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Tunisia's Elections: Marking Time

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Tunisia's recent presidential and parliamentary elections present an unflattering portrait of the country's political system. President Zayn al-Abidin Ben Ali, who has been in power since 1987, won an overwhelming victory, garnering over 90 percent of the vote. The ruling RCD (Democratic Constitutional Rally) party also maintained its dominant position in parliament, leaving little or no space for alternative political currents. The election campaign, despite the government's efforts, failed to generate genuine excitement and interest among the Tunisian public.

Notwithstanding the officially reported voter turnout of over 89 percent for the October 24 elections, some Tunisians expressed disappointment with the government in the weeks leading up to the vote, openly doubting the regime's declared intent to loosen what has long been a strongly authoritarian and repressive regime, intolerant of any form of dissent. Under these circumstances, the prospect of establishing a more pluralist political system in Tunisia remains dim. Still, the elections may also signal the beginning of the end of the Ben Ali era. Under Tunisia's current constitutional provisions, which limit the age of a presidential candidate, Ben Ali will not be able to run in the next elections, scheduled for 2014, raising the question of succession.

Tunisia is widely recognized as a stable, moderate, and pro-western North African country. Although its economy has suffered setbacks in recent years and unemployment is on the rise, Tunisia remains in a relatively stronger position than neighboring countries. Its political life has been less affected by the rise of radical Islamist movements, which have seriously challenged the political status quo across the region. This is an outcome of the Tunisian government's "zero tolerance" approach to such activity, stemming from the challenge posed by Islamists in the late 1980s and the authorities' general intolerance of any form of dissent. Indeed, many critics argue that Tunisia has become one of North Africa's most repressive authoritarian states, in which opposition forces of all shades are effectively muzzled. Human rights

activists in Tunisia are frequently harassed by the authorities for various alleged felonies, and are often unable to continue their activities. President Ben Ali and his close associates have over the years repeatedly rejected international criticism of human rights violations and political repression. But the reality on the ground remains problematic. The state-controlled media refrains from any form of criticism against the authorities, and public debate of pressing issues is limited and stifled. This is particularly disappointing since Tunisian society contains many of the vital ingredients for a vibrant, pluralist society: an educated population, a strong middle class, and a political tradition of broad public involvement in the country's affairs.

Seeking to mollify its critics and burnish its tarnished image, the Tunisian regime has in recent years trumpeted various reforms designed to provide a semblance of political pluralism. Presidential elections now include a number of competing candidates, in addition to Ben Ali. Twenty percent of the seats in the Tunisian parliament are allocated to legal opposition parties and election campaigns explicitly attempt to generate public interest in politics. These efforts, however, fail to conceal the regime's omnipotent grip on public life. The few legal opposition parties, usually weak and locked in internal disputes, face various restrictions in promoting their presidential candidates. Their allocated seats in parliament, itself a rubber stamp institution, also fail to provide a meaningful outlet for promoting alternatives to the regime's policies.

Against this unpromising backdrop, the Tunisian presidential election campaign was noteworthy for its lack of excitement. The three candidates competing against Ben Ali did not employ aggressive campaign tactics to attract public support. Two of them, Mohamed Bouchiha of the People's Unity Party, and Ahmed Inoubli, of the Unionist Democratic Union remained low-key throughout the campaign, leaving the spotlight to the incumbent. The one candidate who was more critical of Ben Ali, Ahmed Brahim of the former communist oriented Ettajdid movement, complained that he did not receive sufficient air time in the country's state-run media to disseminate his positions.

Although he had no concern regarding the outcome of the vote, Ben Ali reacted harshly against several critical newspaper articles published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Tunisian authorities detained and then deported *Le Monde's* special correspondent Florence Beaugé, accusing her of slandering the country and publishing false reports. An article concerning the Ben Ali family's business affairs, which raised questions of possible high level corruption, may have been particularly irksome. Ben Ali himself took the unusual measure of publicly appearing on television shortly before the

vote began, and denounced the "desperate campaign" of "certain foreign journalists" who criticized the upcoming vote's integrity without providing concrete evidence. The Tunisian press, echoing the president, accused Beaugé of calling for murder, or an attack on Tunisia, precisely when Tunisia was making important steps towards democracy and pluralism. The harsh Tunisian reaction indicates how sensitive the government is to international criticism, even while maintaining a firm grip on power.

Moving beyond the elections, the most pressing question on Tunisia's political agenda is how to move towards a post-Ben Ali era. It is unclear whether the Tunisian president himself will start to prepare the ground for such a reality. Ben Ali has traditionally refrained from appointing a vice-president and frequently reshuffles his cabinet, hindering the possibility for individual leaders to strengthen their political position. Nor has he ever indicated who, and how, he should be succeeded. In addition, the possibility of a constitutional change, which would allow Ben Ali to run again after reaching the current age limit of 75 should not be ruled out. As for the country's existing political parties, they do not have the capacity to seriously prepare for the future. Unless Ben Ali makes a serious effort to reconfigure the country's political life during the coming years, the likely contours of the future, post-Ben Ali era will remain opaque.

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At first glance, Tunisia's recent presidential and parliamentary elections present an unflattering portrait of the country's political system. President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who has been in power since 1987, won an overwhelming victory, garnering over 90 percent of the vote. The ruling RCD (Democratic Constitutional Rally) party also maintained its dominant position in parliament, leaving little or no space for alternative political currents. The election campaign, despite the government's efforts, failed for the most part to generate genuine excitement and interest among the Tunisian public. Notwithstanding the officially reported voter turnout of over 89 percent for the October 24 elections, some Tunisians had expressed disappointment with the government in the weeks leading up to the vote, openly doubting the regime's declared intent to loosen what has long been a strongly authoritarian and repressive regime, one which is intolerant of any form of dissent. Under these circumstances, the prospect of establishing a more pluralist political system in Tunisia remains dim. Still, the elections may also signal the beginning of the end of the Ben Ali era. Under Tunisia's current constitutional provisions, which limit the age of a presidential candidate, Ben 'Ali will not be able to run in the next elections, scheduled for 2014, raising the question of succession.

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Against this unpromising backdrop, the Tunisian presidential election campaign got off to a slow start. The three candidates competing against Ben Ali did not employ aggressive campaign tactics to attract public support. Two of them, Mohamed Bouchiha of the People's Unity Party, and Ahmed Inoubli, of the Unionist Democratic Union remained rather low key throughout the campaign, leaving the spotlight to the incumbent. The one candidate who was more critical of Ben Ali, Ahmed Brahim of the former communist oriented Ettajdid movement, complained that he did not receive sufficient air time in the country's state-run media to disseminate his positions.

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