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**"Previewing Tunisia's Elections"
Rayburn Office Building, Friday
Friday, October 17, 2014**

On Friday, October 17, POMED and the Congressional Tunisia Caucus held a panel discussion titled "Previewing Tunisia's Elections," at the Rayburn Office Building on Capitol Hill, with opening remarks from his Excellency **M'hamed Ezzine Chelaifa**, the Ambassador of the Tunisian Republic to the United States. The panelists were **Alexis Arieff**, Africa Policy Analyst at the Congressional Research Service, **Jeffrey England**, Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Democratic Institute, and **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director of POMED. The discussion was moderated by **Cole Bockenfeld**, the Advocacy Director of POMED.

In his opening remarks, Ambassador Chelaifa underscored how admiration for the Tunisian democratic transition experience should not overshadow the complexity of the process, and he called on the U.S. to continue supporting the transition. Chelaifa then identified several dimensions that might affect the election: voter turnout; the proliferation of electoral lists that might spread out votes; the attitude of Tunisian voters; the polarization of the political landscape; the presence of Ben Ali regime members; and the role of civil society, media and lobbying in the electoral process. Chelaifa underlined that, following the elections, politicians will face serious challenges and will also have to decide whether they want to build a coalition, share power between parties and form a national unity government. In terms of policy, the new government will need to elaborate a national security strategy, tackle economic reforms, and most importantly, resolve the issues that drove the revolution in the first place in 2011. **The Ambassador emphasized that Tunisia is a promise for democracy in the Arab World as it can provide a "proof of concept."** However, Tunisia's transition is vulnerable and therefore needs international and U.S. support. Finally, he argued that support for Tunisian democracy will give the U.S. an effective public argument that the U.S. does genuinely support democracy in the region.

Alexis Arieff highlighted key aspects of the United States' role in supporting Tunisia's democratic transition, such as the decision by Congress to authorize the appropriation of \$500 million to Tunisia since 2011 and the creation of the Tunisian American Enterprise Fund. She noted, however, that most funds appropriated specifically for Tunisia have been focused on military sales and equipment. Arieff pointed to the threat of extremism both in Tunisia and on its borders, although she noted that most groups in North Africa have domestic agendas and only a few seem to have targeted Western interests. Arieff also mentioned that Tunisian security forces have engaged in a recent campaign to arrest potential suspects in order to secure the elections, focusing in particular on designed terrorist groups AQIM and Ansar al-Shariah and the spillover from neighboring Libya.

Jeffrey England spoke next, highlighting Tunisia's relatively smooth path to democracy. While he reiterated that this is not the end of transition, the elections will present an opportunity to build off the 2011 experience and formalize the legitimacy of the constitution. Observation is a key element to the success of the upcoming elections, and Tunisia has done well to maintain a transparent framework, England noted. The challenges Tunisia will face in this election season have nothing to do with transparency, but rather with ensuring that political contestants will have the professionalism to accept outcomes that are not in their favor and that accusations against the integrity of the elections will only come with sufficient evidence. Another challenge England foresees for Tunisia is overcoming voter apathy. Beyond a lack of basic voting education, many Tunisians appear to have unreasonable expectations for what will happen after the elections. The critical question is whether a coalition approach to governance will take place and involve a constructive opposition. Healthy competition is a good thing, England argues, and must be used to build up institutions rather than tear them down.

Stephen McInerney noted that though the political system today was more established compared to 2011, there remains much uncertainty surrounding the electoral process. As of today, upwards of 50 percent of Tunisian voters appear to be undecided. The new POMED publication, "Previewing Tunisia's Parliamentary and Presidential Elections," focuses on the seven highest polling parties and presidential candidates, though McInerney emphasized that there is a strong possibility that others will perform well at the elections. He also expressed his personal thoughts based on his recent trip to Tunisia, where he met with several actors involved in the democratic transition. The outlook in Tunisia is mixed, and more Tunisians are disillusioned with their political elite and pessimistic than they were in 2011. The country's economic outlook is also a particular area of concern. He emphasized the need for the next government to undertake serious reforms rapidly after the elections in order to turn around Tunisia's economic decline. McInerney is hopeful that the upcoming elections will be a high point in Tunisia's transition, though the main challenge will be for parties to fight disillusionment and regain the public's confidence. He noted that the populous appears to be more focused on presidential rather than the parliamentary elections. The likely result of the elections is that a coalition government will have to be formed. He mentioned that in Tunisia, there has been talk of forming a "national unity" government that will see Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes sharing power; however, it remains clear that both parties would rather be leader of their own coalition.

During the Q&A, **Cole Bockenfeld** started the discussion by asking where Tunisia stood with regards to security threats and what the chances were of an attack during the elections season. Arieff responded by explaining that, unlike in many countries where electoral violence is a concern, the threat of an attack in Tunisia does not come from the state or those running in the elections. Tunisia's primary concern is non-state actors involved in terrorism along the Algerian border, as well as the increasing numbers of Tunisians going to fight abroad who could return home and carry out attacks. While the size and role of the security apparatus in relation to civil society in Tunisia remains a topic of ongoing debate, the fact that the military is under-resourced could lead to problems in the long term as well as the short term.

Bockenfeld then fielded a question concerning feelings of disillusionment on the part of youth with Islamist leanings and potential support for **Moncef Marzouki**. McInerney responded by describing how Tunisian youth feel as though they made change happen during the revolution, but now they have little political representation. Because Marzouki is seen as outside of the traditional political elite, he may be appealing to youth who feel disenfranchised. England added to the dialogue by questioning how the term “youth” is even defined. He emphasized that it is not that the youth in Tunisia lack political interests, but rather they are not represented in government. England suggested prioritizing how to take the energy of this population and make it a part of the political discussion.

With respect to concerns over the impact of the economy on elections, McInerney responded by saying that there is real danger for the destabilization of democratic gains unless economic reform happens soon. The international community needs to be more engaged and grant more economic aid, he continued. England concurred with McInerney, adding that while the economy will not improve quickly, the next leader will have to “swallow the poison pill” and undertake politically unpopular but serious reforms in order to bolster the economy in the long term. Because Tunisia’s political parties generally lack platforms with a clear and in-depth agenda for how to reform the economy, England suggests the new leader start by aiming for “low-hanging fruit” that will satisfy the Tunisian masses with some small reforms for the time being. Also concerned with the disconnect between short-term and long-term needs, Arieff highlighted that what analysts want and what any elected government official will be able to achieve are very different.