Tunisia: New Occupant of the Palace at Carthage

The new occupant of the palace at Carthage (the location of the ancient city in the suburbs of Tunis), the residence of the head of state, is 88-year-old Baji Al-Sibsi. He defeated his opponent, Interim President Moncef Marzouki in the second round of presidential elections.

Interest in the presidential race in Tunisia, even beyond its borders, was stoked by changes in the country's political landscape after elections for the permanent parliament in October of this year. The secular-leaning Call of Tunisia party made an excellent showing under the guidance of party leader Baji Al-Sibsi.

It pushed the Islamic party Ennahda into second place. Ennahda had a majority of seats in the interim parliament after the revolutionary events in 2011 and the overthrow of Ben Ali.

Before the presidential elections, many were asking whether the success of Al-Sibsi’s party was just a fluke, given that the party was established just two years ago.

The failure of the Islamists represented by Ennahda in October visibly upset party leaders. It had decided to play it safe and not put up its own candidate. But in fact, according to observers, the leadership of the movement encouraged the full support of the main rival of Al-Sibsi, Marzouki. The party of the latter was a part of so-called triumvirate, a coalition government headed by Ennahda.

This fact has demonstrated a much more cautious attitude of the Tunisian Islamists compared with their kindred spirit Islamist institutions in Egypt and Libya.

Voters put their faith in the leader of Call of Tunisia, (56% of the citizens who came to the polls in the second round voted for him). This showed that he is associated in the eyes of many citizens with strengthening of the state’s role as well as with order and stability. The 88-year-old Tunisian does indeed have the charisma of a pragmatist who has the wisdom that comes with experience. In addition, he has a strong track record in the government, and back in the 1970s, he led a number of ministries of Tunisia.

Disappointment with the rule of Ennahda in recent years, fears by many citizens of a surge of Salafism, and sorties by extremists against the forces of order against the background of currents of violence coming from neighboring Libya and ISIL tipped the scales in his favor. And all this despite the fact that Al-Sibsi’s main opponent ran an aggressive campaign under a slogan of not allowing a “return to the past dictatorial regime and a re-occurrence of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011.”

The elections for a permanent parliament and president in the North African state of 11 million people formally complete the transition period after the events of 2011. The president is elected for a five-year term. The new constitution, adopted in 2014, significantly limits his powers in comparison with those of his predecessor so as to avoid the excesses of the former dictator.
Call of Tunisia does not have an absolute majority in the newly elected National Assembly, though, so it will need to form a coalition with other parties and overcome the disunity in the camps of the nationalist and liberal forces.

The party and its leader have to, first of all, solve economic problems related to the stalled economy, rising prices and unemployment, as well as deal with the previously unknown phenomenon of security problems.

Furthermore, Tunisian society is a mosaic of people influenced by traditional religious identities, which supporters and sympathizers of Ennahda draw on.

But in Tunisia, the cradle of the Arab Spring that swept the region in late 2010 and in several countries - Egypt, Libya, etc. - ushered in an Islamist ascendance, events by and large unfolded with an emphasis on compromise, as opposed to other parts of the Arab world, where violence never ceases.

Tunisia has overturned the opinion of a number of Arab and Western political scientists that democracy and Arabs are polar opposites.

Obviously, the outcome of the last presidential election was unpredictable and dependent on the will of the electorate, in contrast to previous decades of authoritarian rule, when the winner was known in advance by everyone even before the vote count.

This suggests that Tunisia, having experienced bursts of turbulence in recent years, is gradually gaining contemporary experience in the political culture of civil society.

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