

Tunisia Elections Dispatch No. 1

Voter Registration

Introduction

The Tunisia Elections Dispatch is the first in a series of updates the [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI) will issue over the course of the next few months as Tunisia prepares to hold parliamentary and presidential elections, currently scheduled for October 26, 2014, November 23, 2014 and potentially a presidential run-off in late December 2014.

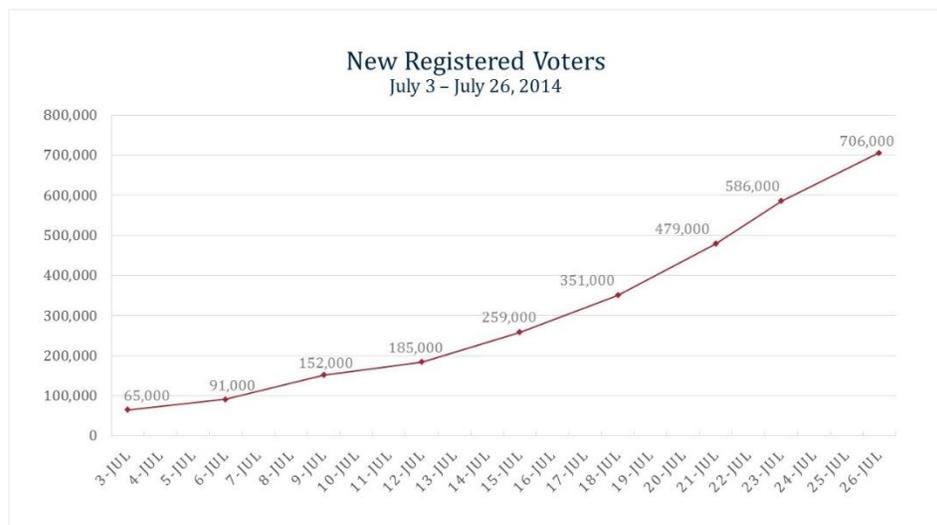
To support these elections, IRI will conduct an international election observation mission of the Tunisia October 26, 2014 legislative elections, deploying long-term observers across the country to monitor the pre- and post-elections processes, as well as a short term delegation in the days surrounding the elections.

This report was compiled from the observations of IRI's long-term observer for the voter registration period. Subsequent reports will draw on the analyses of IRI's long-term observers stationed in-country in the months before and after the legislative elections.

Per Tunisia's new constitution, the elections will be administered by the [Independent High Authority for Elections](#) (ISIE), which is an independent public authority responsible for ensuring democratic, free, pluralistic, fair and transparent elections. It is also in charge of the organization, management and supervision of elections and is headquartered in Tunis. Independent regional authorities for elections (IRIE) were created in each electoral constituency to assist the ISIE in completing its tasks.

Fast Facts on the Registration Process

- Tunisia's voter registration period began abruptly on June 23 after months of delay.
- Registration was scheduled to end on July 22, 2014, but on that day, was extended to July 29.
- Of the newly registered voters, 45 percent are younger than age of 30 and 50 percent are women.
- As of July 24, Tunis, Ben Arous and Sousse have seen the highest voter registration turnout.



OVERVIEW

After a noticeably slow start, the rate of voter registration increased rapidly in the final week of the initial voter registration period, presumably in response to the independent election commission's efforts to raise awareness of registration through the media. The daily registration rate increased from approximately 7,000 per day at the beginning of July to over 30,000 per day on July 16 and 17. In a last-minute rush, about 73,000 people registered on July 21, followed by 93,000 people the next day. The extension period so far (July 23-July 26) allowed an additional 92,000 voters to register. As of July 26, a total of 705,958 new voters have registered.

IRI has observed voter registration throughout the governorates of Tunis 1, Tunis 2, Manouba, Kairouan, Sousse, Kasserine, Ariana, Beja, Bizerte, Monastir and Mahdia. At each site, IRI interviewed ISIE staff and voters. With the exception of a slow start, systems and procedures of voter registration have been operating smoothly, and ISIE staff have been consistently professional, competent and well trained. However, ISIE efforts to promote registration through media or physical advertisements was severely lacking for most of the period.

IRI encountered mixed attitudes toward the elections process. While some Tunisians are excited to participate, the prevailing mood seems to be that of apathy and general disaffection due to frustration with the performance of transitional governments. Generally, this only discouraged people from registering, but others, mostly Salafists, actively marshalled their followers against electoral participation.

Registration Rates

Turnout in Tunis 1 and 2 was noticeably low for the first half of July. At the beginning of July, the two districts each registered about 10-15 voters per day. By July 10, the rate increased to 25-30, for a total of 180,000 additions to the register. ISIE staff in Tunis reported a fairly balanced mix of age and gender among new registrations. Domestic observers disagreed, reporting an especially low level of youth participation in Tunis. To account for the disparity in opinion, most youth may have registered via SMS or the Internet. ISIE statistics from July 23 show that about 45 percent of those newly registered are under the age of 30.

In mid-July, registration turnout began to pick up steam. By July 14, the total reached about 300,000. Most of the gains in registration appeared to come through the SMS or online systems, as the stations IRI visited at that point did not seem busy. Moreover, in Tunis, the officials reported that the vast majority of people coming to register were looking to change their polling station from the previous election; first time voters were far less common. However, on July 16, IRI noted a visible increase in registration activity at polling stations. On July 17, the registration rate reached a new peak of about 31,000 in a day.

Registration rates continued to climb up to the initial registration deadline of July 22. On July 21 about 73,000 people registered, followed by about 92,000 the next day, making the total additions to the registration system about 500,000. Increased activity was not limited

to the capital. IRI's observer found registration proceedings on July 20 in Beja, a typically underserved area, to be the busiest he had seen yet.

On July 22, following discussions in the National Dialogue, a mechanism employed by Tunisian political leaders when traditional institutions of government fail to resolve a key issue, the ISIE announced the extension of the voter registration period to July 29. An ISIE official explained to IRI that this is a "test period," and depending on how many voters are registered during this week, the ISIE may choose to extend registration further.

Since July 23, registration rates have fallen to about 28,000. However, ISIE staff believe they will witness another surge as the new registration deadline approaches.

Attitudes Toward Registration

In interviews with IRI's observer, ISIE officials blame apathy and dissatisfaction with political choices for low voter registration. On July 17, the coordinators in Beja cited a lack of faith in the political process to address citizens' problems as the largest obstacle to participation. Further, they noted that a large portion of eligible voters are undecided and may for this reason feel less motivation to register. Independent Regional Authority for Elections (IRIE) officials in Bizerte on July 18 similarly blamed low turnout on a lack of trust in political parties and disappointment with the performance of the past few governments.

Those registering interviewed by IRI the week of July 13 evinced optimism and excitement about the process. Many told IRI it was their civic duty to vote, and they were proud to participate in elections. The major concern of many was whether they would be able to convince their friends, family and neighbors to vote, noting that most people are uninterested.

IRI has encountered select groups who actively oppose the elections process. On July 7-8 in Kairouan and Kasserine, IRI spoke with individuals interested in boycotting the elections (one former party activist in Kasserine was organizing a boycott of the elections; one group in Kairouan was boycotting political parties and was considering boycotting the elections, as well). In Manouba, Beja and Bizerte, Salafists, who believe that participation in elections is un-Islamic, have disrupted registration efforts. In some areas, such as Jerzouna and Menzel Abderrahmane in Bizerte and Douar Hichr in Manouba, many promotional materials for voter registration were destroyed or vandalized.

ISIE OPERATIONS

Generally, ISIE/IRIE operations in stationary and mobile offices, the SMS (text message) system and the website have functioned well.

IRI noted an important update from the 2011 registration system that should facilitate voting. In 2011, voters were assigned a polling center (generally a school or other public building) and a specific polling station within. This meant that within one center, there could be a long line at one station and three empty stations, and voters could not switch stations to vote faster. In 2014, voters are still assigned a specific polling center, but will be free to

vote at any polling station within that center. This common sense system should make voting easier for Tunisians.

Stationary Offices

Although stationary offices generally operated well, IRI's observer noted some logistical challenges. In Tunis 1 and Tunis 2, ISIE staff reported that many registration centers were unable to open on schedule due to business owners' reluctance to allow them on their property. Additionally, IRIE coordinators gave IRI incorrect information several times the week of July 6-13 regarding where registration centers were open and when they had started working. They seemed unaware or unwilling to admit some problems in logistics and management. Most IRIE offices were not open in Monastir on July 25 (Republic Day), contrary to information provided by the IRIE in the area. Finally, the Sousse IRIE president reported that he did not always have enough field agents to cover the entire governorate because his budget is not big enough to support more staff.

Mobile Offices

Except in Tunis (where there are no rural areas), mobile offices are used to canvass rural areas lacking stationary offices. On June 23, IRI's observer visited the launch of the mobile office set up in downtown Tunis. It was efficiently managed, with minimal wait time for voters, but saw low turnout.

IRI heard mixed reports about the effectiveness of mobile offices. The Kasserine IRIE coordinator reported that the mobile offices have been much more effective than the stationary offices. The IRIE Manouba coordinator reported that his mobile centers were relatively more productive because they work at night as well as during the day. IRIE/ISIE officials stationed at mobile offices in Sousse experienced low registration rates, which they blamed on to the inherent difficulty of finding and registering voters who were disinclined to register on their own in the first place, general voter indifference and their daytime deployment schedule during Ramadan and in summer heat.

SMS System

The SMS system for registering or verifying a polling center seems to work well. To verify one's polling center, the voter enters a number determined by the ISIE along with his/her identification number into a mobile phone. The SMS system then responds with a text containing the person's polling center information. Of the more than a dozen people IRI's observer spoke with who voted in the 2011 elections and intend to vote in the upcoming elections, all but one was able to verify his/her polling center via SMS. According to the ISIE on July 23, about 58 percent of those newly registered did so via SMS.

Website

When registration opened, the ISIE's website was still using a platform from the 2011 elections. The website was revamped one week later, displaying a user-friendly interface that provides a potential voter all the information he or she would need to register. On July 10, a hacker downed the ISIE network briefly, but it was fixed without major disruption to registration. In an environment of heightened security concerns, enhanced cyber security to

protect confidential voter information could prevent future efforts to gain unauthorized access.

ISIE PROMOTION EFFORTS

Registration was insufficiently promoted in the lead-up to the registration period. Organized efforts to boost registration did not begin until July 5. It took nearly two weeks before IRI noticed signs promoting the elections, and many did not mention that voter registration was occurring. From July 5-6, the ISIE began a serious media effort to raise awareness of registration. Regular ads on national television and radio provided simple instructions on registration and encourage voters to register. By July 16, the media campaign began to taper off, and by July 22, it seemed to end. By July 26, television and radio advertisements for elections became rare.

The ISIE inconsistently promoted registration through physical advertisements. The only concerted effort to post signs about the elections IRI observed was in Kairouan. However, the posters blanketing Kairouan were not well installed, and most of them fell down after less than a day. Outside of the governorate's capital no such materials were seen. This often made it difficult for IRI's observer to find many registration centers. By July 22, the ISIE seemed to have stopped distributing promotional materials, and by July 26, many of the original promotional materials for elections had come down without being replaced.

The ISIE also largely failed to deploy canvassers in heavily trafficked public places. On June 23, for example, no ISIE staff were stationed at the sidewalks of Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis to direct people to register at the mobile office in the median. Hundreds of people walked past it without taking a second look. IRI observed a notable exception on July 23 at the Festival of Carthage. ISIE employees approached people in line to exit the music festival venue and were largely successful in convincing them to register.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF REGISTRATION

The elections and the voter registration period have been a frequent topic of discussion in Tunisia's news media. By July 5, media reports were emphasizing the low turnout of voters to register. With no visible improvement by July 13, the media began to raise questions about this issue. Various ideas for dealing with this problem began to emerge.

Some suggested extending the registration period and delaying the elections. An editorial in *La Presse*, an influential media outlet, first proposed this in the week preceding July 13. Some political parties favored the idea, but overall the idea did not have much support. While some advocated postponement simply to ensure a strong turnout for elections, others believed that low registration, and subsequent low elections turnout, would favor Ennahda. However, little evidence supports this idea. While the party is better funded, more disciplined and larger than others, it also benefitted from its outsider status in 2011. The question exists as to how many of its 2011 supporters will vote for it in 2014.

Some media, particularly blogs and social media, featured calls for an election boycott in the week preceding July 13. Across the board, the motivation for the boycott appeared to be the

lack of suitable political options for the voter. While there were no questions as to the integrity of the election process, there were complaints that the process itself is empty because no political parties are capable of governing or because there is no difference between the parties.

On July 15, the poor results of registration led to harsher criticism in the media, which in turn caused a political stir. The idea of postponing elections gained momentum. However, *Al Maghrib*, a Tunisian newspaper, reported that some parties would only agree to an extension of the registration period if elections are not delayed. The Mt. Chaambi terrorist attack diverted media attention from elections somewhat, but the media began to focus on registration information more than the politics surrounding registration.

On July 26, IRI's observer reported that media coverage of voter registration had decreased significantly.

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS' REGISTRATION EFFORTS

Political Parties

Like the ISIE, parties were late to promote voter registration. As of July 5, of four parties (Ennahda, Nida Tunis, Ettakatol and Afek Tounes) with which IRI's observer had spoken, only Ennahda and Afek Tounes were doing any activity to promote voter registration. However, public evidence of these efforts were not visible. All of the parties IRI's observer spoke with (Ennahda, Nida Tunis, Ettakatol, Afek Tounes, Massar and Al Jomhuri) were doing something to encourage voter registration from July 6-13. Al Jomhuri was conducting door-to-door campaigns and Facebook events. Afek Tounes and Massar distributed flyers. Nida Tunis put up banners in some areas. Despite this, no voters interviewed at registration sites had heard from any political party. Parties stepped up their efforts from July 14-20 to promote registration. Nida Tunis organized rallies to get out the vote. Other parties redoubled their grassroots campaigns.

On July 24, the IRIE president in Sousse reported dissatisfaction with the role played by a political party in his area. Nida Tunis activists were trying to register lists of their supporters at ISIE offices. Since this is not in line with procedures, ISIE officials would turn away the party activists, causing the party members to accuse the ISIE of trying to suppress voter registration by party. The IRIE president thought that ignorance of the proper voter registration process was to blame and not malicious intent. He said that the IRIE made public announcements and held meetings to correct the misunderstanding, and they have heard no complaints since then.

As of July 27, parties shifted focus from public registration campaigns to preparing for the campaign period. Some parties are still promoting registration internally through their membership ranks.

Civil Society

Until July 13, IRI only observed one civil society organization working to convince voters to register. I-Watch posted graphics to its Facebook page promoting registration. On July 15

and 16, IRI observed the Sawty Association, the Tunisian Scouts, the Ofia Network and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy putting up signs in Tunis to encourage people to register. This has bolstered ISIE's physical advertisement efforts. Civil society registration activity during the extension period has been low.

Tunisian civil society plays an important role as monitors of the registration process. Several groups are conducting observation of the process and producing numerous reports. Representatives of the Tunisian Association for the Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE), Mourakiboun and Marsad have all visited the same registration stations IRI has in Tunis.

In some regions, IRI has noted mixed feelings about civil society's role in voter registration. ISIE officials in Bizerte told IRI that local civil society made ISIE's job harder by spreading misinformation and engaging in political campaigning. Several associations held events to encourage registration that were seen as thinly veiled political party campaigning. This caused some citizens to believe the ISIE is connected with them and is therefore not neutral. Also, many citizens mistakenly believed that they are required to choose a political party when they register and have avoided registering because they do not want to be in a party. On July 24, IRIE officials in Sousse expressed frustration with the perceived low engagement of civil society organizations, too many of which are monitoring registration and not encouraging it.

SECURITY

During the voter registration period, Tunisia experienced nonviolent protests and strikes unconnected to elections, violent protests led by Salafists about elections in Kef and Sidi Bouzid, an assault on a mobile registration bus in Beja, as well as terrorist attacks on Tunisian armed forces near the Algerian border.

Although violence is uncommon in Manouba and Bizerte, where Salafists have a strong presence, Salafist opposition to elections has turned violent in Kef, Sidi Bouzid and Beja. Between July 6 and July 13, protestors engaged police in Kef and Sidi Bouzid for several days. Police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse Salafist demonstrators, who responded with stones and Molotov cocktails. IRI's observer met a mobile registration team in Beja whose bus was assaulted on a rural highway, forcing them to leave the area and return to the IRIE office. The ISIE team was not hurt.

The regions bordering Algeria have seen a number of attacks against Tunisia's armed forces, police and security services. On July 16, in a serious setback for the security of the elections, terrorists in Jebel Chaambi near Algeria's border killed 14 soldiers at a security checkpoint. This is the deadliest attack on Tunisian armed forces in recent history. The Uqba Ibn Nafi Battalion, which has been blamed for the attack, has been involved in plots to attack Tunisian citizens throughout the country. The attack was a coordinated assault, involving approximately 60 militants armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. The group is believed to be connected both to Ansar al-Charia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. According to Defense Minister Ghazi Jeribi, among the militants responsible for

the attack were [Algerian citizens and “other foreign mercenaries.”](#) Violent attacks continued in these areas, including several incidents in Kef, one of which resulted in eight military casualties.

The Mt. Chaambi attack has had little effect on voter registration, but is likely to impact the elections process as a whole. The National Dialogue met several times to discuss how to improve security for the elections. Tunisian security forces made numerous arrests July 21-27, including of terrorist cells in Bizerte and Mahdia and of Ansar al-Charia leader Saifeddine Rais. Additionally, the government has started to close down mosques deemed friendly to extremists.

CONCLUSION AND WHAT LIES AHEAD

Compared to the ISIE's original goal of 2.5 million, the tally at the initial registration deadline of just under 500,000 falls well short. Considering the slow start to registration, it could also be viewed as a nice recovery, which was made possible mostly by the ISIE's awareness campaign. Efforts from political parties, civil society and both national and local media have played some role, as well.

The results of the extension are mixed. The ISIE has been able to add nearly 100,000 voters to the rolls, but daily turnout is once again much lower than it was before July 22. The occasion of Republic Day, followed by Eid al-Fitr on July 28, means that many people are on vacation now which could result in low registration for the duration of the current extension period.

Overall, there is no doubt the ISIE could do more to register eligible voters. Considering the boost in registration after the ISIE's media campaign in early July, there is reason to believe that media attention and direct outreach could continue to boost registration. However, the ISIE has made little observable effort on these fronts.

The registration period may well be extended again; IRI's observer has been told unofficially that it will continue through the first three weeks of August. However, ISIE officials worry about the challenges that would arise from prolonging registration even further. There is no indication yet that an extension of the registration period would result in delayed elections. As such, political parties will need to continue to mobilize and organize quickly and include voter registration drives in their campaign outreach.

Nationwide, voter apathy remains high and IRI polling suggests that Tunisians are feeling increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of positive results from Tunisia's transition. Security threats remain significant, although mainly targeted at the state for the time being. Further attacks on security personnel or terrorism targeting civilians could result in a postponement of elections.

The official parliamentary elections campaign period for political parties begins on October 4, 2014 and closes on October 24, 2014. Parties must declare their presidential candidate

by September 22, 2014 approximately one month prior to the legislative election. For now, there is little interest in a consensus presidential candidate.

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