

Tunisia's Presidential Elections: Global Populism Intrudes on the Tunisian Transition

by Dario Cristiani

In describing the results of the first round of Tunisia's Presidential elections, many citizens made reference to an ancient Tunisian saying – “*Sefserik u Bab 3aliwa*”¹ – to express the popular concept that “everyone goes home”. Indeed, the results of the vote held on 15 September was that two *quasi* outsiders – the independent candidates Kaïs Saïed and Nabil Karoui – managed to make it to the second round, while the more seasoned politicians and personalities failed to reach the electoral threshold.

Those “going home” were representatives of a political elite perceived as detached from social and

political realities in the country. This wave of discontent targeted everyone: the so-called *modernists*, whose ideology is rooted in the teachings and experience of the “father of the Republic”, former President Habib Bourguiba, but also the mildly-Islamist Ennahda party, which played a central role in post-2011 Tunisia but is today increasingly accused of being part of the “system” (*systhème*).

By comparison, Saïed (which secured 18 per cent of the vote) and Karoui (15.6 per cent) are considered political outsiders. While neither of them are traditional politicians, both are well known figures among Tunisians and their public engagement activities have always had a political dimension. In the case of Karoui, this engagement was more partisan than Saïed's. Karoui was one of the big supporters of Nidaa Tounes – the now imploded catch-all party that brought together all the modernists – and a vocal anti-Islamist. He can hardly be considered a stranger

¹ “Your sefseri and Bab Aliwa”: The sefseri is a typical, usually white, piece of cloth that old Tunisian women used to wrap around themselves – back in the days – before going out. Bab Aliwa is one of the entrance gates of Old Tunis, now destroyed, which hosts the central station for long-distance coaches and louages (the Tunisian version of collective taxis). As such, the expression can be understood as “take your sefseri and go home”.

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to the *establishment*. His focus on charitable activities, also conveyed through his TV channels, won him the sympathy of many vulnerable socio-economic groups in Tunisia. His wealth, as well as his media empire, pushed many observers to compare him to Silvio Berlusconi,² the former Italian prime minister and media tycoon, not least given their long-standing acquaintance (Berlusconi's TV channel Mediaset has stakes in Karoui's Nessma TV since 2008).

Such comparisons, however, are superficial. The idea of state supported by Karoui is very different from that of Berlusconi. If there is a European politician to whom Karoui can be compared, that name is Achille Lauro, the populist mayor of Naples in the 1950s. Lauro promoted a governance-system at the local level centred around a charismatic strongman who paternalistically supported the poorest sectors of the population through *state-driven charity*.

Exactly the model that Karoui has in mind for Tunisia. Notably, Karoui managed to reach the second round without actively participating in the electoral campaign as he was jailed on money laundering charges on 23 August and is presently still in jail. This issue adds a further layer of complexity to the political situation: Karoui made clear that he and his supporters will not

² Rachid Barnat, "Nabil Karoui: Un douteux mélange de bling-bling berlusconien et de misérabilisme prolétarien", in *Kapitalis*, 3 August 2019, <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2019/08/03/nabil-karoui-un-douteux-melange-de-bling-bling-berlusconien-et-de-miserabilisme-proletarien>.

accept the results of the elections if he is not allowed to carry out his campaign as a free man.

Kaïs Saïed, on the other hand, is a different story. He also can hardly be considered unknown to the broader Tunisian public. A professor of constitutional law in Tunis and described by some as a "Robespierre, but without guillotines",³ he is also nicknamed "Robocop" for his robotic tone of voice. He is famous for his rhetorical skills and mastering of classical Arabic as well as for refraining from using the Tunisian dialect in public or while campaigning (although he is now using it more often since the vote).

Traditional media outlets played a significant role in promoting Saïed's reputation: from his interviews discussing constitutional and economic problems to candid camera shows, TV and radio coverage helped boost his image among ordinary Tunisians. His electoral campaign, however, followed a different path. Initial preparations began very early – as far back as 2016 – and in the run up to the vote he avoided costly media campaigns, instead preferring to meet people face-to-face, in their houses or the many Tunisian "cafeterias", the country's traditional place for socialisation.

This strategy allowed him to micro-modulate his message, tailoring it to the specific family or social groupings he was engaging and allowing him to

³ Benoît Delmas, "Tunisie: Kaïs Saïed, un Robespierre en campagne", in *Le Point*, 11 September 2019, <https://w.lpnt.fr/2335234t>.

be perceived as actually close to the people.

In terms of ideology, however, Saïed's inclinations "cannot be defined",⁴ as one observer recently put it. He is a very peculiar and heterogeneous leader. His fierce denunciation of corruption dominated his electoral message. This resonated well in a country where citizens perceive democratic institutions and constitutional rules as being hijacked by political elites and those in power. Saïed stressed the need to apply the Constitution to the letter. He was a fierce critic of the flexibility that many in Tunisia adopted in dealing with constitutional issues after 2014.

This criticism concerning the application of the Constitution became more and more popular, particularly over the past two years. Many criticised the ongoing "politicisation of the public administration", driven by Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and Ennahda, accusing them of instrumentalising it for electoral purposes.⁵ Saïed, however, has made no secret of his ambition to amend the Constitution. He has argued for the need to inject forms of direct democracy into Tunisia's parliamentary system, for instance by choosing representatives from popular Congresses active at the local levels. This view brought many observers to compare him to the late Libyan leader

Muammar Gaddafi.⁶

This focus on direct democracy demonstrates Saïed's ideological flexibility. While his profile is far from the ideological world of political Islam, he is considered the face of a right-wing, social conservatism in Tunisia. Indeed, in many of his positions, he is clearly an expression of the widespread – yet often largely overlooked – social conservatism that characterises Tunisian society.

This conservatism is not necessarily religious, nor rooted in Salafism or other brands of political Islam. Still, it is widespread and informs social relations and behaviours at the micro-level not only in rural areas but also in several urban areas which witnessed massive immigration from the interior. Yet, at the same time, he is also supported by many who were historically associated with the extreme left in Tunisia.⁷ This has made Kais Saïed resemble other contemporary populists which tend to mix right and left-wing inclinations in their political messaging.

It was this social conservatism that allowed Saïed to erode some of the traditionalist support for Ennahda. Indeed, Abdelfattah Mourou performed very poorly (12.9 per cent). Mourou

⁴ Iman Zayat, "The Many Faces of Kais Saïed", in *The Arab Weekly*, 19 September 2019, <https://theArabweekly.com/node/45709>.

⁵ Michaël Béchir Ayari, "La Tunisie se rend aux urnes dans un contexte délétère", in *Q&A / Middle East & North Africa*, 12 September 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/11632>.

⁶ Mahjoub Lotfi Belhadi, "Man hua Kais Saïed?" (Tribune: Who is Kais Saïed?), in *Le Maghreb*, 24 September 2019, <https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/item/39280>.

⁷ Tarek Kahlaoui, "Limadha yajibu an na'tadhira lishaa'bina wa nafham Kais Saïed la an nashtumahu min abrajina al 'ajia" (Why should we apologize to our people and understand Kais Saïed rather than insulting him from our ivory towers), in *Le Maghreb*, 17 September 2019, <https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/item/39174>.

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IAI COMMENTARIES 19 | 56 - OCTOBER 2019

is the vice president and co-founder of the Ennahda party, and since 2014 has been the first vice president of the Assembly of Representatives of the People (ARP). The party endorsed him not only because he is one of the historical leaders of the movement, but also because he is a *beldi*, born and raised in the capital, Tunis. This choice reflected the importance that socio-territorial considerations had in defining their strategy. By doing so, they wanted to appeal to sections of the Tunisian coastal middle and upper class and avoid being exclusively perceived as "the party of the south".

Tunisia is historically divided along socio-political (modernists vs traditionalists), geographic (coast vs interior) and linguistic lines (Northern vs Southern dialect). In some cases, these cleavages overlap, and often present themselves in forms of social classes. Regionalism, a widespread sentiment often not addressed openly, also remains a crucial element of political, social and cultural identification. The breakeven of electoral data shows that territorial loyalty still orientated the voting behaviour of several groups, but it is slowly eroding.⁸

Saïed's victory is rooted in this erosion. Abdelkarim Zbidi, the "modernist" candidate, was particularly strong in the Sahel and in the wealthiest areas of Tunis (*Banlieue Nord*), historic modernist strongholds. Ennahda maintained most of its votes in

the southern provinces where it is traditionally stronger (Tataouine, Medenine, Gabès). However, the performance of Saïed shows that there is a slow erosion of some of these socio-territorial loyalties. Differently from others, he managed to garner widespread support across Tunisia, with the sole, expected, exceptions of the modernist bastions.

Territorial loyalties will still play a significant role in the near future, and will influence the outcomes of parliamentary elections in October. However, the victory of Saïed and the success of independent lists in the local elections of 2018 show that more and more Tunisians orientate their choices away from geographic and party allegiances, rather choosing individuals.

The difficult post-2015 economic situation made the Tunisian people increasingly disillusioned. Economic and political stagnation nurtured the feeling that political elites *do not act*. Or, they act, but only for their own interests. The presidential vote made these grievances crystal clear.

Together, Saïed and Karoui got 34 per cent of the vote. If one adds the votes of Lotfi Mraïhi (6.6 per cent), Seifeddine Makhlouf (4.4 per cent) and Saif Saïd (7.1 per cent), the total equals just over 50 per cent of the electorate. This share suggests that rather than consolidating Tunisia's transition, the country has gone from transition to *democratic fatigue* in less than ten years; a trajectory that other democracies experienced in a much broader timeframe.

⁸ Cahiers de la Liberté, *Twitter post* (in French), 18 September 2019, https://twitter.com/cahiers_liberte/status/1174440634905767936.

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The Tunisian case is somewhat peculiar, however, as its nascent democracy emerged when a global wave of populism started unfolding, which has now led to a crisis of democracy at the global level too. Tunisia was therefore caught up in these global trends, which also amplified Tunisia's post-revolutionary problems, particularly in the socio-economic domain.

The country is now experiencing its own peculiar forms of populism, a trend that not only risks undermining the country's resilient but still fragile democratic institutions but may also result in deepened faultlines within Tunisian society. The fragmentation that characterised the presidential election is also likely to characterise the upcoming parliamentary elections (scheduled on 13 October). A fragmented parliament will then result in heterogeneous, and likely conflictual, governmental coalitions.

A populist presidency; a divided parliament; persisting economic problems; deepening societal cleavages: the challenges facing Tunisia, the one country to have made progress in the post-Arab uprisings transition, are growing tougher. Week by week. Day by day.

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