

In a raucous cafe in a Tunis slum, men talked in loud voices and paid little attention to the politicians debating on the television mounted on the wall. Qais Jebali swiftly made espressos behind the bar and explained why no one in the gritty neighborhood of Tadamon cared about the upcoming elections. "We've had five governments since 2011 and nothing has changed on the ground," he said, arranging the cups of strong black coffee on a tray with a bowl of sugar. "The poor people don't trust the government because they are marginalized, harassed by police and don't have money to pay bribes." Outside, members of the National Guard in bullet-proof vests and carrying assault rifles waved cars through a dilapidated traffic circle. Security was heightened because a standoff with suspected militants was taking place just a few kilometers away. On Sunday, Tunisians will vote for their first five-year parliament since they overthrew dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, marking the end of the democratic transition that they alone among the pro-democracy Arab Spring uprisings have managed to achieve. Now, many Tunisians are expressing disillusionment over democracy. They say it has not brought prosperity and seems largely to involve squabbling politicians and attacks by Islamic militants, raising fears that many may not turn out to vote in a country that has been described as the best chance for democracy in the Arab world. "There is a depression after these three years of seeing rulers lying, not keeping their word, not doing or not even trying to do what they promised to do, and especially, in the midst of a dire economic situation," said Chawki Gaddes, a political analyst at Tunis University. In 2011, the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party dominated elections and formed a coalition government with two secular parties. Over the next two years, the country was buffeted by punishing inflation, attacks by radical Islamists, assassinations and the daily spectacle of squabbling politicians in a country accustomed to a half century of one-party rule. As the government and opposition deadlocked amid the rising political acrimony - and against the backdrop of a military coup against the Islamist government in nearby Egypt - the Islamist-led government stepped down at the end of 2013 in favor of new cabinet of technocrats. Polling from the Pew Research center in Tunisia has seen support for democracy as the best form of government drop from 63 percent in 2012 to 48 percent, while the demand for a strong leader rose from 37 percent to 59 percent. The disaffection is particularly strong among young people, the group that so spectacularly took to the streets to fight Ben Ali's riot police and force him out of power three years ago. In the neighborhoods like Tadamon, it's difficult to find any young people registered to vote. According to Mouheb Garoui of the election monitoring group I Watch, some 60 percent are undecided just days before the election. "There were so many promises in 2011 and now the same promises are being made in 2014," he said. "There is discontent and apathy among youth." The Islamist-led government managed to lay down many of building blocks of a new political system and, together with the opposition, write a constitution described as one of the most progressive in the region. Yet the turmoil and deadlock kept away foreign aid, tourism and investment. "The question of the economy was neglected in the three years of the revolution - it was years of political wrangling and political transition," Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, the interim prime minister that succeeded the Islamist government, told The Associated Press. He says his administration, which succeeded the Islamist government, has begun the necessary economic reforms to stabilize the country. Under his watch, foreign aid has flowed back to the country. In the past year, security forces have also carried out a string of attacks to dismantle suspected militant cells, most recently on Friday when a counterterrorism operation in the suburbs resulted in the deaths of six alleged militants - five of them gun-toting women, according to police. The party most hoping to capitalize on voters' disaffection is Nida Tunis (Tunisia's Call) run by charismatic - albeit 87-year-old -

politician Beji Caid Essebsi, who is clearly trying to evoke the good old days of an educated, modern Tunisia without the dictatorship. Formed after the revolution, the party brings together trade unionists, businessmen and more than a few politicians from Ben Ali's time that are united by little more than opposition to the Islamists. The main message of their campaign has been that their party represents progress in the face of what they call the reactionary policies of Ennahda. "We needed a party to bring back the middle class that was pushed to the side by the aggression of the Islamists and their beliefs," said Mustapha Ben Ahmed, a member of the party's executive bureau. "This historical bloc can restore the prestige of the state." The party is probably the only one that can compete with Ennahda's impressive organization around the country and is running equal in polls. Wwith the anti-Islamist vote divided among many parties all promising jobs and stability, Ennahda likely will have to be part of any future coalition - a possibility Ben Ahmed fervently condemned as an "unnatural alliance." The leader of Ennahda, however, has said his party is ready to make a coalition with whomever else the voters choose, though Nida Tunis would not be his first choice. Rachid Ghannouchi told AP that the lesson he has learned from the party's first experience in power was the need for an even broader-based coalition to carry out the difficult reforms need to get the country on track. "Before when we came to power we were just activists and not statesmen but today we have both activists and statesmen," he said. "We have gained experience and become more realistic with a better understanding of the problems of the people." At a massive Ennahda rally in the heart of downtown on the iconic Bourguiba Avenue on the eve of the election, thousands cheered and waved flags, showing none of the flagging enthusiasm for politics found elsewhere. For supporters of the party, any past missteps are made up for by the belief that the Islamists have their best interests at heart. "They were learning," said Kamal Ali as he drove his car through downtown. "Do children on the first day of school already know how to read and write?" He gestured at the still damaged husk of the old ruling party headquarters nearby. "The others they knew how to do politics, but they also knew how to steal - morals is the most important thing."--AP