

## Tunisians Vote in a Milestone of Arab Change

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

TUNIS — Millions of Tunisians cast votes on Sunday for an assembly to draft a constitution and shape a new government, in a burst of pride and hope that after inspiring uprisings across the Arab world, their small country could now lead the way to democracy.

“Tunisians showed the world how to make a peaceful revolution without icons, without ideology, and now we are going to show the world how we can build a real democracy,” said Moncef Marzouki, founder of a liberal political party and a former dissident exile, as he waited for hours in a long line outside a polling place in the coastal town of Sousse. “This will have a real impact in places like Libya and Egypt and Syria, after the fall of its regime,” he added. “The whole Arab world is watching.”

In another first for the region, a moderate Islamic party, Ennahda, is expected to win at least a plurality of seats in the Tunisian assembly. The party’s leaders have vowed to create another kind of new model for the Arab world, one reconciling Islamic principles with Western-style democracy.

Results are expected to be tallied within days. In the meantime, those still struggling through the postrevolutionary uncertainty of places like Libya and Egypt watched Tunisia “with a kind of envy,” said Samer Soliman, a professor at the American University in Cairo and an Egyptian political activist.

Libyans and Egyptians acknowledge that Tunisia was not only the first but also the easiest of the Arab revolutions, because of its relatively small, homogenous, educated population and because of the willingness of the Tunisian military to relinquish power. The success of Tunisia offers inspiration, but perhaps few answers, for Egyptians or Libyans who hope to follow in its footsteps.

Libya’s interim leaders on Sunday proclaimed their revolution a success and laid out an ambitious timetable for the election of their own constituent assembly. But they have yet to solve the problem of unifying the loosely organized brigades of anti-Qaddafi fighters under the control of an interim authority to govern Libya until then, much less lay the groundwork for elections.

And with Egypt a little more than a month away from a vote for a new Parliament, its interim military rulers have so far balked at adopting many of the election procedures that enabled Tunisia’s election to proceed smoothly. Among them are inking voters’ fingers to ensure people vote only once, transparent ballot boxes, a single election day rather than staggered polls, and weeks of voter education before the balloting. Also, in Egypt, the interim military rulers have not agreed to relinquish any of the army’s power over either the next Parliament or a planned constitutional panel.

For Tunisians, though, the scenes at the polls on Sunday — a turnout far above expectations, orderly lines stretching around blocks, satisfied smiles at blue-inked fingers — already seemed to wipe away 10 months of anxiety and protests over the future of the revolution that ousted Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. For the first time in their history, many Tunisians said, they expected an honest count of their ballots to determine the country’s future.

“Today is the day of independence,” said Amin Ganhouba, 30, a technician. “Today we got our freedom, and our dignity, from the simple act of voting.”

In a statement issued after the polls closed on Sunday, President Obama congratulated Tunisians for “the first democratic elections to take place in the country that changed the course of history and began the Arab Spring.”

Many people expressed faith that the act of voting itself would change Tunisia for the better, no matter who won. Some argued that democracy would make public officials more accountable. “The people in power know that we are keeping a watchful eye,” said Kamel Abdel, 45, a high school philosophy teacher voting in the crowded slum of Tadamon.

Others predicted an almost magical transformation. “There is going to be social justice, freedom, democracy, and they are going to tackle the unemployment issue,” Mohamed Fezai, a jobless 30-year-old college graduate, declared confidently.

At least one woman celebrated a vote she cast at random. Beaming with pride, Fatima Toumi, 52, an illiterate homemaker, said that she had done her civic duty, but did not know which party’s box she had checked. “Whoever I pick doesn’t matter,” she said. “I hope it will improve the situation of Tunisia’s youth.”

About 25 percent of Tunisians are illiterate, a lower rate than many countries in the area, and several voters said they expressed their choice by marking the box next to the logo of the party they favored: a star and bird for the Islamic party, or an olive tree for a liberal rival.

Some people declined to vote. Sitting in a cafe in Sousse, Mr. Ben Ali’s home town, Saber Kaddour, 44, a coffee wholesaler, argued that voters were too caught up in politics to think about the issues. “Everything is disguised, and people think they understand what is going on, but they don’t,” he said. He predicted chaos after the results were announced, with the losing party taking to the streets in protest.

“But that is not democracy,” the cafe’s owner, Nedra Elkhechime, replied earnestly. “Even if you lose, you have to accept it.”

In interviews this week along Tunisia’s affluent coast and in its impoverished interior, most voters said their biggest concerns were the economy, jobs, and finding candidates with integrity.

In Tadamon, the poor neighborhood, several voters said they were repulsed by a party that tried to tell them it would lower the price of bread and other staples, or the tycoon whose newly founded party brought a rap singer to a rally in a ploy for votes. But some said they appreciated that Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party, gave away sheep for poor people to sacrifice for the feast at the end of Ramadan. Nasreddin Mnai, a 22-year-old student, called it evidence that “they are going to help the poor people.”

Ennahda had a long history of opposition to the dictatorship before Mr. Ben Ali’s persecution eviscerated it in the 1990s, and its leaders have said that they hope to establish a durable, pluralistic democracy that will protect the rights of individuals and minorities regardless of who is in power. They often cite the model of Turkey, a secular democracy now governed by a party with an Islamic identity.

At stops across the country in the final days of the campaign, Ennahda’s founder, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, stepped up his religious appeals. “When you go into the polls, God’s presence will be there with you,” he

said at a rally in the impoverished city of Kasserine. “God wants you to vote for the party that will protect your faith.”

But at every stop, Mr. Ghannouchi and others from Ennahda repeated their commitment to women’s rights, including equality in education and employment and the freedom to adopt or reject Islamic dress, like women’s head scarves.

Ennahda supporters, though, were divided over how much regulation of personal morality the party should seek to impose. Some agreed that women ought to be able to reject the veil, and that Tunisians should be able to buy alcohol — widely available here now — despite an Islamic prohibition.

“We don’t want the Islamists to attack the secularists, or vice versa,” said Belhsan Menzi, 31, an Ennahda supporter waiting to vote in Tadamon.

But his friend Lotfi Nasri, 35, said he expected Ennahda to make sure Tunisians complied with Islamic moral codes, including rules about alcohol and head scarves. If Ennahda wins power, he said, Tunisia “will be more of an Islamic country.”

Others said they expected it to do more to restrict profanity or blasphemy in the popular culture.

The uprising that unseated Mr. Ben Ali began when a fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in the impoverished inland town of Sidi Bouzid to protest his lack of opportunity and the disrespect of the police.

On Sunday, his mother, Manoubia Bouazizi, 53, told Reuters that the elections were “a moment of victory for my son, who died defending dignity and liberty.”

Hend Hasassi contributed reporting.