

Islamists claim victory in Tunisia's Constituent Assembly elections

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Tunisia held elections Sunday to elect a 217-member Constituent Assembly, tasked with drafting a new constitution within one year. The assembly will also form a new interim government and select a president, who will hold office until the general election scheduled for late next year.

The Constituent Assembly's stated purpose is to design a new constitution and political regime for Tunisia, whose US-backed dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced to flee by mass working class protests in January. These began after an unemployed vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself in Sidi Bouzid in protest against social misery and state repression. Ben Ali's failed attempts to crush the protests led to his downfall and sparked protests throughout the Arab world, including the fall of US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

Ben Ali's successor, President Fouad Mebazza, set up a reform commission after mass protests in February forced out Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi to try to stabilize the regime and halt protests and strikes. This commission organized the Constituent Assembly election. It included nominees of the Tunisian regime, union bureaucrats, the UTICA business federation, and members of petty-bourgeois ex-left parties such as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Ettajdid, the former Tunisian Communist Party. (See "Tunisian Reform Commission defends capitalist regime")

As of this writing, final election results had yet to be released, with only 101 seats out of the total 217 having been assigned. The right-wing Islamist party Ennahda expected to have a plurality of the vote, leaving behind "center-left" parties such as Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic (CPR). According to the latest results, Ennahda has won 43 seats, CPR 16, Ettakatol 10, Aridha Chaabia (Popular Petition) 12, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) 5, Afek Tounes 3 and the Maoist Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hamma Hammami won 1 seat.

In the overseas vote, Ennahda took 9 of 18 seats, with the rest going to Ettakatol and the CPR.

Ennahda, which was banned under Ben Ali regime, began talks with several other political parties, including Ettakatol and CPR, to form a national unity government. Founded in 1981

and inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda is led by Rachid Ghannouchi, who has lived in exile in Britain for 22 years. He claims that his party has ideological ties to the Islamist party of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan.

Ettakatol was formed by Mustafa Ben Jaafar, a doctor, in 1994. Ben Jaafar served as public health minister in the first interim government of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi after Ben Ali was ousted. Ben Jaafar was forced to resign by continuing mass protests against the role of Ben Ali henchmen in the Tunisian government.

The Congress for the Republic was created by human rights activist Moncef Marzouki in 2001 and it was banned under Ben Ali. Marzouki went into exile in France and returned to Tunisia after Ben Ali fled the country.

The election was widely promoted by the Western media as setting the stage for a "democratic transition process." US President Barack Obama praised it as an "important step forward."

In fact, its right-wing result does not reflect this winter's uprising in the working class—in which the Islamists played no significant role—but the right-wing character of the transition regime and the counterrevolutionary aims of its deeply unpopular reform commission.

The Tunisian Electoral Commission reported that turnout for Sunday's vote was over 70 percent. However, this figure counts only the 4.1 million registers voters, out of a total of 7.5 million eligible voters registered. In fact, over half of the electorate did not participate in the vote, underscoring mass alienation from the elections and hostility to the political establishment. (See "Tunisians distrust upcoming Constituent Assembly election")

The transition regime, staffed by large numbers of former Ben Ali regime officials, has addressed none of the social demands of the working class. In Sidi Bouzid a 24-year-old unemployed worker who sells vegetables, Djamaï Bouallègue, told the French Stalinist daily *l'Humanité*: "Since January 14, it's true we can speak more freely, but my situation has not changed ... I do not trust any party. I do not trust promises

without proof.”

L'Humanité also spoke to Ben Mohammed Kadri, a 34-year-old unemployed worker with a master's degree in earth sciences, in Regueb, some 30 kilometers from Sidi Bouzid. He said that his family has a total of 90 dinars (€45) per month to support three people, of which 60 dinars (€30) are spent on medicine for his father, whom authorities have not given health care.

Kadri said: “We are left with 30 dinars (€14)—that is to say 250 millimes (12 euro-cents) per day per person. It's not even enough to buy bread.” He added, “The Tunisian revolution has changed nothing in terms of inequality. I will not go vote as long as I have not obtained my right to a job.”

Under conditions where there was no clear left-wing opposition to the regime, Ennahda was able to pose as the sole representative of social discontent. It ran against the reform commission, which was supported by center-left bourgeois parties like the PDP and Ettajdid.

Having initially participated in the reform commission, Ennahda left it in June, protesting that the aims of the revolution were not being realized. While it supported measures undertaken by the commission, it cynically ran a populist campaign against it.

Voters punished PDP and Ettajdid, on the other hand, for their collaboration with the regime. Before the Sunday poll, the PDP was expected to get a substantial number of seats. However, it went down to a humiliating defeat, obtaining just five seats. So did the Democratic Modernist Pole, a coalition of civil associations and political parties led by the Ettajdid movement.

Both the PDP and Ettajdid were recognised political parties under Ben Ali, even signing a 1988 national pact with the regime.

Ennahda's main goals are now to reassure the Tunisian business community and global finance capital that it will pursue pro-business policies against the working class, while securing enough support from the center-left and petty-bourgeois parties to obtain a workable majority.

Ennahda secretary-general Hamadi Jbeli, tipped as a possible Ennahda prime minister, met with the UTICA employers' federation on Tuesday. In remarks to the official TAP news agency, he said Ennahda would make no major changes in banking or on social issues, like alcohol and women's rights. He said, “Is it logical to handicap a strategic sector like tourism by forbidding wine or wearing bathing costumes? These are personal liberties for Tunisians and foreigners as well.”

Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi met with stock exchange executives on Wednesday, with the stock exchange rising after the meeting. Ghannouchi's son Moaz, an economist, said: “We wanted to reassure them that we are on their side and that we want to play a positive role in the Tunisian economy.”

Ennahda is also reassuring representatives of Western imperialist powers, including the United States and France,

who are supporting Ennahda's role in a future regime. The French news magazine *Jeune Afrique* commented: “According to sources at the US embassy in Tunis, the Americans could support a coalition between the Islamists and the Destourians [Tunisia's former ruling social-democrats], the only political forces that could, as they see it, successfully lead the country after the election of a Constituent Assembly.”

An anonymous Western diplomat in Tunis described the imperialist powers' attitude to Ennahda as follows in a Reuters interview: “We will pay close attention to what they implement, but on the economic side we have no cause for concern. Our biggest concern is long delays in government formation. A lot of their backers are from the merchant class who are keen on the idea of a liberal economic policy, and they don't have serious plans to change the economic policy of previous governments.”

As it prepares to continue the unpopular policies of Ben Ali, Ennahda is reaching out broadly to the petty-bourgeois “left,” union bureaucrats, professional organizations, and other middle-class groups to support them against the working class and the threat of new revolutionary struggles.

Ennahda campaign manager Abelhamid Jlassi said, “The priorities for Tunisia are clear. They are stability, conditions for a dignified life and the building of democratic institutions in Tunisia. We are open to anyone who shares these objectives.”

He added, “We will not shut anyone out of our consultations ... including political parties in the assembly and outside it, and civil society groups and unions.”

There are indications this invitation will be extended to the Maoist PCOT, which kept out of the reform commission while giving it tacit support. *Al Jazeera* published an opinion column by Larbi Sadiki, a Senior Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter, who wrote: “Hamma Hammami's PCOT may be also polling well, perhaps rewarded for consistency despite demonisation from anti-communist voices. Hammami, along with Marzouki, is potentially a partner in a prospective alliance led by the al-Nahda Party.”



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