



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**“Previewing Tunisia’s Historic Elections”**  
**Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**  
**1779 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC**  
**Friday October 14th, 2011, 10:00am-11:30am**

On Friday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace held a panel discussion entitled “Previewing Tunisia’s Historic Elections.” The panel included **Mongi Boughzala**, professor of Economics, University of Tunis El-Manar and Research Fellow at the Economic Research Forum **Chiheb Ghazouani**, Attorney at Law and Vice President of the Tunisian nongovernmental organization Afkar and **Steven McInerney**, Executive Director at the Project on Middle East Democracy, and moderated by **J. Scott Carpenter**, principal at Google Ideas.

**J. Scott Carpenter** began with opening remarks by praising the Tunisian electoral system, characterizing it as a politically inclusive system with impressive gender parity. Mr. Carpenter cited the electoral system, the transparency of the elections, and recent explosion of civil society as reasons to label Tunisia as the “best opportunity for success” in the Arab Spring.

**Mongi Boughzala** began by explaining that while the Tunisian revolution surprised many, it is important to realize that the social/political situation before the fall of Ben-Ali was non-sustainable. Tunisia was highly educated, modern, Mediterranean, and a comparatively wealthy for a MENA nation. At the same time, the nation was part of the Arab world, ruled autocratically for 30 years, and faced high unemployment—especially among the highly educated youth population. Furthermore, corruption had become ubiquitous and plainly visible throughout the country. The hidden poverty and corruption alongside and educated and modern youth made Tunisia unstable.

Tunisians chose a risky path to democracy by breaking with the old constitution/institutions. The Constituent Assembly will have to simultaneously govern and write a new constitution. Looking ahead to the elections, he laid out some positive indicators along with existing challenges.

On the positive side, the election process is likely to be run smoothly. An independent, trusted commission has been planning for 7 months. They have coordinated with (now neutral) security forces, and they have maintained the public trust. The country has remained fully functional throughout the transition period (all major services are still in place), and the interim government has written good legislation (such as the election law). Finally, all major parties have expressed commitment to conducting the elections in a free and fair manner and accepting the results. The most significant challenges facing the transition elections stem from the uncertainty created by the explosion of candidates/parties, worries about el-nahda, and managing the expectations from politicians, voters, and parties.

In conclusion, Tunisia will need good leadership, cohesion, credible institutions, and help from abroad. These elections will be determinative for Tunisia’s transition, and they will be important for other transitions underway because they will demonstrate if democracy can work for the Arab world.

**Chiheb Ghazouani** reiterated that Tunisia events in Tunisia have a demonstrative effect across the Arab world, citing the reforms in Morocco and Saudi Arabia as examples of responses. The elections will be another signaling event about the broader prospects for MENA democracy.

Chiheb suggested there is a “Tunisian exceptionalism” in the Arab world. It is uniquely western, has closer cultural and historical ties to the US and Europe, has proposed peace agreements between Arabs and Israelis (which got the country banished from the Arab league), and has always been a haven for women’s rights. Mr. Ghazouani grouped parties into two principle groups, conservatives (Islamists) and progressives (secular, social democratic). In line with Tunisian exceptionalism, the principle Islamist party, Nahda embraces the market economy and is in favor of maintaining the Code of Personal Statutes. He compared it to the Turkish Islamist Party. The leftist parties also generally favor the market economy, and while secular parties are smaller than Nhdha, there is a fair likelihood of them building a coalition. All parties think that the US can have a positive role in Tunisia’s future (as opposed to meddling). This is particularly true concerning the economy. Because the US did not support Ben-Ali during the revolution—as opposed to France—America has not burned any bridges in Tunisia.

Given that Tunisians are open to greater US involvement, Mr. Ghazouani suggested that the US should help support elections while staying neutral towards any individual party, invest in long term Tunisian growth (factories rather than foreign aid), consider a trade agreement, facilitate the access of American Universities to Tunisian students, and continue Peace Corps work in Tunisia. He emphasized education, even suggesting that we build an American University in Tunis. He views education as the most important thing for Tunisia’s future and the best way to create

**Steve McInerney** noted there has been insufficient attention paid to Tunisia in DC and Egyptians are rather envious of the progress in Tunisia. While Egypt is lead by the SCAF, which is trying to steer the transition to protect its own power, Tunisia is lead by a weak, technocratic, civilian government that has no power to protect and has an interest in handing over the government to a legitimately elected parliament. Furthermore, Tunisians understand the hard road to democracy much better than Egyptians. They know the transition is ongoing; the revolution is not complete, etc. Therefore, Tunisians actually have more reasonable expectations of the immediate future than Egyptians. Many things that Tunisians see as problematic are actually positive. For example, Tunisians are uncomfortable with campaigning and political attacks, but the organizing and work that parties are doing are great signs for transition. The issue DC has forgotten is that Tunisians wants to be stronger internationally, and they welcome a US relationship. This is unique in the Arab world. With such mistrust of the French (who supported Ben Ali during the revolution), the US must capitalize on this.

McInerney cited a few challenges moving forward. Again, these elections are massive and confusing for average Tunisians. In addition, while the electoral commission made some good changes on the fly, like allowing people who did not register to vote if they have a national ID card, these changing rules are further complicating the elections. There are no reliable polls/predictors for how the election will turn out. Thus, many parties will be very disappointed. However, if 10 or 11 of the biggest parties accept the results, then the elections should turn out fine.

Boughzala started the question and answer section as he expanded on the agreement over a freer market. The agreement is not a convergence of attitudes. Fiscal discipline will be a huge challenge as Tunisians demand greater public sector employment, health care, more equitable (regionally speaking) economic growth. **Chiheb Ghazouani** responded to a question about why youth are not at the head of

political parties despite driving the revolution by saying that while party leadership is mostly older people in a fight over egos, the youth are largely participating through political civil society. In response to a question about the economy and unemployment, unions, and the business community, Boughzala argued that the new business union will lead to greater competition with the main labor unions in Tunisia, the business community is strong and representing itself well, and good business/worker communities are important for Tunisian democracy. The main challenge to the government is the structural unemployment in Tunisia.

In response to a question about the role of women, Ghazouani said he was optimistic about the future of women's rights. Given Tunisia's history, and the statements of the Islamic party, he sees no reason why there will be a scaling back of women's rights. Steve echoed this, noting the gender parity requirement on the electoral lists...highlighting that Nahda has put women on top of many of its lists. In response to a question about the urban/rural economic disparity, Ghazouani again emphasized that education is the best way to solve that problem. He noted that the Constituent Assembly will only be temporary, so it will not need to have a cohesive long-term economic plan

In response to a concern about the history of instability associated with the likely multi-party parliament that Tunisia will have, Mongi restated that nearly all parties have demonstrated respect for the democratic process, a willingness to negotiate, and a willingness to compromise.