In the run-up to September 15, when the country will go to the polls, the Tunisian presidential election campaign has been marked by the large number of candidates (26) running for presidency and the intense rivalry between them.

This is the second multi-party presidential election to take place since the collapse of the previous regime during “the Jasmine Revolution” in 2010.

The struggle for the office has brought together the country's political heavyweights. They include Tunisia's incumbent Prime Minister, two former prime ministers, the former President, Minister of Defense, former ministers, and the acting speaker of Tunisia's parliament, etc.

The nominees represent an array of 14 different local parties and coalitions, including a moderate Islamist party — the Ennahdha Party — also known as Renaissance Party, represented by the Party's Vice-President Abdelfattah Mourou.

Independents and political newcomers have been drawn into the race. Other candidates include the ambitious leader Nabil Karoui of the "Heart of Tunisia Party" — a businessman, powerful media mogul, and charity-owner. His charity organization distributes food to those in need, and provides other forms of social assistance. According to polls, the popularity of this troublemaker, as he has been called by the local media, soared in June, and July this year.

The election race paints a picture which reflects the political mosaic of people who have come into the picture, compelled by the events which have unfolded in the post-revolutionary years. Dozens of new parties and political groups have since appeared in Tunisia. Many of them have adopted similar slogans which reflect democratic values, a vision of progress, etc.

The late President Beji Caid Essebsi, who died in July this year at 92 years of age, succeeded in bringing together many politicians who united in the big tent secularist party “Nidaa Tounes” or “Call of Tunisia”, in order to counter the dominance of the Islamist Ennahda Movement. Party members ranged from liberals, nationalists, leftists, to progressives, etc. In the 2014 elections, “Nidaa Tounes” won more seats then “Ennahda”. The party leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, became the country's president.

However, for the best part of the last five years, the balance of the political landscape has shifted. Due to the fact that neither of the two rival parties could garner an absolute majority in parliament, there were all kinds of coalition alliances formed and deals made. In the process, the fragile alliance “NidaaTounes” had cobbled together began to crumble. Members left the party, defecting to other factions. The party's popularity suffered, it was demoted to third place, and now “Ennahda” has the most seats in parliament.

For the first time, the “Ennahda Movement” put forward its own presidential candidate (in the past it had abstained), against the background of discord in the secular camp. Members of the same “Nidaa Tounes” party, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense, are competing with each other in the presidential race.

In this atmosphere, there may well be a second round of presidential elections, as was the case the last time round. If this does take place, it seems there will be no avoiding temporary alliances or coalitions between different candidates.

According to Tunisian political analyst N. Al-Salami, the political landscape is complicated and it’s full of surprises.
According to his predictions, there are 4 contenders for the office of president: the 43-year-old Tunisian Prime Minister Yousef Shahid, the Defence Minister Abdelkarim Zbidi, former president Moncef Marzouki, and Mourou from "Ennahda".

Ideological and political motives are not the only factors which may influence the election results, there are also geographical aspects. The majority of the population living in the south of the country vote for “Ennahda”; they live in the less developed, more disadvantaged areas of Tunisia. This was where spontaneous demonstrations of discontent among the urban grassroots led to the eruption of the "Arab Spring".

Secularists gain more votes from people who mainly inhabit the more prosperous central regions and the North of the country. This is where more people who value secular traditions live which developed back in the middle of the 20th century.

The elections are taking place at a time when Tunisia, with a population of 11 million is facing some serious economic problems. These are issues of unemployment, estimated at 15%; inflation, which reached 6.5% in July this year; and money owed to the IMF, which can only be paid back through austerity.

Another challenge lies in creating an image of Tunisia as a stable and safe country, which is both important to secure an inflow of foreign investment and for a crucial source of the Republic’s revenue - the tourist industry.

Terrorist attacks which were carried out in 2015 set alarm bells ringing for tourists from all around the world, who may have otherwise planned a holiday to Tunisia. In recent years, thanks to measures the authorities have been taking, the influx of holidaymakers is beginning to pick up again. From the beginning of the year to July, Tunisia welcomed 5 million international visitors, and is expected to host a total of around 9 million in 2019, compared to 8 million in the past.

In the run-up to the elections, the Tunisian newspaper Alchourouk has urged candidates of parties who have similar or identical policies and slogans not to follow personal ambitions, but to cooperate and unite by nominating a common representative in order to strengthen the "unity of the democratic family". Scattering the votes will only divide the electorate and play into the hands of the opposition.

Will this advice be heard?

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