

Analysis

Islamic Force Rises in Tunisia

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TUNIS, Jul 31, 2011 (IPS) - The fundamentalist Ennahda party seems poised to take advantage of a chaotic situation ahead of general elections in Tunisia. Ennahda and other Islamist parties are taking advantage of the Aug. 2 deadline for registration for elections coinciding with the start of the holy month of Ramadan, when there is better attendance at mosques.

So far only 16 percent of potential voters have registered.

The interim government has warned imams against political propaganda at Friday prayers, but there is no sign of compliance. If anything, the Islamist parties have support from new imams coming in for the Ramadan from Saudi Arabia.

Bolstered with money from rich Gulf countries, the Islamists are increasing their influence among the poor by offering financial support to women willing to leave their jobs and stay at home, and to men who grow beards to show religiosity. The Islamists also organise collective weddings, picking up the costs.

As a consequence, Wahhabism, the purist form of Islam exported by Saudi Arabia, is spreading rapidly in this country where religion has always been regarded as a matter of individual choice. The more radical Islamist groups are becoming visibly aggressive, resorting to violence during demonstrations, and threatening women.

Two weeks ago hundreds of radical Islamists raided police stations to snatch weapons, injuring some policemen. The popular belief is that these 'Salafi' groups may be a militant wing of the Ennahda.

President Fouad Mebaza's decision to extend the state of emergency, declared Jan. 14 and set to be lifted on Jul. 31, may also have been prompted by fears of violence by radical groups.

Ennahda is unlikely reach absolute majority, but it is influencing the elections and altering the political course, to some extent away from the democratic ideals of the January revolution.

The Islamists did not participate in the revolution.

In a move to shore up secular goals in the face of the fundamentalist tide, a democratic front has emerged, and has organised a rally against violence in the national capital.

Women's associations that were active during the revolution fear the apathy ahead of elections. Their efforts in filling 50 percent of the candidates' lists will come to naught if enough Tunisians do not participate.

A programme has been launched by women's rights groups to convince women to come out and vote on election day, Oct. 23, and to be actively involved in the electoral process.

Women's groups are also keeping an eye on the space given by media to different political forces

during the campaign. Tunisia's media is poorly developed, and journalists are yet to wean themselves away from the suppression and censorship that marked dictatorial rule.

People appear confused about electing a constituent assembly that is to give them a new constitution and pave the way for general elections. This is not surprising, considering that no less than 100 new political parties are contesting Tunisia's first free elections.

"I don't know who I will vote for" is a common refrain. "There was always (ousted president Zine El Abidine) Ben Ali to choose for me," said one undecided voter, reflecting the dependency that people had come to have on the repressive regime.

The fact that there are too many new political parties in the fray is seen as a sign of interest in gaining power rather than solving problems that are the legacy of decades of dictatorship. It is hard to tell one new party from another.

Many young people who had supported the revolution seem disappointed. There is no move to pin responsibility for what went wrong under dictatorship, and there is a sense that the perpetrators of repression, corruption and abuses under the fallen regime are never going to be held to account.

Such apathy has made it difficult for the independent court for the constitutional elections to convince Tunisians that they hold the power to pick candidates who can be trusted to build a democratic future.

A campaign to build awareness on the importance of the new constitution using street posters, advertisements and pamphlets, some distributed at airports targeting Tunisians flying in, appears to have fallen flat.

The lack of professionalism in the media is somewhat offset by about 300 bloggers seeking to bridge the information gap, and trying to convince people of the importance of the elections, starting with registration as voters.

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