



# Tunisia

## Hidden Ticking Bomb?

By Antonino Occhiuto

Tunisia, despite being the smallest country in North Africa and often overlooked compared to other countries in the Middle East North Africa Region (MENA), was the first country bursting into rebellion during the 2011 Arab spring. Important elements of the recent May 2018 local administrative elections further signal what several analysts already worry about: the explosion, once again, of severe unrest on Europe's doorstep.

### The Election

The 2018 local election can be considered as a milestone on the road to democracy in the North African country, which has been internationally praised for its political transition following decades of dictatorship. Despite the laudable political developments, Tunisia is still struggling with its endemic economic problems, lack of development and widespread corruption. Tunisia is grappling with economic challenges including an inflation rate of around 8% and unemployment of more than 15%. Since 2011 security is also increasingly an issue, as terrorist activities and the appeal to join the ranks of Daesh have both been on the rise. Making things worse Tunisia's masses quickly lost their faith in the new democratic establishment which is increasingly seen as incapable of delivering any real change. This was reflected in the 2018 election turnout, attested at just 33.7% of the eligible voters. An additional problem, according to international monitors, is that only the elderly generations participated in the election process which failed to attract the country's youth. Young voters were markedly absent from polling stations in the capital Tunis and elsewhere. Tunisians' lack of trust in the political elite and minimal political awareness have pushed a disenfranchised youth to refrain from joining parties and the political process all together.

The Islamist Ennahda party won the election obtaining more than 5% more votes than its secularist rival, Nidaa Tounes. Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes are also coalition partners in the national government. They were expected to dominate the long-delayed polls, which saw officials elected in 350 municipalities for the first

time since a 2011 uprising ended decades of authoritarian rule. However, the two parties have been unable to bring about the kind of significant change that was expected from Tunisia's masses in the wake of former President Ben Ali's resignation. Party officials on both sides blame the unnatural Islamist-Secularist alliance for the failures which are underscored by the rising popularity of independent candidates in the 2018 vote. Consequently, competition between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes is on the rise and risks to create further tensions within Tunisia.

## **Europe and the Gulf**

Due to the prospect of instability, Europe risks losing one of the few islands of relative stability in the North Africa region which is strategically key for its interests. As such the European Union is interested in supporting the much-needed consolidation of Tunisia's democracy. A successful outcome in this effort would be beneficial in both the short and in the long term. In the short term it strengthens Tunisia's national resilience, that is key to diminish the risks of conflict spill over from Libya, while in the long run it helps to create an example for a genuine Arab democracy. The establishment of democratic institutions is crucial for Europe's future engagement with the Middle East North Africa region (MENA), given how often economic cooperation and development aid from the EU is subject to the partner countries improving the political and human rights of their citizens.

Concerning the impact of terrorism, Tunisia faces the complex challenge of dealing with the return of hundreds of foreign fighters who joined jihadi groups in Iraq, Syria and Libya. The Tunisian government and the European Union fear that these returnees will destabilize the country by bolstering domestic extremist networks. The recurrent protests in Tunisia's southern regions bordering Libya, result of the deep discontent that residents in these areas always had with the central authority, makes the future impact of jihadi returnees particularly worrying for the future of Tunisia's South.

The North African country is also increasingly relevant as the intra-Gulf crisis opposing Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Qatar continues. Tunisia was a close ally of the UAE under Ben Ali's reign. After the revolution, however, Tunis shifted away from Abu Dhabi and towards Doha. Al Jazeera's critical coverage of Ben Ali over the years won Qatar favour with Tunisia's new government, and the Qatari state-owned network contributed to significantly encourage anti-regime protests of 2011. In 2012, Doha and Tunis signed 10 investments agreements, and the Tunisian armed forces took part in military drills in Qatar. The UAE opposes Qatar's growing influence in Tunisia, which is currently developing through Doha's support for the Ennahda party, and in other North African states such as Libya

where Doha backs the Islamist factions connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.

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We at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), will continue to monitor the developments taking place in Tunisia, a North African country in which important interests for both European and Gulf countries are at stake and in which Euro-Gulf cooperation is likely to be needed to ensure Tunisia's long-term security and stability.

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