

Tunisia Elections Dispatch No. 3

Pre-Elections Period

Introduction

This is the third in a series of reports the [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI) is issuing over the course of the next few months as Tunisia holds parliamentary and presidential elections. The parliamentary elections will be held Sunday, October 26, 2014, while the presidential elections are scheduled for November 23 with a potential run-off occurring before the end of 2014.

This report is a follow-up to IRI's [Tunisia Elections Dispatch No. 2](#) and [Tunisia Elections Dispatch No. 1](#) and draws on the observation and analysis of IRI's long-term observers deployed at strategic locations throughout Tunisia. IRI's long-term observation mission is based in Bizerte, Mahdia, Medenine, Tozeur and Tunis, but has provided coverage of 20 of Tunisia's 24 governorates. The long-term observer (LTO) delegation includes representation from Egypt, France, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Portugal and Togo and has been active since September 1, 2014. IRI also deployed an LTO to witness the voter registration period in July and August of this year.



Mustafa Ben Jaafar speaks with the media after registering his candidacy

To support the elections, IRI will conduct international election observation missions for both the parliamentary and presidential elections, deploying long-term and short-term observers throughout the country to monitor the pre- and post-elections processes, assess the transparency and credibility of the process, and, afterward, offer analysis and recommendations for future electoral cycles.

Per Tunisia's new constitution, the elections are being administered by the [Independent High Authority for Elections \(ISIE\)](#), which is a permanent independent public authority responsible for ensuring democratic, free, pluralistic, fair and transparent elections. Independent Regional Authorities for Elections (IRIE) were created in each electoral constituency to assist the ISIE in completing its tasks.

Fast Facts on the Pre-Elections Period

- From August 22-29, 2014, political parties, coalitions and independent candidates vying for the legislative elections submitted candidate lists to the ISIE.
- The ISIE published preliminary lists on September 5, 2014.
- The ISIE approved 1,327 lists, comprising 15,256 candidates.
- Presidential candidates submitted candidacy registration materials to the ISIE from September 8-22, 2014.
- The ISIE received 70 presidential candidate applications, 59 in the final 72 hours; 27 were accepted.
- IRIEs have recruited, selected and trained tens of thousands of polling center staff.
- The official election campaign period kicked off on October 4, 2014.
- Party campaigning has had a sluggish start, but activities have been ramping up in recent days.
- Women and youth are increasingly visible in the political and electoral process.
- Media coverage of elections has been limited, but has increased considerably since the start of the campaign season.
- Civil society is engaged in supporting the electoral process, but funding and volunteer recruitment challenges have limited civil society's impact.
- The security situation has been generally calm.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Since September 1, 2014, IRI's LTO teams have consistently engaged IRIE representatives in governorates across the country. Each IRIE is broadly supported by governors who are promoting active participation in elections, while emphasizing the importance of the neutrality of state officials and encouraging fairness and respect for rules and procedures. This support, along with regular communication with the ISIE, has been critical during this busy phase of the electoral process. Over the last several weeks, Tunisia's electoral administrator has processed, published and finalized candidate lists for the legislative elections, recruited, selected and trained polling staff, located and established polling centers and polling stations, processed and submitted the preliminary list of presidential candidates and trained and deployed campaign controllers for the ongoing campaign period, all while continually engaging other elections stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, media and election observers.

Candidate Lists

Prior to the LTOs' arrival in Tunisia, candidate lists for the legislative elections had been submitted to the IRIEs. IRI observers found that IRIE representatives were well versed in the electoral law, particularly as it relates to electoral lists. Accordingly, the preliminary lists of candidates were formally published on September 5, following the electoral calendar. This process was observed as quite transparent as IRIEs posted the lists as soon as they were published by the ISIE and provided appropriate, technical explanations for any of the lists that were rejected. More than 1,500 candidate lists were submitted and, after a busy period of appeals, 1,327 lists comprising 15,256 candidates were approved.

Separately, the ISIE received applications from presidential candidates from September 8-22. By September 19, IRI's long term observer in Tunis noted that only 11 applications had been submitted. In the final 72 hours the ISIE received more than 59 additional applications, which created logistical challenges that proved quite cumbersome. After thorough review, the ISIE accepted 27 applications for presidential candidacy.

Polling Staff Recruitment

After concluding a busy period reviewing candidate applications, the IRIEs focused their efforts on finalizing the provisional lists of polling staff and publishing the lists for review by stakeholders. Although most IRIEs were able to recruit enough staff, IRI observers noted that IRIEs encountered difficulty finding a sufficient number of polling workers in rural areas. This was true in both the north and south of the country.

Recruitment and selection has been transparent throughout the process. Lists of prospective polling workers were posted and their final selection was made only after thorough review and scrutiny by political parties and civil society. Affiliation with a political party was the reason for most of the rejections. IRI was also encouraged by the large number of women and youth who comprised polling center staff.

During this busy period IRIE staff confirmed polling center locations and determined the appropriate number of polling stations to be organized at each center.

Election Campaign

Several IRIEs workers lamented their inability to tamp down on party campaign activities prior to the official campaign period. The ambiguity in the electoral law on what constitutes inappropriate party campaign activity prior to the official campaign period contributed to discord between political parties and the electoral administrators. Some IRIEs registered formal complaints to the ISIE about this incongruity in the law; however, the complaints have not yet been addressed due to the demanding electoral schedule. It appears that many parties were conducting campaign activities in advance of the start of the official campaign period on October 4.

Since the start of the official campaign period, IRIEs have had much more authority over campaigning. Campaign controllers have been trained and deployed and are now monitoring party activity. According to the IRIEs, the most numerous infractions registered so far have been the destruction of party campaign posters and posting campaign material in unauthorized spaces. These infractions are considered minor by the IRIEs, which allow parties a period of 24 hours to resolve any infraction. If the party or list obeys the IRIE's warning, the IRIEs consider the issue resolved. If the list or party refuses to address the issue, then it can be fined. IRI has noted that some parties have failed to request permission, per the electoral law, from their respective IRIEs to hold campaign events. LTOs even met with campaign controllers at a political party campaign event in which the IRIE representatives stated that the event had taken place without the mandatory 48-hour prior approval. This kind of infraction has been reported in other governorates, but LTOs have learned that IRIEs are not addressing these violations.

Administration

The relationship between IRIEs and the ISIE appears to be operating efficiently to date. IRIEs expressed across the board that they felt they had adequate support from the ISIE and that regular communication was taking place, thanks in part to consistent training and well established internal communication structures. However, IRI consistently heard that the main difficulty for the electoral management body was the lack of human resources and concerns related to logistical and administrative constraints. More staff is needed to control and enforce the electoral law and monitor adherence.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Generally, IRI's LTOs have encountered enthusiastic party members and candidates who, encouraged by the voter registration campaign, believe there will be significant voter turnout for the legislative elections due to the critical transitional period the country finds itself in. However, they acknowledge that as political parties and associations they must meaningfully encourage voters to turn out on Election Day.

Preparation and Administration

Many political parties expressed confidence in their logistical and organizational preparedness, as well as their readiness to message to voters. During the last several weeks, parties have been drafting messages to present party programs in a campaign context. In the lead-up to the campaign period, parties were forming committees, recruiting party agents for polling centers and training party activists on various campaign strategies. Parties also conveyed general confidence in the ISIE's and IRIEs' ability to administer the elections process. The parties that remained skeptical were mainly concerned by the logistical challenges they have witnessed, affirming what some IRIEs had already communicated.

LTOs in each region noted that political parties plan to observe both voting procedures during the day and vote tabulation in the evening in a wide array of polling centers. Some smaller parties and coalitions are working together to observe polling stations in order to minimize logistical expenditures and encourage broader collaboration.



Election Campaign

The campaign period began on October 4, 2014, with little fanfare due to the *Eid Al-Adha* holiday weekend. IRI teams did not witness any rallies or mass activities. The public spaces reserved for public party events were outlined with boxes showing the number registered to a political party list, which corresponds to the party's position on the ballot. These numbers, and the corresponding order of parties on ballots, are randomly selected and vary in different constituencies. So far, parties appear to be generally abiding by the campaigning rules, though, as mentioned previously, the destruction of party posters and campaigning before October 4 have been frequent violations. IRI anticipates much more activity in the coming weeks after the quiet start to the campaign period.



An IRI long-term observer photographs campaign posters early in the campaign period

It is important to note that political parties similarly expressed dissatisfaction with the ambiguity surrounding the pre-campaign period. Parties accused each other of starting to campaign prior to the official campaign period as established by the electoral calendar, but it appears most parties engaged in this practice. Some of these instances have been reported directly to IRIEs; however there has not been extensive follow-up due to the growing responsibilities of the electoral administration. As previously mentioned, there is uncertainty between both the IRIEs and political parties as to what constitutes campaign activity. Regardless, it is clear parties took advantage of the ill-defined legal guidelines in the weeks leading up to the official launch of the campaign season.

Women and Youth

Elections stakeholders expressed excitement over the level of youth involvement in the elections; however, it is by no means certain what percentage of voters are youth. Civil society organizations tend to have predominately youth membership. IRIEs have been encouraged by the number of youth volunteers for polling center staff and controllers. Several parties submitted candidates on their lists who are in their twenties. In certain governorates some parties have more than 40 percent youth representation. Youth are gaining traction in several political parties that appear to have prioritized youth involvement.

IRI observers noted that many parties are concerned by the lack of women's representation. Tunisian electoral law institutes a "vertical zipper system" to ensure gender parity in the district party lists, with men and women candidates alternate down the list. In the south, in more conservative governorates in particular, IRI LTOs learned that it is difficult for political

parties, as well as independent lists, to integrate women in their lists and that most parties have not created space for women in their internal structures. In all, 145 party lists for the parliamentary elections had women candidates at the head of the list. However, IRI teams have met with women candidates running for office throughout the country.

Vote Buying and Intimidation

Most of the parties that IRI met explained that vote buying is a common practice and often times accused of competitors. However, no parties presented proof or evidence of vote buying violations to IRI observers. Several parties expressed that they were aware of alleged vote buying during the period before the *Eid* celebration. In some instances in the south, parties alleged that hundreds of sheep were purchased and distributed in an effort to purchase votes. This concern is similar to the one IRI heard expressed at the start of the school year, in which vouchers for school supplies, featuring a party stamp, were handed out to families.

Related to these allegations are concerns that foreign financing is impacting the integrity of the campaign period. Smaller parties and independents argue that this has tipped the scales in terms of party competition. However, there are formal channels through which these claims must be processed, and providing concrete evidence in these cases is challenging.

There have been reports of alleged party intimidation throughout the campaign period. This is not unique to any particular party, as several parties have registered complaints, per the electoral law, to IRIEs, police, local courts and the media. Some cases reported to IRI LTOs covering Gafsa, Tozeur and Sfax have alleged political violence against activists and party members and, in one case, an independent candidate reported detention and physical abuse.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Media was tightly controlled during the Ben Ali regime, and the transition to more liberal, balanced media has been inconsistent. Most stakeholders think media is biased towards certain parties. The general consensus from stakeholders is that media is not playing as useful a role in the electoral process, and in voter education in particular, as it could be.

However, despite several complaints that IRI teams have received throughout the observation period about the lack of a more substantial media presence in the political and electoral process, political parties and civil society have seen more traction with the media in recent weeks. With elections just two weeks away, media coverage could still assist voter education, particularly during the present campaign period.

PARTICIPATION OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

The revolution seems to have been lost to some in Tunisia, particularly among youth who envisioned a more dramatic, if not ideal transition. A struggling economy and the growing impatience of unemployed youth seems to have increased disillusionment as it relates to the upcoming elections. IRI LTOs sensed this especially in the south and in more rural communities.

However, IRI teams have encountered several youth and women organizations that are actively and creatively engaged in the political and electoral process. LTOs also observed a

high participation of young people in numerous political parties and several other civil society organizations.

The participation of women in legislative elections was guaranteed by the Tunisian election law passed in May 2014, which provides equitable alternation of men and women on the lists of candidates. Certain parties expressed that they were able to follow this regulation, while others found it more difficult. As a nascent democracy, however, it is encouraging that the provisions of the law concerning the participation of women and the inclusion of the youth in the elections have been taken into account.

LTO teams have encountered several organizations that are involved in defending the rights of persons with disabilities. Across the country there is an attempt to gain more support within the national assembly to address the glaring concerns of this important population group. However, it is clear that the country is lacking in this area, particularly as it relates to the political participation and access to voting facilities of underrepresented groups.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

IRI LTOs have engaged with several different civil society organizations, and many asserted general activism, whether in voter education, transparency initiatives, combating corruption, election monitoring, etc. However, actual activities for some in the field are currently limited. Some CSOs have had difficulties recruiting, which has contributed to the many challenges they face. Civil society activism also tends to be focused in populated, urban centers and can sometimes be limited in breadth and scope.

IRI has not observed significant activity related to voter education, despite the need to utilize associations in mobilizing citizens to participate in the elections. Not only do many organizations lack funding for these kinds of initiatives, but the ISIE is very selective in identifying neutral organizations, since some are affiliated with political parties.

However, there have been encouraging signs of some meaningful activity by CSOs in recent weeks. Most of the traction has centered on raising awareness and encouraging citizens to vote. These kinds of initiatives are important, particularly because voter apathy appears to have increased over the past few months. CSOs also have an important role to play as domestic elections monitors, an activity which some are already engaged in.

SECURITY

LTO teams continue to gauge the security situation and report that the environment remains generally calm. There are pockets of the country that seem to have a heightened sense of security; governorates that border Algeria in the northwest of the country and locations in the south and middle of the country are areas of heightened concern. However, broadly speaking, there remains a general sense of peace and calm.

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