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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

TUNISIA/ Surprise? Suspense? No, this is Tunisia.

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On October 25, Tunisians will go to the polls to elect their next president and house of representatives, in the country's fifth presidential and legislative elections since Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seized power in 1987. Unfortunately, few surprises are in store. In twenty-two years at Tunisia's helm, Ben Ali has held regular elections at precise five year intervals, striving to offer an image of democracy by virtue of the legitimacy that such elections would seemingly offer his regime. The regime's efforts to pull the wool over the eyes of the outside world (Tunisians themselves hold no such illusions) might convince were it not however, for four indisputable factors. Firstly, the Soviet-style presidential victories in which Ben Ali regularly bags between 94.49% and 99.91% of the vote. Secondly, the regular absolute victories of the RCD, the hegemonic ruling party which has managed to win every single seat in competition in every Tunisian election since elections began. Thirdly, the lack of credible opposition candidates and parties (which only sit in Tunisia's parliament thanks to a special quota of seats reserved for them), a problem due only in part to the fetters imposed by the regime. And finally, without doubt, what has elsewhere been called the 'big man' syndrome: the persistence in power over more than two decades of President Ben Ali himself, without even a hint of alternation in sight. All things considered, Tunisia's elections fool nobody: there are no surprises and precious little democracy. Should the world sit up and take notice then of what happens in one week's time, despite the almost total predictability of the results? The answer is yes, albeit a reserved one. What these elections will not reveal, is any indication of an upcoming post-Ben Ali future or of the real strength of opposition forces within Tunisia. However, while a massive victory for Ben Ali and the RCD is beyond doubt, the elections do offer observers a rare glimpse inside the workings of the Tunisian political system: both at the regime itself and at how it handles dissent at an institutional level.

The participation in the legislative elections this year, of eight political parties¹ and several minor independent lists, gives the impression of a real multiparty electoral struggle. Nothing could be further from the truth. Because of Tunisia's electoral system, a majority one where the winning list takes all the seats in each constituency, the ruling and omnipresent RCD party is effectively guaranteed total victory each five years. To counter this situation, since 1994 a proportion of seats (now some 20%, or 37 out of 189) have been reserved for other parties, this time using a proportional system to allocate the remaining seats. Granted this, the only uncertainty in the whole legislative election process is how many seats each "opposition" party will obtain. This uncertainty however, may not even be decided at the polls, since multiple rumours at street level in Tunisia would have it that the distribution of the 20% is undertaken at the Presidential Palace and not in voting centres. This would certainly explain what recent history also reveals: those parties that get the largest share of seats are those that least attack the regime and indeed go along with it. In 2004 for example, the MDS and PUP were the two biggest winners, the former symbolising its return to the officialist fold by openly supporting Ben Ali's re-election bid, and the latter fielding its secretary-general, Mohamed Bouchiha, not to compete with Ben Ali but rather to "encourage" the democratic process. Instead of directing their attacks at the President or at the RCD, those parties that participate generally focus their attention on extremist parties not

¹ Six of them pro-government (the RCD, the Popular Unity Party, the Movement of Socialist Democrats, the Unionist Democratic Union, the Social Liberal Party, and the Green Party for Progress) and two opposition (the leftist Ettajdid Movement, and the Democratic Forum for Freedoms and Labour).

recognised by the regime, or on boycotters. This time round there is one difference to the 2004 legislative elections: the FDTL is participating, despite the decision to exclude its leader from the presidential race. The FDTL boycotted the 2004 elections, as did the PDP, which has, in the last week pulled out of the legislative race following the invalidation of 17 of the party's 26 lists. The FDTL is, for the moment, continuing in the race despite 5 of its lists being annulled, as is the third and final other "genuine" recognised opposition party, the Ettajdid Movement which has been denied half of its 26 lists. It is interesting to note that behind the Ettajdid banner, two unrecognised leftist parties, the Patriotic and Democratic Labour Party (PTPD) and the Leftist Socialist Party (PSG) are advocating participation. On the contrary, most of Tunisia's unrecognised, and authentic opposition parties, are openly calling for the elections' boycott, principally through internet blogs and a Facebook campaign.

The presidential election is a much more straightforward affair. Here there is no room for uncertainty whatsoever: Ben Ali will win a fifth five year term, by more than 90% - the only "doubt" being what exactly that high figure will be². He is accompanied in the election, as in 2004, by three other candidates: Mohamed Bouchiha of the PUP, Ahmed Innoubli of the UDU and Ahmed Brahim of the Ettajdid. The first two candidates are, by their own admission, not in the race to compete, but rather to "better secure pluralism and democracy" as Bouchiha puts it. Only Brahim pretends to run a serious campaign, claiming to be "a real candidate" and "an equal" to the incumbent. Brahim has received the backing of another, failed candidate, Dr Ben Jaafar of the FDTL, after the Constitutional Court rejected his candidacy for not meeting a new legal requirement, namely having been the democratically-elected head of a political party for at least two years. The extremely one-sided nature of the presidential race has been highlighted this year by the obstructions placed in the way of Mr Brahim and his Ettajdid movement. At the time of writing, on Friday 16 October, five days into the thirteen-day campaign, Brahim had still not begun campaigning, following the seizure of his party's newspaper Ettarik Al-Jadid ("New Way"), the censoring of his electoral manifesto, and the whitewashing or removal of party posters around the capital. While his participation seems assured, his attempts to run on an equal footing with Ben Ali, who meanwhile is carrying out a spectacular American-style campaign, are hopeless.

The thirteen day Tunisian election campaign is thus far running much as in other years. The RCD party machine, inseparable and difficult to tell apart from the institutions of state, is proceeding to hold rallies and "exceptional" informative days around the country, while the smaller parties on a considerably smaller scale make contact with citizens and introduce the members of their lists. The only zest in the campaign has sprung from the Ettajdid's protests. There are no debates in Tunisian electoral politics. This year, however, a momentous initiative by the Institut d'Études Politiques of Paris, saw the gathering in the French capital on October 10 of all the major leaders of the Tunisian opposition, members of civil society and, at the last minute, representatives of Ben Ali, to discuss and debate the country's key issues on the eve of the elections. A first in Tunisia's recent history, the symbolism of holding such a meeting 1500km from Tunisia, could not be lost on any of its participants. Tunisia's upcoming elections, although not unimportant, are not an event worthy of much democratic celebration.

² Ben Ali's scores have, not surprisingly, been compared with the show elections held by the Soviet Union among other places: 1989: 99,27 %; 1994: 99,91 %; 1999: 99,45 %; 2004: 94,49 %.