

Tunis, Dec 22 (AP) - Tunisian polling firms have declared Beji Caid Essebsi, an 88-year-old official from previous regimes, as the winner of Sunday's presidential runoff, cementing his dominance over a country where his party already controls Parliament. The runoff election marks the culmination of a 4-year-long rocky transition to democracy after Tunisians overthrew dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, kicking off pro-democracy uprisings around the region in what became known as the Arab Spring. Only in Tunisia, however, has the transition to democracy remained on track, with elections for a permanent parliament held in October and the first round of presidential elections a month later. The Sigma Conseil company's exit polls, which have consistently come close to matching official results released later, gave Essebsi 55.5 percent of the vote and his opponent Moncef Marzouki, the outgoing interim president, 44.5 percent. Other polling companies gave between 52 and 54 percent to Essebsi. Marzouki's campaign maintained that Sunday's election was too close to call, and the official results are expected by Monday night. Marzouki congratulated Tunisia for its election and said the country has "banished the fake elections of the past which were won by percentages of 99.99 percent." Celebrations began immediately after polls closed at Essebsi's party headquarters with fireworks, cheering crowds and lines of cars honking their horns. Essebsi struck a conciliatory note, urging Marzouki's supporters to work with him to rebuild the country. "The future begins today!" Essebsi said, saluting Marzouki and the people who voted for him. "What is important is what we do today and tomorrow for Tunisia and all its children. We must work hand in hand." The election has shown deep divisions in the country, not just between Islamists and more secular groups but also between the wealthier capital and coastal regions and the more impoverished interior, which voted for Marzouki. While the moderate Islamist party Ennahda dominated politics immediately after the revolution in 2011, they were unable to address the serious economic and political challenges in the country, including terrorist attacks. The Islamists came in second in October's parliamentary election and did not field a presidential candidate, though they tended support Marzouki. Essebsi created Nida Tunis (Tunisia's Call), a collection of former regime officials, businessmen and trade unionists to oppose the Islamists and to restore the "prestige of state," which he said had suffered in the wake of the revolution. There are now fears that Nida Tunis' control over the presidency, prime minister and Parliament could result in a return to the country's old authoritarian ways - an argument Marzouki attempted to push during his campaign. In the end, however, Tunisians appear to have desired a return to stability and normalcy after the years of revolutionary turmoil. "Essebsi, thanks to his political experience and international ties as well as his program, can get the country out of this mess," said Mehrez Rakkez, a lawyer who voted in the lower income neighborhood of Kram. He described Marzouki's three years as interim president as a disaster and said the vote was a choice between "life and death." In nearly all the countries swept by pro-democracy uprisings since the Arab Spring, there has been a degree of backlash since the first heady days, including government crackdowns and Egypt's military overthrow of an elected president. In Tunisia, however, the backlash has remained within the legal framework of the transition. In contrast to the almost 70 percent turnout for the first round of the presidential election and the legislative balloting, the official election authority said only 59 percent of Tunisia's 5.3 million voters cast ballots on Sunday. "This election doesn't interest me," said a young man sitting in a crowded cafe in front of a polling station in Tunis' lower income neighborhood of Yasmina. "I voted before, but I feel the candidates lie. They promise to create jobs for the youth and improve living conditions, but they don't keep them." The eve of the election was marked by some violence with a shotgun blast wounding a soldier near the city of Kairouan. The attackers returned early

Sunday morning and attempted to target another polling station but were caught by the army which killed one and arrested three. No other major acts of violence were reported by the time polls closed at 6 p.m. According to authorities, around 100,000 police and soldiers secured the polls.