs has helped him steer Tunisia through the treacherous waters of international - especially inter-Arab affairs but unwillingness to appoint a prime minister who dares spell out tough economic measures – even if he falls on his sword afterwards, has deprived Tunisia of the debate on its economic future it desperately needs. However uncertain the future, more accountable local government is a small step in the right direction.