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# Divine Election

As Tunisians prepare for the Arab Spring's first free election, they are discovering that democracy, too, can be messy.

BY **DON DUNCAN**

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**T**UNIS – Tunisia’s brave protesters, who toppled dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January, may have captivated the world and inspired similar revolts across the Arab world. But ahead of their first democratic elections this Sunday, Tunisians are far less united than they seemed just a few months ago.

"This election is a Zionist-American plot to rip Islam out of Tunisia," Abdullah, a bearded, middle-aged, Tunisian Islamist, told me last Friday near Kasbah Square in central Tunis, the site of many government buildings and several of the largest demonstrations during the January revolution.

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Abdullah, along with thousands of other Islamists who also came out to protest, was furious over a private Tunisian TV station's broadcast last week of the French-Iranian film *Persepolis*, which includes a depiction of God — a sacrilege for devout Sunni Muslims. The Islamists **hit the streets** in the capital, and in towns throughout Tunisia, after noontime prayer. Some of the protesters attempted to burn down the TV station that had broadcast the film. The controversial broadcast may have triggered the protest, but chants soon widened to include calls for the establishment of an Islamic state in Tunisia.

"Even if the elections weren't happening, you can't touch God; it's forbidden in Islam," said Abdullah, affirming that his movement's political aspirations applied in the long-term, not just during campaign season.

Days before the election, Tunisia is fiercely divided between its secular elite and its reemerging Islamist movements, most of which had gone underground under Ben Ali for fear of imprisonment or torture. Their numbers are unknown at present, but polls for the impending elections have

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served as clear indicators: The long-repressed Islamist al-Nahda ("Renaissance") party is projected to win some 20 percent of the vote in Sunday's election, a result that would transform it into the largest party in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

This is making many secular Tunisians and those in the country's minority groups, particularly the Berber and Jewish communities, very wary. And the recent anti-*Persepolis* riots have exacerbated the situation, heightening worries that the upcoming elections could be less than the positive step toward the democracy that Tunisia needs most right now.

"Jews are worried everywhere, but in Tunisia more so, because of the extremist problem," said Roger Bismuth, leader and spokesman for Tunisia's 2,000-strong Jewish community. "I think the big mistake is to mix up a country's politics and economics with the religion. I think if we get to that point, the country cannot function."

Al-Nahda, meanwhile, is aware of growing fears about its suspected illiberal intentions and has worked hard to project a moderate image. "Nahda does

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not represent Islam," spokeswoman Yusra Ghannouchi, who is also the daughter of the party leader, Rached Ghannouchi, told me. "Freedom of speech and freedom of expression is of paramount importance and we have striven for this. We are not for restricting these freedoms. But this should be done responsibly and with respect for the other's opinion."

Ghannouchi added that the same media that decried an attack on freedom of speech following the Islamist protest of the broadcast of *Persepolis* stood silent under Ben Ali, and colluded with his repression of freedom of speech — a tacit shot at the country's secular elite.

"In this phase leading up to the elections, it's unfortunate that there are people provoking more tensions, more divisions, more fears, more hysteria," she said. "We believe this is a time to provide more calm and more confidence for people to go forward to this historic election and to focus on it as our route toward democracy."

Secular movements, like the Ettajdid party, are crying foul. They call al-Nahda's centrist position a facade masking more sinister intentions.

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"It has two lines," said Abdelaziz Messaoudi, a member of Ettajdid's political committee. "Sometimes the leaders say they have nothing against the progressive gains of Tunisian society, but in the mosques, it says: 'No, we are an Islamic party. We want to fully apply the precepts of Islam.'"

Sunday's election will choose an assembly to draw up Tunisia's new constitution and define the country's political framework moving forward. So far, al-Nahda has put in a strong showing. Its door-to-door and grassroots campaign strategy is visibly more extensive than the other parties. Al-Nahda also has a reach in Tunisia's poorer, more religiously conservative, and long-neglected inland regions that is unmatched by the secularist parties, whose support base is concentrated along the more affluent, liberal coastal areas.

Al-Nahda's success may also stem from the fact that it has existed far longer than the majority of the 80-plus parties running in this election, most of which were formed after the January revolution. Founded in 1989 from a pre-existing group called Islamic Action, the party was banned from participating in that year's elections. In 1991, Ben Ali arrested thousands of the party's

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members and forced most of its leadership into exile. Ultimately settling in Britain, Ghannouchi remained in exile in for 22 years, until this January, when he returned to Tunisia to a hero's welcome from his followers.

With an extensive, well-organized international network of members or sympathizers, al-Nahda also has financial might unmatched by most other Tunisian parties. It draws funding from domestic supporters, but has also been accused of receiving financial backing from Gulf Arab states, although these accusations have not been substantiated. (In July, the party halted its participation in the Higher Political Reform Commission, which was established to oversee legal and constitutional reform in post-Ben Ali Tunisia, over a bill passed that banned foreign funding of political parties in Tunisia.)

Most of all, al-Nahda has a very close connection to the hearts and minds of its constituency in Tunisia, many of whom suffered greatly under the Ben Ali dictatorship. Like other groups who opposed the regime, al-Nahda members in Tunisia were active in revolutionary protests and the exiled leadership

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also acted to bolster the revolution from the sidelines.

"Lots of people grew up with the movement, despite the decades of brutal repression and fierce crackdowns," said Yusra Ghannouchi. "They appreciate that this movement, among others, was at the forefront of the struggle against dictatorship."

Tunisia's mosques serve as a broad medium through which al-Nahda can spread its political message — a tool that the secular parties sorely lack.

Faysal Cherif, a professor of history at the University of Tunis, noted that the mosques serve as an "unofficial canvassing platform" for the party. He added that the secular parties "made a big mistake" by using the campaign to bash the Islamist movements, rather than offering a solid vision for Tunisia's future.

The Islamist revival has provoked a backlash from Tunisia's secular citizens, who have taken to the streets in the run-up to the elections to register their displeasure. On Oct. 16, they held a demonstration that called for protecting freedom of speech and personal liberties in the new constitution, and

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denigrated al-Nahda and the Islamist movements. People chanted, "the people want a secular state," in response to chants for an Islamist one, two days prior. Others held placards saying "do not touch my liberty," and "free Tunisia." Many taped up their mouths to protest a feared clampdown on free speech, should Islamists win significant power in the election.

But Tunisia is not in real danger of becoming an Islamist state. Electoral laws passed in recent months moving Tunisia away from a majoritarian electoral system to one based on proportional representation will most likely produce a Constituent Assembly with a wide spread of parties, rather than one dominated by a few large parties. The only room for exerting power beyond the dictates of the electoral law is through coalition-building after the elections, which itself will ensure that a wide array of parties is represented in the policymaking process.

Another moderating influence on the post-election political sphere will be Tunisia's civil society, which has mushroomed since the fall of Ben Ali. Hundreds of new associations and NGOs have been formed and they intend

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to act as both watchdogs and pressure groups on Tunisia's new class of politicians. Groups such as the Association of Democratic Tunisian Women, the Tunisian Amazigh Culture Association, and Tunisian Democratic Youth have promised to keep a watchful eye on legislation that they believe will restrict Tunisians' freedoms.

"We won't remain twiddling our thumbs. We will put all kinds of pressure so that our rights don't regress," said Souad Rejeb, an executive board member of the Association of Democratic Tunisian Women, a lobby group that monitors women's interests in the media and in politics.

The upcoming election will represent one of the first signs of what sort of country will emerge from Ben Ali's fall and its chaotic aftermath. But as the gulf of distrust widens between the country's secularists and Islamists, Tunisians are learning a hard fact: Democracy, too, can be messy.

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