

When masked gunmen started pounding on the door last week, politician Mohamed Al Nasri leapt from the second-floor window into a neighbor's home. It was more than just an isolated case of political violence. Coming weeks before crucial elections, it underscored how vulnerable democracy is in the cradle of the Arab Spring.

Tunisia was the first country to overthrow its dictator in the 2011 Arab Spring, and now it's the last one to keep its democratic flame alive. The October parliamentary elections and the November presidential ballot are meant to complete the North African nation's democratic transition - but it's a troubled process overshadowed by the threat of terror, a struggling economy and a deeply divided political class.

Days after the attempt on Al Nasri's life, police announced the arrest of 12 men suspected of planning attacks on the elections. The incidents follow a warning issued by the prime minister at the start of the month that terrorists were seeking to torpedo the elections. Now reservists have been called up to secure the polling stations for the Oct. 26 parliamentary and Nov. 23 presidential contests.

"We have to prepare for the worst and have taken the necessary preventative measures, because it is better to plan ahead than resort to late solutions," Chafik Sarsar, the head of the national election commission, told The Associated Press. "It makes sense to call up the reservists because of the unstable situation throughout the region."

The Arab Spring got underway when Tunisians overthrew their dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011. The fall of Ben Ali's secular police state, however, allowed the rise of extremist Islamists that the elected government led by moderate Islamists only finally confronted in a serious manner last year.

Since then police have fought and arrested several cells in major cities, and there are constant clashes along the borders between soldiers and heavily armed militants.

The hardening of the government line, however, prompted Tunisia's extremist Ansar al-Shariah group to declare war on the state.

"You have mistaken our tolerance for weakness, and what has taken place in Tunisia since last May with our brother mujahedeen in the mountains shows you only understand the logic of force and only hear the noise of bullets," the group said in a July 28 statement. Its leadership is believed to have fled next door to lawless Libya.

Significantly, the statement also pledged allegiance to both al-Qaida leader Ayman Zawahri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-described caliph of the Islamic State group that has been wreaking havoc in Syria and Iraq.

The Tunisian government estimates that 2,400 of its citizens are fighting in Iraq and Syria, nearly all of them with the Islamic State, and there are fears about what might happen when they return.

After more than a dozen Tunisian soldiers were killed in an ambush in July near the Algerian border, the government unleashed a new crackdown against mosques and organizations believed to be funding and recruiting extremists.

The moves raised fears by local and international rights groups that Tunisia might be following in the footsteps of fellow Arab Spring country Egypt, where popular demonstrations against the elected Islamist government led to the military overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi. His ouster was followed by a massive security crackdown against terrorism which has undone many of the democratic advances brought on by the revolution.

So far, Tunisia's political factions have not turned on each other the way they did in Egypt, but the past three years have seen bitter battles that the new elections may reawaken.

There are fears that a massive electoral win by either Ennahda, the moderate Islamists who dominated the 2011 elections, or their anti-Islamist opponents might by shatter the fragile consensus that has reigned for the last year, and resulted in the adoption in January of the most progressive constitution in the Arab world.

According to Michael Ayari, senior Tunisia analyst for the International Crisis Group, the best outcome would be one forcing the various factions to continue sharing power and working for a consensus - an aspect of its transition that has set Tunisia apart from its neighbors.

"The only thing I am sure of is that everyone fears an unbalanced result," he said, referring to the possibility of a crushing win by Islamists or another party. "The polarization is not over, it's just quieter now."

At first glance, Tunisia has a bewilderingly varied political scene, with 170 registered parties competing in 1,500 lists with a total of 15,000 candidates for just 217 seats - all in a country of only 10 million, with 5.2 million voters.

Of those parties, perhaps only a dozen have any real weight, with the main opposition to Ennahda being Nida Tunis, or Tunisia's Call. The party brings together a diverse array of supporters of the old regime, businessmen and leftists, loosely tied together by the charisma of leader Beji Caid Essebsi and a shared antagonism to what they call the Islamists' project.

In polling, the two parties are the clear front runners and any future government will be determined by the coalitions each one can make with the smaller left-wing and populist parties. The contest between Islamists and anti-Islamists, which is also playing out on the battlefield in neighboring Libya, has attracted scrutiny from around the region, especially from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which have spoken out forcefully against political Islamist groups like Ennahda that have ideological links to the Muslim Brotherhood - the region's oldest political Islamic organization.

These countries would prefer not to see Ennahda return to power.

Despite some combative rhetoric, Laryssa Chomiak, director of the Center for Maghreb Studies, said Tunisian parties have learned through the transition to work together, especially on the problems that really matter to people like the economy and security.

"You see a lot of moderation in the last three years in their positions," she said. "You see quite a lot of similarities with proposed economic and security programs since a majority of Tunisians are concerned about that."--AP