The Election of Ennahda and the Future of Tunisian Democracy

by Elizabeth Fair

People gather in Tunis to protest electoral fraud.

http://www.upi.com/News_Photos/News/Protests-against-electoral-fraud-in-Tunisia/5812/12/?ref=ma
On October 24, Tunisia held its first free election since the Revolution. Demonstrations in Tunisia began the Arab Spring, and the country has been a focal point of global attention as it creates a new government with dignity, enthusiasm, correctness, and little outside assistance. Described as a day of festivities and equality, voters waited in line for their turn to cast a ballot. More than 90 percent of registered voters (about 55 percent of the population) came out on Election Day. Apart from a few small protests concerning election fraud, the results were issued without incident. The Ennahda Party won 41 percent of the vote, or 90 of the 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly, and was charged with the responsibility of creating a new constitution. Congress for the Republic received the next highest number of votes, gaining 30 of the 217 seats. What do these parties and seat allocation mean for Tunisia’s future?

The Ennahda Party, which won the vast majority of seats, is a moderate Islamist group, sparking fears among commentators that their influence will stifle secular liberal freedoms. Many Tunisians, however, saw their vote for the Ennahda Party as a vote for honesty and morality, not necessarily for Islamic reasons. The Islamist party enlisted support from the more conservative, working class sectors of the country. The party was banned by the previous regime, but continued to work with its working class support base. Islamist parties represent organized opposition, giving them an immediate advantage in the first elections. They have brand recognition, but that does not necessarily mean that have an irrevocable mandate from the people. Their governance of the country will count for more than their Islamist tendencies. More female candidates ran in this party than in any of the others. Following the spirit of the parity law instituted for this election, every slate was required to be made up half by females. The spokeswoman for the party is the Western-educated daughter of the party leader, and Ennahda has already expressed that women can choose to wear the veil or not (it had previous been prohibited in Tunisia). The party will conform to Tunisian visions of democracy, not the other way around.

More generally liberal political parties ran a close second in the election, confounding commentators and challenging them to make sense of votes for both Islamists and secular liberals. Tunisian unity came first for voters, and parties that sought to distance themselves from Ennahda or discounted sharing power with the group suffered at the ballot box. Such parties were accused of not creating a strong platform of their own and attempting to tap into fears of a hard-line Islamist state. A few hundred people did protest against what they saw as Ennahda’s election fraud, but most Tunisians saw this as an opportunity for cooperation in politics, if not compromise in civil and human rights.

The question remains of how the new Constituent Assembly will handle the next few steps into democracy. Tunisians feel a sense of ownership for their country and will peacefully defend their freedoms, and the success of this election stands as an inspiration to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the triumph of Ennahda and the parties that chose not to bring up religion as an issue for the campaign, raises a troubling issue that the role of religion will remain a silent deal-breaker, instead of something defined openly in Tunisia’s forthcoming constitution. Tunisia grapples with the legacy of French-inspired civil rights and more conservative Islamic views that led to widespread protests of the recent TV showing of the film Persepolis. Free religious expression is a priority, but if it is not acknowledged as an open right instead of an assumed one, assumptions about morals could become codified. Turkey has been cited thus far as a good example of a secular country ruled by an Islamist party; let us hope that Tunisia takes this example and fashions it as their own.
References


