

End of Presidential Race Leaves Tunisia Divided

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TUNIS — Four years after their popular uprising set off the Arab Spring, Tunisians vote on Sunday in a presidential runoff that will complete their transition to democracy, even as a contentious campaign has reopened divisions in the country.

Moncef Marzouki, 69, who has been interim president for three years, came in a close second in the first round and is warning that his defeat will take the country back to dictatorship.

A win by his rival, Beji Caid Essebsi, 88, whose party, Nidaa Tounes, won the largest bloc of seats in recent parliamentary elections, would allow one party to dominate politics again, Mr. Marzouki warns.

“It is much more than just an election,” he said in a recent interview in the presidential seaside residence at ancient Carthage on the north side of Tunis, the capital. “We are going to decide whether Tunisia will become a democratic state or go back to the old regime.”

“I can also say it is an Arab challenge,” he added. “I fear this could be the end of the Arab spring.”

Mr. Marzouki is a longtime human rights activist and opponent of Tunisia’s past dictators — Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who was overthrown in Tunisia’s revolt in 2011.

Mr. Essebsi was a senior official under both leaders, but he has won a large following with an anti-Islamist campaign that has drawn support from secularists and the middle class, as well as members of the former government.

He charges that the Islamist party, Ennahda, and its coalition partners, including Mr. Marzouki’s party, the Congress for the Republic, mismanaged the country and allowed a rise in terrorism once they gained power after Tunisia’s revolution.

He now promises stability and security after four years of turbulence and emphasizes his experience of 40 years at senior levels of government.

Nidaa Tounes won a plurality of 86 seats in October’s parliamentary election, and Mr. Essebsi won the most votes in the first round of the presidential election with 39 percent of ballots.

The results were widely seen as a defeat of the Islamists by secularists. But Mr. Marzouki says that is a misreading of events. He maintains that he is a secularist who is being attacked by opponents as being a supporter of the Islamists.

“The divide is not between secularists and Islam,” he said. “The divide is between democrats and nondemocrats.”

“I have been, for more than three decades, a human rights activist — I went to prison, I wrote a book about democracy — deeply convinced that this country has to be first a democratic state,” he said.

His opponent never spoke out, he says. “Beji Caid Essebsi has nothing to do with democracy,” Mr. Marzouki said. “He has always been part of the dictatorship.” Supporters invariably describe Mr. Essebsi as experienced and reassuring.

“He is, in principle, a tranquil, moral force in which every citizen can see a reflection of himself,” a recent front-page editorial in the daily *Tunis-Hebdo* said.

A left-wing journalist, Taoufik Ben Brik, described Mr. Essebsi as “the grandfather who makes us laugh and who is kind.” Others retort that he was an authoritarian interior minister in an era of political prisoners and torture.

Mr. Marzouki is commonly seen by commentators as divisive and volatile. His support comes from the poor and marginalized communities, in particular from his native south.

“Marzouki feels the pain,” said Muhammad Nasser, a supporter in the working-class district of Ettadhamen in Tunis. “Even when in power for two years, he definitely did not steal anything. This is the president we like.”

Yet Mr. Marzouki is contemplating not only his own possible defeat, but the collapse of most of the democratic parties that had for years formed the mainstay of the dissident movement under dictatorship.

Mr. Marzouki’s own party held on to just four of its 29 seats in October’s legislative elections. Its coalition partner and several other democratic parties made similarly poor showings as voters shifted toward Mr. Essebsi.

Mr. Marzouki conceded that the coalition government had made mistakes. But public expectations were impossibly high, and the social and economic ills inherited from the Ben Ali era were too serious to solve in a few years, he argued.

“I must confess that for us, many of us had spent our whole life in opposition,” Mr. Marzouki said. “Ruling a state was extremely new for us, so we had to learn.”

The coalition government had not understood the threat of Islamist terrorism when it first emerged in 2012, he conceded. Nevertheless, he said the government and security forces had successfully countered the threat since then.

One regret was not moving faster against corruption and the entrenched interests of the Ben Ali government. "I wonder if we were not a little bit naïve," he said.

A concern of human rights activists, including Mr. Marzouki, is that Mr. Essebsi has said that he intends to revise a transitional justice law under which a commission was set up to investigate and prosecute tens of thousands of crimes of torture and inhumanity by successive governments since 1955.

That period encompasses Mr. Essebsi's own tenure as interior minister under the Bourguiba dictatorship.

"We must smile and be hopeful again and not talk of the past," Mr. Essebsi told supporters Friday night in downtown Tunis at his last rally of the campaign.

But across town at Mr. Marzouki's rally, his supporters said they feared the return of oppression under Mr. Essebsi. "If Essebsi wins, I will be sent back to jail," said Abderrauf Yousefi, 57, a mechanic who was detained this year after a police raid.

Najet Hammami, a mother of five, said, "Essebsi called all of us extremists." Mr. Marzouki says that most of all he fears a confrontation between hard-liners among the supporters of the old government and the Islamists.

"It will be a confrontation between corrupt dictatorship and radical Islamists," he said. "These will be the main key players, and we as democrats and human rights activists will be thrown away. And this will be a huge confrontation. This will be terrible for the whole Arab world."