

International

Exit polls show Islamist inspired party leading Tunisia's election

Ennahdha and Qalb Tounes were both swift to claim victory

TUNIS: Exit polls showed an established Islamist-inspired party leading that of a jailed business tycoon in Tunisia's legislative polls Sunday, weeks after a presidential election that reshaped the country's post-Arab Spring political landscape. Polling stations for the seven-million-strong electorate closed at 6:00 pm. Ennahdha and Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia) - led by detained business tycoon Nabil Karoui - were both swift to claim victory. Two exit polls after the close of voting showed Ennahdha in the lead with 40 seats out of 217, while Qalb Tounes was in second, with one pollster giving it 35 seats, and another 33.

However, preliminary official results are not expected until tomorrow. In the runup to the legislative vote, Ennahdha and Qalb Tounes officially ruled out forming an alliance, and with a plethora of parties and movements running, the stage could be set for complex and rowdy negotiations - or even a second poll. The legislative vote comes after candidates aligned with traditional political parties were eclipsed by independent runners during the first round of presidential polls last month. "According to preliminary results collected at voting stations, Qalb Tounes has come first", party spokesman Hatem Mliki said. But its main rival Ennahdha also claimed that it had "according to preliminary results... won the elections". In the first round of the presidential vote Karoui, held since August on money-laundering charges, came second behind Kais Saied, an independent law professor. Courts rejected several appeals for his release during campaigning.

Low turnout

The sidelining of the ruling political class in the first presidential round on September 15 was rooted in frustration over a stagnant economy, high unemployment, failing public services and rising prices. The ink-stained fingers once proudly displayed after the 2011 revolution were briskly wiped clean as Tunisians fed up with the status quo cast ballots for lawmakers for the third time since the

2010-2011 uprising. "I came to vote out of duty, nothing more," said Abdeljlil Frihi, in his 70s, scrubbing his finger and railing against a political class that "sank" the country.

Mohamed Daada, 60, said he had "no hope for a positive change" in Tunisia. "I don't trust anyone or any political party. Life just gets worse in this country." More than 15,000 candidates on 1,500 lists contested 217 seats in a parliament dominated by Ennahdha in alliance with centrist party Nidaa Tounes, which has been decimated by infighting. The elections commission, ISIE, said turnout was 41.3 percent, well down from the 64 percent achieved in 2014. The first round of the presidential poll achieved a turnout of 49 percent.

The presidential race may have overshadowed the legislative contest, but parliament is responsible for tackling the main challenges facing Tunisian society and observers were concerned about voter apathy. "People no longer trust the old parties, and they don't know the new ones, so they're not motivated in this election," said Ali Reikiki, who works with Tunisian electoral monitor Mourakiboun. A strong showing for Qalb Tounes could bolster Karoui's presidential campaign and supporters say it might make a case for him to take over as prime minister if he loses to Saied. The socially conservative professor has not come out in support of any party.

Complex talks, or new vote?

With the electorate tired of political maneuvering and the failure to improve living conditions since the ouster of late longtime autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, new movements have been vying for votes - among them Qalb Tounes. The party that emerges as the largest will have to negotiate with other factions in order to secure the support of a minimum of 109 deputies, in order to secure a parliamentary majority. "Negotiations will probably take two weeks", said political analyst Youssef Cherif. But he also pointed to the risk of a new vote in the event that parties are unable to



TUNIS: Supporters of the Tunisian Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party celebrate in reaction to the first exit polls in front of the party's office in the capital Tunis. — AFP

agree a viable alliance. Islamist populist lawyer Seifeddine Makhrouf's Karama party secured 17 or 18 seats in Sunday's polls, according to exit polls. Parliament will have two months to agree on the formation of a new government in a country hailed as the Arab Spring's sole democratic success

story but straining to meet the revolution's other demands of "work and dignity". While it has succeeded in curbing jihadist attacks that rocked the key tourist sector in 2015, Tunisia's economy remains hampered by austere International Monetary Fund-backed reforms. — AFP

Where are world's stateless people?

LONDON: An estimated 10 to 15 million people are not recognized as nationals by any country, often depriving them of basic rights most of the world takes for granted such as education, healthcare, housing and jobs. The UN refugee agency is hosting a major intergovernmental meeting in Geneva on Monday to assess progress at the midpoint of its #Ibelong campaign which aims to end statelessness by 2024. Here are examples of stateless populations:

Myanmar/Bangladesh

In 1982, Buddhist-majority Myanmar passed a citizenship law that effectively rendered stateless most Rohingya, who are Muslim and of South Asian descent. Ethnic violence has driven many to leave, but hundreds of thousands remain in Myanmar. There are about 900,000 Rohingya in neighboring Bangladesh and smaller populations across Asia. Some are sold into slavery on fishing boats and plantations.

Ivory Coast

Ivory Coast is home to 692,000 stateless people. Many are descended from migrants from neighboring countries who were encouraged to work on Ivory Coast's coffee and cotton plantations in the 20th century. At least a quarter of Ivory Coast's population is estimated to be of foreign descent, and the question of who is or is not Ivorian helped fuel two civil wars in the West African country.

Thailand

Nearly 479,000 people are stateless, including mem-

bers of ethnic hill tribes such as the Yao, Hmong and Karen who live in the mountainous border with Myanmar and Laos, and the semi-nomadic "Sea Gypsies" along the Andaman coast.

Estonia/Latvia

When the Soviet Union broke up, many ethnic Russians remained in the new Baltic states and were defined as "non-citizens". Nearly 221,000 stateless people live in Latvia and 78,000 in Estonia, mainly ethnic Russians who have trouble obtaining citizenship and at times face discrimination.

Syria

In 1962, many Kurds in the northeast were stripped of citizenship, a move Human Rights Watch described as part of a plan to "Arabise" the resource-rich region. Before the civil war, there were an estimated 300,000 stateless Kurds in Syria, many of whom were promised nationality by President Bashar al-Assad in reaction to the 2011 uprising. UN data suggests the number fell to 160,000, but this may be partly because many fled the war. Human rights experts have warned that babies born to Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and Jordan could end up stateless.

Kuwait

Stateless people are known as Bedoon, which is short for bedoon jinsiya meaning "without nationality" in Arabic. Some trace their origins to nomadic tribes that once moved freely around the Gulf region. There are about 92,000 Bedoon in Kuwait, according to UN data, but some estimates are much higher. They are often barred from free education, healthcare and many jobs.

Nepal

Although Nepal says it does not have a stateless population, experts on statelessness believe many people, pos-

sibly hundreds of thousands, may be affected. Part of the problem derives from a law banning women married to foreigners from passing their nationality to their children. There is also a stateless population of people who were expelled by Bhutan in the 1990s.

Dominican republic

A 2013 court ruling, along with earlier changes to nationality laws aimed at tackling illegal migration, has left many stateless, mostly people of Haitian descent who were born in Dominican Republic. In 2015, there were about 134,000 stateless people, according to UN data, but the figures are being updated.

Iraq

There are about 47,500 stateless people who include Bidoon and Faiil Kurds, an ethnic group that historically live both sides of the Iraq-Iran border. More than 100,000 Faiil Kurds had their nationality revoked in 1980 under the Ba'ath regime. Although many have since had their nationality reinstated, others remain stateless.

Europe

Tens of thousands of stateless Roma - an ethnic group with origins in India - are thought to live in central, eastern and southern Europe. With the break-up of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, successor states claimed they belonged elsewhere. Other Roma in Kosovo and Bosnia have become stateless due to war-time displacement. Roma are often unable to register their children's births or hold official property titles. This can make it hard to prove where they are from.

Venezuela

Some children born to Venezuelan parents who have fled to other countries amid a political and economic crisis at home are at increased risk of statelessness. — Reuters

I found a country, but lost my brother, stateless activist says

LONDON: As a teenager growing up in Lebanon Maha Mamo lived in constant terror of checkpoints, but her only crime was to be born stateless. With no documents to prove who she was, Mamo feared she could be arrested and locked up indefinitely. Like other stateless people, she was deprived of basic rights most people take for granted. Everything from going to school or getting a job to even enjoying a night out with friends was fraught with difficulties.

Yesterday, Mamo will tell her story to film star Cate Blanchett at the opening of a major intergovernmental meeting on statelessness in Geneva. Charismatic, down-to-earth and fluent in five languages, Mamo has become a powerful voice in #Ibelong, a campaign to eradicate statelessness which is estimated to affect about 10 million people worldwide. "For most people a passport is a travel document, but for me it means everything," said Mamo, who became a Brazilian national last year and now speaks at international events draped in a Brazilian flag. "It means I exist. It's finally a sign I belong somewhere."

'Massive impact'

Mamo's fate was sealed before she was born when her Christian father and Muslim mother fell in love in Syria. Interfaith marriages were banned so they eloped to neighboring Lebanon where she, her sister Souad and brother Eddy were born. "You can only be Lebanese if your father is Lebanese, and we couldn't be Syrian because our parents' marriage was illegal, so we grew up stateless," she said. "It has had a massive impact all my life. I had many challenges every day. I was afraid of every single thing." Mamo was rejected by many schools before eventually being accepted by an Armenian school which took pity on the family. A talented basketball player, she was scouted by professional coaches who believed she had potential to play on the national team - until they realized she had no documents.

"That was when my world came crashing down," she said. "This was the first moment when the deprivations really hit home. But as a teenager I didn't yet understand how big my problem was." Despite good school grades, her applications to study medicine at university were also



GENEVA: Australian actress and UNHCR ambassador Cate Blanchett (right) and formerly stateless refugee in Brazil, Maha Mamo show their passport during a UNHCR executive committee meeting yesterday in Geneva. — AFP

rejected. Health care was another obstacle. To get urgent hospital treatment for a severe allergy Mamo was forced to pretend to be her best friend.

With no papers, even the most mundane things became a logistical nightmare. "There are simple things you would never imagine that are so impossible: buying a sim card, getting a loan, having a library card or even going to a club to dance with your friends or celebrate a birthday," she said. "If they ask for ID you have to give up and go home." In Lebanon, there was the added danger posed by checkpoints. "If the police stop you then you are going to jail just because you don't have documents," she said. "Every time I saw one I had to run the other way just because my existence itself was illegal."

New beginning

Desperate for a solution to her predicament, Mamo sent her story to presidents, ministers and any organization she thought might be able to help - and was met with a wall of silence. But in 2014 Brazil offered to take Mamo and her siblings under a new humanitarian visa program it had launched to help Syrians fleeing war. "I went to Brazil not as a stateless person, but as a refugee. I only knew two things about Brazil - the football and the carnival," said Mamo, now 31 and fluent in Portuguese. Her arrival in Brazil coincided with the launch of the United Nations' #Ibelong campaign aimed at ending statelessness in a decade. "For me, my brother and sister that was the hope. In 10 years we would have the chance to be a person, a human being," said Mamo. — Reuters

Afghan generation knows only conflict as war turns 18

KABUL: Afghanistan's war cost 13-year-old shoe shiner Hameedullah his education. Poverty forced Sabir, 11, to flee home and sell dried fruits on Kabul's streets. Niyamathullah, 9, hangs out in a park, looking for work. Such is the lot of many a child in Afghanistan, which this week passes another somber milestone. Yesterday, the conflict turned 18, meaning every single Afghan child now has known only war. "Peace is like a dream to us in Afghanistan," said Mohammad Mobin, a 17-year-old Kabul high schooler. "Afghanistan can develop only if we have peace."

On October 7, 2001, the United States launched air strikes against Afghanistan, following the September 11 attacks conducted by Al-Qaeda that killed nearly 3,000 people in the US. The Taliban, who had refused to hand over Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, were toppled within weeks, but the ensuing insurgent conflict has dragged on ever since and become the longest war in US history.

Violence has only worsened in recent years, disproportionately impacting children. "Since we were born, we have had no peace in our country, it has only been fighting and conflict," said Sayed Ibrahim, an 18-year-old medical student in Kabul. The UN published a report last week saying that from 2015 to 2018, researchers studying the plight of Afghan kids documented more than 14,000 grave violations against them throughout the country, marking a sharp increase from the previous four years.

"Imagine turning 18 having known nothing but conflict and war throughout your entire childhood and formative years," said Onno van Manen, country director for Save the Children in Afghanistan. "Life in Afghanistan means living in daily fear of explosions, missing school because it's too unsafe and not knowing if your parents or siblings will make it home." The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) says the number of attacks against Afghan schools tripled last year compared to 2017. By the end of 2018, more than 1,000 Afghan schools had been shut due to conflict.

"I don't study because I have no money, I have to make money to support my family," said Sabir, an 11-year-old boy who fled his home province of Ghazni to sell peanuts, sunflower seeds and dried fruits in central Kabul. "We have to go to school and get an education. We can end fighting through education."

The 2001 invasion did herald some enduring improvements for many young Afghans - particularly girls, who had been banned from receiving an education under the Taliban. In Kabul and other urban centers, schools and universities flourished, and an entire generation of children now has never known Taliban rule. But the economy remains so weak that poorer families often yank their kids from school and send them to hustle for extra cash on dangerous streets. Jobs for many youths are so scarce they have few options but to try to emigrate, or join the Taliban or other insurgent groups who pay a regular wage. — AFP



KABUL: Schoolgirls walk along a street at a hillside overlooking Kabul. — AFP

India's top court halts tree felling after protests

MUMBAI: A mass felling of trees in one of the world's most-polluted megacities was halted by India's top court yesterday, amid protests their removal would strip the city of a precious "green lung". Some 2,700 trees were being cut down in the financial capital Mumbai to make way for a depot for subway carriages in the city of nearly 20 million people.

But the felling angered locals, with Bollywood stars and residents joining regular demonstrations that grew over the weekend after workers started removing the trees at night. More than two dozen activists were arrested during weekend protests were all later released on bail, police said. Following an emergency hearing called after petitions from activists, the Supreme Court said no more trees in the suburb of Aarey were to be felled until a next court session on October 21.

The date is also when crucial state elections are to be held, with the dispute taking on political significance. The Shiv Sena, a powerful local ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, has criticized the national government over the felling. The subway project has sharply divided opinion and triggered a nationwide debate over conservation and need for development.

Supporters say Mumbai-ranked the world's fourth most polluted megacity by the World Health Organization last year-badly needs new transport, citing its overburdened colonial-era railway system used by some 7.5 million people every day. Officials have defended the construction, saying only 30 hectares of the 1,300 that make up Aarey-a lush, green oasis close to the Sanjay Gandhi National Park-were being cleared. Part of the dispute over the development is whether the area should fall under forest protection laws that cover the national park.

Police have barricaded all access points to Aarey, and on Monday stopped activists and journalists from entering the area. — AFP