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# Tunisia's Inaugural Municipal Elections: A Comparative Analysis of Independent Lists in La Marsa

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Tunisia's Inaugural Municipal Elections: A Comparative Analysis of  
Independent Lists in La Marsa

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I seek to answer two principal questions: what motivates candidates in La Marsa to run on independent lists, and what differentiates each of La Marsa's four independent lists from each other? Through interviews with candidates and from campaign materials such as Facebook pages, brochures, and videos, I have found that the fundamental lack of confidence in extant Tunisian political parties and processes has led candidates to align with independent, or citizen, lists for the May 2018 municipal elections. Candidates' focus on unique, local, and decentralized issues also plays a factor in their rejection of partisan politics in this election.

The main differences between La Marsa's four independent lists are the level of detail that each list gave to their programs and the way by which each list formed. La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa appear to have had the most comprehensive programs, as well as the most active campaign cycle both online and in-person, and the preliminary election results reflect this planning and activity.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

In October 2011, Tunisia held its first democratic elections since the January 2011 Jasmine Revolution and subsequent collapse of President Zine Ben Ali's regime. In December 2010, the self-immolation of Mohamad Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia served as a representation of the dismal economic conditions, social restrictions, and repressive political climate that had characterized the country for decades. For many, Bouazizi's suicide is seen as a spark that ignited the Arab Spring, but in reality, the revolution began as a result of a combination of these conditions and events. Due to factors including, but not limited to, its relatively small size and highly educated populace relative to the Middle East North Africa region, the country's revolution was a political success.<sup>1</sup>

After the establishment of a 159-member High Commission to create an electoral code, as well as an independent election commission, the *Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections* (ISIE), Tunisians voted in October 2011 for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), or the legislative body that would create a national constitution and political institutions.<sup>2</sup> The Ennahdha Party, a Muslim democratic party led by Rached Ghannouchi, won the plurality of seats in the NCA after its party leaders and supporters returned from decades of exile under the Ben Ali regime.

In October 2014, Tunisia held its first parliamentary elections, as well as two rounds of presidential elections. Nida Tounes, a secular party, won 86 seats in the parliamentary elections, with Ennahdha gaining 69.<sup>3</sup> Four months later, a coalition government was formed

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<sup>1</sup> *Final Report on the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly Elections* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute, 2012), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Final Report on the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly Elections* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute, 2012), 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute, 2015), 12.

between Nida Tounes and Ennahdha, despite disapproval from a majority of Nida's members of parliament.<sup>4</sup>

Three years later, in January 2017, parliament and ISIE announced that Tunisia's first municipal elections would be held in October or November of 2017, thus beginning the voter registration and election preparation process.<sup>5</sup> The elections were delayed until May 6, 2018 and the electoral code for municipal elections, the *Code des Collectivités Locales*, was passed one week prior to the elections.<sup>6</sup> Pursuant to Tunisia's closed-list proportional representation with the largest remainder voting system, Tunisians filed their candidacies to ISIE not as individual candidacies, but as partisan, independent, or coalition lists in March 2018.<sup>7</sup> Of the 2,074 lists presented to ISIE, 860 were independent, or nonpartisan, lists.<sup>8</sup>

In La Marsa, a large coastal suburb of Tunis, eight lists were approved by ISIE: Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes, Attiyar Aldimoqrati as partisan lists; Alitihaad Almodani as a coalition list; and La Marsa Change, Alwen El Marsa, Amal El Marsa, and Houmet El Marsa as independent lists.<sup>9</sup> In total, half of La Marsa's lists were independent, citizen lists. For comparison, Bardo, a municipality in the same voting district as La Marsa, Tunis 2, also had eight total lists but only two independent lists. The Tunis 2 district is also home to Carthage with three independent lists, Sidi Bou Said with three independent lists, Halq El Wadi with two independent lists, and El Kram had two independent lists. It is worth noting, however,

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<sup>4</sup> Laurence, Jonathan, *Tunisia, The Courage of Compromise* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> *Tunisia Weekly Update: Parliament Passes Municipal Elections Law after Long Delay* (Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Tunisia votes in first municipal elections since 2011 uprising* (Doha, Al Jazeera, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> *Tunisia: Municipal Elections 2018 – ISIE Announces 2,074 Final Candidate Lists* (Tunis, All Africa, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Oueslati, Brahim, *Municipales en Tunisie : un scrutin sur fond d'indifférence* (Paris, Jeune Afrique, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> *Lists for Municipal Elections in La Marsa* (Tunis, ISIE, 2018).

that independent lists still comprised half of the total lists presented in Carthage, Sidi Bou Said, and El Kram.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, I seek to answer two principal questions: what motivates candidates in La Marsa to run on independent lists, and what differentiates each of La Marsa's four independent lists from one another? I specifically selected La Marsa due to its number of independent lists and its geographic proximity to SIT.

In regard to the former question, I conclude that an overwhelming number of candidates chose to run on independent lists due, in part, to dissatisfaction with political parties and the Tunisian political sphere after interviewing candidates, attending campaign events, and studying online and material campaign materials. In the context of my research questions, it is important to examine the studies that have already been conducted on Tunisians' disillusionment with democracy and partisan politics. The Pew Research Center conducted two surveys regarding Tunisians' confidence in democratic governance—one in 2012 shortly after the revolution and one in 2014 prior to the first parliamentary and presidential elections. The study concluded that Tunisians' preference for and support of democracy significantly declined between 2012 and 2014. In 2012, 63% of respondents found "democracy preferable to other types of government," compared to 48% in 2014. Notably, "only 43% of Tunisians between 18 and 29 think democracy is preferable" in 2014 versus 54% for Tunisians over 50. A majority of respondents also believed that a "leader with

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<sup>10</sup> "ISIE Lists for Municipal Elections in Tunis 2," ISIE, March 2018, <http://www.isie.tn/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B32.pdf>.



a strong hand” was needed for the country. Lastly, in 2012, 40% believed that democracy was more important than a strong economy, versus 73% of 2014 respondents who believed that a strong economy is more important than democracy.<sup>11</sup> The Pew study demonstrates the frustration and disappointment that Tunisians, especially young Tunisians, felt just three years after the revolution. The results are representative of the fact that Tunisians wanted not only a political revolution, but also an economic and social revolution. Instead, many feel as though the change in political institutions brought none of the reform the country needs.

Four years later, in January 2018, Sada, an online journal from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that is focused on political, social, and economic issues in the Arab world also conducted a survey regarding Tunisians’ satisfaction levels with the national economy and with government performance. One survey question asked respondents to name the most important challenge facing Tunisia, and a majority answered with “the economy and unemployment,” while a minority answered with “corruption or low income.” Tellingly, the study reports that “60 percent thought that no political party handled [the problem identified as most important] well.” Additionally, the survey found that “only about 30 percent of Tunisians had ‘total’ or ‘partial’ confidence in liberal political parties, religious parties, their own parliamentary representatives, or the parliament.” Meanwhile, 72 percent expressed “high levels of total and partial confidence” in the police force, and 92 percent expressed high confidence levels in the military. Overall, Tunisians lack confidence in the institutions related to democracy and governance and place their trust in the more traditional power structures that existed under Tunisia’s authoritarian regimes. Importantly, the study

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<sup>11</sup> *Tunisian Confidence in Democracy Wanes* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2014).

concludes that “the concern is not dissatisfaction with the poor performance of the current government or *some* political parties but with the entire political system.”<sup>12</sup>

As demonstrated in both the Pew Center and Sada Carnegie Endowment reports, a concurrent increase in economic concern and decrease in confidence in Tunisian democracy has taken root in the country during the seven years since the revolution. This fundamental lack of confidence in the Tunisian political and economic situation became evident in voter participation levels even before May 6, 2018, the official date of the municipal elections. Prior to the elections, parliament voted to allow Tunisian military and security forces to vote in the municipal elections, whereas in parliamentary and presidential elections they are forbidden to do so. On Sunday, April 30, the voting day designated for military and security forces, only 4,492 voted of the 36,495 registered, or 12% of registered voters.<sup>13</sup> These dismal figures led political analysts and members of the press to predict that absenteeism would be the true victor in the first municipal elections.<sup>14</sup>

It is this critical mindset, demonstrated by the military and security forces, that makes the study of independent lists relevant. If Tunisians choose to vote at all for their municipal councils, will this disapproval of and disinterest in the post-revolution political sphere motivate voters to vote for independents, rather than for big-name political parties including Ennahdha and Nida Tounes? Additionally, how has this political climate affected the number of Tunisians choosing to run for local office? Has it swayed more citizens to run on independent lists?

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<sup>12</sup> Aydogan, Abdullah and Yildirim, A. Kadir, *The Economic and Political Dissatisfaction Behind Tunisia's Protests* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Mourad, S, *Tunisie: Municipales, entre la tentation de l'absention et le droit d'exercer son devoir de vote!* (Tunis, Tunisie Numerique, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Nechi, Oumeïma, *Municipales en Tunisie : le combat de la société civile pour contrer l'absention* (Paris, Jeune Afrique, 2018).

## **Methodology and Limitations**

To conduct my research, I performed informal, semi-structured interviews with three candidates, two from La Marsa Change and one from Alwen El Marsa. During these interviews, conducted in either French or English, I first asked basic questions, such as in which of the five La Marsa neighborhoods do the candidates live. I then inquired about the candidates' professional backgrounds and whether they had any prior experience with political parties, political campaigns, or political organizing. Finally, I moved on to the candidates' views on the function of local government, why and how they joined their list, and what their lists' programs entail. The main challenge I encountered during these interviews was the language barrier when conducting interviews in French. For instance, it is possible that I was able to gather more information about La Marsa Change from Nabila Hamza than I was able to gather about Alwen El Marsa from Imen El Fehri simply because I was able to speak with Ms. Hamza in English.

Another challenge that I faced during the interviews revolved around respecting the code of honor that La Marsa's lists signed in order to run positive campaigns and avoid political mudslinging. I would have preferred to ask La Marsa Change candidates questions about Amal El Marsa, for example, but I did not want to put any candidate in the position of violating the code of honor. However, by choosing this approach I did not ask important questions regarding corruption claims and potential partisan ties that affected the independent lists.

Despite several attempts to schedule interviews with candidates from Houmet El Marsa and Amal El Marsa, I was unable to meet with any candidates from these lists. In place of interviewing Houmet El Marsa and Amal El Marsa candidates, I examined their informational campaign materials, namely their websites and Facebook pages and the images, videos, and texts posted there. I also attended a debate in La Marsa that was intended to take

place between Houmet El Marsa, Amal El Marsa, Nidaa Tounes, and Tiyyar Aldimoqrati, but the only participant who attended was the head of the Houmet El Marsa list, who spoke entirely in Tunisian Arabic. Undoubtedly, my examination of La Marsa's four independent lists is incomplete—and potentially unfair to Houmet El Marsa and Amal El Marsa—due to my inability to interview candidates from two of the four lists.

Despite the fact that my research focuses primarily on the four independent lists in relation to one another, I regret not asking the candidates more about their opinions of the specific political parties that presented lists in La Marsa. Each of the candidates spoke at length about the general disappointment and corruption that accompanies Tunisian partisan politics in general, but I did not receive any information about Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes, or Tiyyar Aldimoqrati's campaigns and programs in La Marsa. This information would have given me a better-informed answer as to why candidates chose to run on independent lists, other than the general responses I received about mistrust in political parties. If I had more time, I would have also liked to interview some candidates from the partisan lists to hear their perspectives as to why this many independent lists were presented in La Marsa.

## **Discussion/Analysis**

### *La Marsa Change*

#### *Overview:*

La Marsa Change is a list of thirty Marsois citizens, headed by Doctor Slim Meherzi. Originally, La Marsa Change formed not as a candidate list for the municipal elections, but as a group of La Marsa residents with civil society backgrounds. One year prior to the municipal elections, this group convened to form an organization to diagnose and propose solutions to La Marsa's local issues. The list's slogan is "*Marsa Solidaire et Citoyen*," and its symbol is the gnawia, a vegetable typical of La Marsa. In February 2018, La Marsa Change held two

primary elections—one between three candidates for the position at the head of the list and another to fill the 29 remaining seats on the list. La Marsa Change used a committee system to formulate its program, meaning all La Marsa citizens were invited to join a committee regarding a certain topic or issue and discuss possible approaches with the candidates.<sup>15</sup>

*Program:*

La Marsa Change's program is summarized in eight points. The first is to make La Marsa more unified and more inclusive through projects that would improve health, education, and transportation services for those who live in poverty. Within this first objective, La Marsa Change also proposes a plan to better distribute and direct funds to the poorest regions of La Marsa. Other proposals include improving access to housing for families facing financial and social hardship, creating artisanal districts in several neighborhoods, supporting industrial activities in Bhar Lazraq and other industrial zones, and creating programs to support young entrepreneurs.

The second point in the program involves making La Marsa more economically dynamic, especially in light of the nearly 33% of young people in La Marsa who are unemployed. Within this objective, La Marsa Change hopes to attract more businesses, specifically environmentally-friendly ones, to La Marsa who can employ young people by improving public transportation, introducing new communication technology, and creating environmental programs, especially in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with large youth populations such as Bhar Lazraq, Harrouch, and Bousselsa. La Marsa Change also plans to encourage incubators, start-ups, and private-public partnerships to establish themselves in La Marsa. The list would also like to create a career advising center for young people, work with the Ministry of Tourism to develop La Marsa's tourism industry, create

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<sup>15</sup> La Marsa Change, "Qui Sommes-Nous?" Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.lamarsachange.com/#section-about>

jobs involving environmental protection, and dedicate space to souks in each of the five La Marsa neighborhoods.

The third point in La Marsa Change's program is to make the city greener, cleaner, and more attractive. This is one of the most detailed points in the plan, and sub-points include implementing a complete garbage collection, sorting, recycling, and repurposing system to simultaneously clean the environment and create jobs. The list would also like to plant new, healthy palm trees throughout the city, clean the beaches and shorelines in a manner that respects the region's biodiversity, and impose a new urban development plan to improve weak infrastructure, especially in Bhar Lazraq, Gammarth, Harrouch, and Jbel Khaoui. La Marsa Change also plans to create more parks, rid the streets of illegal kiosks and businesses, and improve pedestrian zones.

La Marsa Change's fourth objective is to make La Marsa more accessible for everyone, meaning improving public transportation between the more affluent centre-ville neighborhoods and the more peripheral, working class neighborhoods. The list will also designate more pedestrian and cycling zones throughout the city. Additionally, La Marsa Change's plan involves making the town more accessible for those with disabilities and reduced mobility, facilitating the movement of ambulances, and creating different spaces throughout the town for citizens to access different artistic and cultural events.

The fifth point in the program is to ensure that children are protected, valued, and able to access sports and recreational activities. This point is divided into four sub-points. The first sub-point is in regard to early-childhood services and education. La Marsa Change hopes to open a public kindergarten in each La Marsa neighborhood at rates that impoverished families can afford. La Marsa Change also proposes opening more schools in the town, especially in the densely-populated neighborhoods. Additionally, the list would like to create

services to listen to and aid children who are victims of violence and abuse. The second sub-point involves creating creative, cultural, and athletic spaces for youth, as well as connecting youth with advising centers and civil society organizations. The third sub-point seeks to improve the lacking infrastructure for athletic activities; La Marsa Change hopes to place more sports equipment in underequipped neighborhoods including Bhar Lazraq and Gammarth, build an Olympic swimming pool, and create fitness trails in Essaada Park and the Gammarth forest. Lastly, the fourth sub-point addresses public health issues in La Marsa, specifically the disparity in access to health services between the different neighborhoods in the commune. La Marsa Change seeks to construct more clinics in the neighborhoods that do not have their own, develop preventative health programs to combat chronic disease and addiction, open animal protection services, and stop pollution and contamination in Bhar Lazraq.

Promoting women's rights in La Marsa is the sixth point in the program. La Marsa Change will take a gender-based approach to municipal budgeting, as well as adopt an annual action plan on gender equality in La Marsa. The list would also like to create programs to promote female entrepreneurs and create a gender equality commission.

The seventh point in La Marsa Change's program seeks to safeguard cultural and architectural heritage and guarantee access to culture for all La Marsa residents. In order to restore La Marsa's dilapidated architectural sites and structures, La Marsa Change pledges to create an extensive inventory of all buildings and historic homes that need repairs and propose a plan to restore them. La Marsa Change also plans to write a comprehensive guide of La Marsa's historic, cultural, and touristic attractions. In addition to architectural preservation, La Marsa Change would like to redevelop public libraries, modernize and diversify their book collections, and develop media libraries.

The eighth and final point in the La Marsa Change program is to have a participatory and transparent government managing La Marsa. La Marsa Change promises to combat the corruption and clientelism that has plagued the community. The list is also in favor of an open data policy that would allow all La Marsa citizens to access municipal files regarding public projects and would live stream each municipal council meeting. La Marsa Change proposes ongoing training of elected officials, involving local borough committees in the determination of local projects, creating an inventory of all public land in La Marsa, and forming a *Maison des Associations* to provide legal, financial, and organizational resources for associations. Finally, La Marsa Change promises to draft a code of ethics for the municipality and its citizens.<sup>16</sup>

La Marsa Change's program covers economic, environmental, social, educational, health-based, and political objectives for La Marsa. As La Marsa Change stated on their website, "*Notre objectif est de faire de la Marsa, une ville vivante, décloisonnée, qui ferait le lien entre l'habitant, son centre-ville et sa périphérie.*"<sup>17</sup>

#### *La Marsa Change Campaign:*

La Marsa Change employed a combination of online and physical materials and events to promote the list and its program. La Marsa Change's Facebook page has garnered 10,034 likes as of May 7, 2018, and its Facebook group has 1,500 members. Through Facebook, La Marsa Change shares professionally-produced video clips of its candidates, as well as footage of the list's various events throughout La Marsa. La Marsa Change also has a detailed website that includes photographs and biographies of each candidate, a comprehensive explanation of the eight-point program, a list of campaign events, and a

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<sup>16</sup> La Marsa Change, "Notre programme." Accessed May 9, 2018.  
<http://www.lamarsachange.com/#section-program>

<sup>17</sup> La Marsa Change, "Notre programme." Accessed May 9, 2018.  
<http://www.lamarsachange.com/#section-program>



contact page. La Marsa Change's events included citizens' cafés, open meetings in different neighborhoods in La Marsa, and an event with live music the night before the campaign-free "day of silence," or May 5, 2018.

*Themes: Perspectives from Mourad Louhichi and Nabila Hamza*

According to two La Marsa Change candidates, motivation to run as an independent candidate stems from two main factors. The first consideration is a sense that the municipal elections are unique and not to be treated as presidential and parliamentary elections. This is to say that while partisan politics are appropriate on the national scale, they are not suited to municipal issues and the localized level of attention that must be given to them. Mourad Louhichi, candidate from La Marsa Change, decided to run as an independent because this is "*une election citoyen plus qu'une election partisan.*"<sup>18</sup> The independent lists provide candidates with a platform free from national political agendas, allowing them to focus their programs entirely on concerns that are unique to their municipality, in this case La Marsa.

The second factor behind running on an independent list relates to the current political climate in Tunisia; a pervasive sense of mistrust in and frustration with partisan politics in the country has led potential candidates to distance themselves from extant political parties. Nabila Hamza, candidate from La Marsa Change, says that "disappointment [in political parties] is huge" and that "you can feel it when you talk to people."<sup>19</sup> Citing political disenchantment in Bhar Lazraq, one of La Marsa's five principal communes, Ms. Hamza explained, "You cannot imagine the reaction in Bhar Lazraq. People are not even registered to vote. There are 42,000 inhabitants and only 3,000 are registered to vote." Ms. Hamza continued to describe the mentality that La Marsa residents from Bhar Lazraq have that "all political parties are liars" and that the country has been a "mess since the revolution" with

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<sup>18</sup> Louhichi, Mourad. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, March 23, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Hamza, Nabila. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, April 18, 2018.

“no good roads [and] no good schools.”<sup>20</sup> In Ms. Hamza’s opinion, independent lists offer an alternative to political parties and the inherent implications of corruption and disappointment that accompany them.

Both Mr. Louhichi and Ms. Hamza cited several characteristics specific to La Marsa Change that distinguish their list from the three other independent lists in La Marsa. The democratic spirit and processes of the group, from its formation to the programs it has planned for the future, attracted both candidates to the list. La Marsa change originated not as a list, but as an informal organization of La Marsa citizens who met to diagnose local challenges and discuss how to address them. These citizens represented a variety of professional backgrounds, from teachers to doctors to traders to students, and many had backgrounds in civil society organizations and activism. In 2017, one year prior to the municipal elections, this group of citizens decided to form an independent list through a primary election. Of approximately 64 contenders interested in joining the list, there was a primary election between one woman and two men for the position at the head of the list and a subsequent election for the other 29 members of the council.

Additionally, Mr. Louhichi and Ms. Hamza both noted that La Marsa Change is unique because it focuses on representing all Marsois citizens. The first five candidates of the list represent each of the five main neighborhoods in La Marsa: Erriadh, Sidi Daoud, Gammarth, Bhar Lazraq, and Medina. In dedicating the first five spots in the list to each region of La Marsa, La Marsa Change seeks to fight against disparities that exist between the different neighborhoods. Ms. Hamza explained, “We think that we have to create a sense of belonging to those people who feel that they are marginalized and not part of La Marsa.”

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<sup>20</sup> Hamza, Nabila. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, April 18, 2018.

Ms. Hamza added that La Marsa Change distinguishes itself from the other independent lists from the way in which its platform and program were prepared. For six to eight months, La Marsa Change created eight commissions, each dedicated to a specific topic or challenge affecting La Marsa. The commissions included Environment, Traffic, Urban Management, Education, Health, and Youth and Sports. According to Ms. Hamza, approximately 400 La Marsa citizens joined the various commissions, many of whom have expertise in one of the eight topics. Through commission meetings, La Marsa Change received about 100 written contributions and proposals to help the list formulate its program. Through this commission process, La Marsa Change took a participatory approach in choosing its platform and strategy, rather than having “two or three people sit down and decide the program.”<sup>21</sup> La Marsa Change candidates pride themselves on having La Marsa residents take part in the diagnosis and the solution-making process to La Marsa’s problems.

#### *Alwen El Marsa*

##### *Overview:*

Alwen el Marsa, or “Colors of La Marsa,” is a list of thirty Marsois citizens led by Moez Bouraoui. Mr. Bouraoui holds a “*docteur*” in environmental science from the *Ecole Nationale du Génie Rural des Eaux et Forêts de Paris*, and he is also a lecturer of urbanism and land development at the *Institut Supérieur des Technologies de l’Environnement, de l’Urbanisme et du Bâtiment*. Mr. Bouraoui has worked on several large development projects in cities throughout Tunisia and abroad. As a cofounder and former president of the *Association Tunisienne pour l’Intégrité et la Démocratie des Elections* (ATIDE), Mr. Bouraoui also has political experience. In 2014, Mr. Bouraoui participated in legal projects that led to the creation of ISIE. He also assisted in drafting laws for the 2014 electoral code,

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<sup>21</sup> Hamza, Nabila. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, April 18, 2018.

the 2017 consolidation laws for the upcoming municipal elections, and the *Code des collectivités locales*.

Those interested in running on Alwen's list submitted applications and were chosen by an objective committee of Alwen supporters who selected thirty candidates based on skill and experience, integrity, honesty, and respectable reputation. The first six candidates on the list represent the five regions of La Marsa: Medina, Erriadh, Gammarth, Bhar Lazraq, and Sidi Daoud.<sup>22</sup>

### *Program*

Alwen El Marsa has a twenty-point program that seeks to write “*une nouvelle page de la gouvernance de notre ville orientée vers la participation citoyenne, la lutte contre la corruption, la réforme de l'administration, la transparence, l'accès à des services publics de qualité et le vivre ensemble, dans une cité harmonieuse, au cachet préservé et aux espaces naturels valorisés.*”<sup>23</sup> Alwen created its program to make each citizen feel respected, heard, and valued in the community. The main focuses of the program are infrastructure; citizen services; culture, youth, and athletics; and environment and recreation.

The twenty-point program is divided into three sections: well-being, participatory governance, and innovation and dynamism. The first eight points are related to well-being in La Marsa and returning to all sections of the town the image of an attractive town. The first point focuses on revising the urban development plan and restarting the 2000s project, “*Marsa : ville jardin*” that has since ceased. The second point involves controlling urbanization and putting an end to illegitimate businesses and situations that are currently ignored by the police.

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<sup>22</sup> Alwen El Marsa, *Alwen El Marsa: Liste Indépendante* (La Marsa, Alwen El Marsa, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Alwen El Marsa, *Alwen El Marsa: Liste Indépendante* (La Marsa, Alwen El Marsa, 2018).

Thirdly, Alwen seeks to make equal La Marsa's different neighborhoods in terms of infrastructure—sidewalks, rainwater management, cemeteries, roads—and localized public services. Alwen would like to construct a network of roads, at least thirty kilometers long, in the regions that lack roads and access to transportation. The third point also includes ensuring that La Marsa's infrastructure is accessible to people of all ability levels. The fourth point in the program is a traffic plan to decrease the number of cars in centre-ville and create a municipal transportation network that accesses all neighborhoods in La Marsa.

The fifth objective is to fight against water pollution by better managing waste, which would include a new recycling program. Alwen's sixth point focuses on security, specifically using video surveillance and streetlamps in all public spaces. The seventh point is to create more green spaces in all neighborhoods. Alwen would like to plant 2,500 trees throughout the city and protect trees and plant life in Sidi Daoud, Marsa Saada, and the Gammarth forest.

The eighth and final point under the wellbeing section of the program is in regard to youth and sports. Alwen seeks to create more spaces and provide more public equipment dedicated to sports and athletics in the five neighborhoods.

The next five points are related to Alwen's participatory governance program. Alwen plans on engaging in participatory budgeting, in which civil society organizations and citizens have a voice in allocating municipal funds. Alwen also seeks to fight corruption with a strict application of the law and open access to information. The list would like to make local governance and administration faster, more effective, and more transparent, and it will dedicate at least 1.5% of the budget to improving the skills of municipal administrators. Alwen will also help develop local associations and ensure that they are compliant with the law while respecting their projects and their autonomy. Lastly, Alwen promises to hold referendums whenever a petition receives more than 5,000 signatures.

The third section of Alwen's program focuses on making La Marsa a dynamic and innovative town. Alwen plans to create more than 2,000 jobs in the industrial zone and in the service sector by developing competitive market factors. The list will also promote tourism by revitalizing the hotel zone and by funding shuttle buses and transportation specifically for touristic use. Alwen will also allocate at least one percent of the municipal budget to fund cultural and artistic events and spaces. Moreover, Alwen would like each La Marsa neighborhood to have souks and markets that are controlled by the municipality. In order to simultaneously create jobs and protect the environment, Alwen will promote renewable energy sources and construction projects that respect the environment through a bonus supported by the municipal tax in five years. Alwen would also like to open nurseries in every neighborhood with room for at least 75 children in each. Finally, Alwen will provide services for elderly people and create an intergenerational assistance network.<sup>24</sup>

*Campaign:*

During the campaign, Alwen El Marsa held community events throughout La Marsa. In addition to formal *cafés citoyens*, Alwen consistently had a presence at the weekly Bousselsla flea market, where candidates introduced themselves to citizens. Alwen also did door-to-door canvassing and participated in a debate with La Marsa Change and Ennahdha. Alwen has a Facebook page, liked by 2,100 people, with professionally-made videos and notifications about campaign events. The list also distributed a detailed brochure, written in both French and Arabic, with biographies of each candidate and a complete description of Alwen's program.

*Themes: Perspective from Imen El Fehri*

Motivation to run as an independent candidate, according to Imen El Fehri, originates from the fact that there is a total lack of trust in Tunisian political parties due to corruption

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<sup>24</sup> Alwen El Marsa, *Alwen El Marsa: Liste Indépendante* (La Marsa, Alwen El Marsa, 2018).

and incompetence. Ms. El Fehri, who is currently a law student studying fiscal and administrative litigation, also noted that this is not a presidential or parliamentary election, but a local one. Ms. El Fehri believes that this is “the first and last chance” for citizens to change their municipality and local living conditions.<sup>25</sup> When asked what she means by “last chance,” Ms. Fehri explained that the citizens in La Marsa must vote and act now to change the city, or they might not have the opportunity to do so in the future.

According to Ms. El Fehri, Alwen El Marsa is different from the other independent and partisan lists in La Marsa because it is the “popular” list in La Marsa, or the list for the common Marsois citizen. The Alwen list is genuinely committed to empowering citizens from all neighborhoods in La Marsa and ameliorating problems relating to infrastructure, socioeconomic disparity among and within neighborhoods, cultural programs, and youth services. Ms. El Fehri, who lives in Bhar Lazraq, noted that Alwen, unlike some of the other independent lists, is comprised of candidates who have experience living and working in regions such as Bhar Lazraq. Ms. El Fehri remarked that some of her friends and neighbors commented on only seeing candidates from certain lists visit the neighborhood when the campaign season began, despite the fact that they all claim to be committed to representing the best interests of Bhar Lazraq.

While discussing her home community of Bhar Lazraq, Ms. El Fehri elaborated on the specific programs that Alwen would implement to benefit this historically underserved La Marsa neighborhood. Currently, Bhar Lazraq is home to 10,000 residents, yet there is no post office, no local hospital, and no local police force in the community. Ms. El Fehri believes that the first step in empowering and improving Bhar Lazraq will be to provide it with the basic municipal services that it lacks.

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<sup>25</sup> El Fehri, Imen. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, April 24, 2018.

The candidates' experience in finance, in administration, in infrastructure, in law, in decentralization processes, in civil society, and in activism also distinguishes Alwen from the other lists, according to Ms. El Fehri. While each list boasts of its experience in civil society and nongovernmental organizations, Alwen's program extends beyond civil society projects; Alwen seeks to effect tangible change in La Marsa. Alwen candidates are transparent and honest about the need to levy local taxes to improve conditions and implement new programs in La Marsa, unlike Nida Tounes, for example, which has claimed that it will not impose new taxes if elected at the local level. Ms. Fehri added that local businesses must help bear the burden of decentralization and local taxation. La Marsa is home to major shopping centers, including Zephyr Mall in Marsa Plage, popular bars and restaurants in Gammarth, and event spaces in Bhar Lazraq. Ms. Fehri believes that while local taxation on the household will increase relative to the symbolic municipal taxes paid under Ben Ali, businesses will also play a critical part in supporting municipal services and programs.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Amal El Marsa*

##### *Overview:*

Amal El Marsa is an independent list composed of thirty La Marsa residents who represent all of the commune's neighborhoods. The list is headed by Muhammad El Taieb El Mehiri, who was a former football player for La Marsa's football club and is a current public servant. Mr. El Mehiri now works for the *Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie* (CNAM), the public medical insurance provider in Tunisia. Due to his work, Mr. Mehiri meets with many La Marsa residents every day who have fallen victim to the country's social and political issues. His encounters with these citizens gave Mr. Mehiri the inspiration to run for La Marsa's municipal council. After introducing the idea to his fellow Marsois friends, Mr. Mehiri formed Amal El Marsa to effect change in La Marsa and return a sense of hope to its

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<sup>26</sup> El Fehri, Imen. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. La Marsa, April 24, 2018.



citizens after seven years of post-revolution disappointment. Mr. Mehiri described Amal El Marsa candidates as “radicals” because they have no political aspirations, backgrounds, connections, or resources; they only have the ability and desire to improve La Marsa.<sup>27</sup>

*Program:*

Amal El Marsa’s program is focused on building relationships with Marsois citizens, improving infrastructure, and building the tourism industry. Mr. El Mehiri believes that the first step Amal must take is regaining citizens’ trust, which will be a slow process. The list selected the name “Amal El Marsa” and its logo, a phoenix, due to the pervasive sense of hopelessness and frustration that La Marsa residents feel with the government and with social conditions. The second component of Amal’s program consists of basic infrastructure projects, including repairing La Marsa’s streets. Thirdly, Amal will slowly work to restore La Marsa’s archaeological and historical sites that have been neglected for years. Mr. Mehiri claims that this restoration will be a critical step toward transforming La Marsa into a tourist destination and cultural hub comparable to Cannes or to Capri. For example, Mr. Mehiri believes that Saf Saf, a famous Tunisian café and restaurant located in Marsa Plage, deserves to be included as a UNESCO World Heritage site—a classification that would attract tourists from around the world. In a campaign video, Mr. Mehiri noted that La Marsa has many of the same physical characteristics as Cannes and Nice and questioned, “Why is La Marsa not shining?” He added that Tunisian-made films are viewed internationally, so La Marsa should one day have its own film festival.<sup>28</sup>

*Campaign:*

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<sup>27</sup> Muhammad El Mehiri, “Amal El Marsa...Her Future,” Facebook video, May 2, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/1974665302548354/videos/2039807126034171/>.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad El Mehiri, “Amal El Marsa...Her Future,” Facebook video, May 2, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/1974665302548354/videos/2039807126034171/>.

Amal El Marsa held campaign events that were advertised on their Facebook political candidate profile, which has 1,567 likes. Events included a bike tour around La Marsa to promote the importance of sports in La Marsa and to display the various neighborhoods within the city. Amal also hosted a health clinic where 100 families in need received free medical consultations from doctors on the list. Both of these events were held on May 4, 2018, the last day of the campaign cycle. Amal El Marsa also has a Facebook group of 4,408 members where campaign photos and videos are posted.<sup>29</sup>

*Themes:*

The main objectives of Amal El Marsa, according to campaign videos, are to give a voice in government to all La Marsa citizens and to help La Marsa live up to its full potential. Mr. Mehiri commented that he and his friends formed Amal El Marsa as fathers who want to make La Marsa a shining city for their children and for future generations. While Amal El Marsa's program is not highly detailed, the guiding principle seems to be making La Marsa the cultural centerpiece not only of Tunisia, but of the Mediterranean, as well. Amal seeks to restore hope to La Marsa citizens through a slow process of citizen-government relationship building, improving infrastructure, and highlighting La Marsa's cultural, historical, and artistic attractions.

*Houmet El Marsa*

*Overview:*

Houmet El Marsa is a list of thirty Marsois citizens led by Ms. Radhia Ben Abdallah. Houmet candidates consider their list to be "*la liste des jeunes*," because half of the list is comprised of Marsois citizens under the age of 35. Ms. Ben Abdallah comes from a

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<sup>29</sup> Amal El Marsa's Facebook page, accessed May 7, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%89-1974665302548354/?hc\\_ref=ARTYFsO07Va5DezqBjVLSbulzIy82RHLREdECZZFZkD1gDYjm905cKgwcQyKzsKKbWg&fref=nf&hc\\_location=group](https://www.facebook.com/%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%89-1974665302548354/?hc_ref=ARTYFsO07Va5DezqBjVLSbulzIy82RHLREdECZZFZkD1gDYjm905cKgwcQyKzsKKbWg&fref=nf&hc_location=group).

background in urban management and development, and many of the candidates on the list have experience in civil society organizations. Ms. Ben Abdallah has described her list as a sign of dedication to La Marsa and believes that her list will benefit the city through their program and from their professional experiences.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that Ms. Ben Abdallah was originally aligned with La Marsa Change, and she decided to form Houmet El Marsa after La Marsa Change's primary elections.<sup>31</sup>

*Program:*

Houmet El Marsa has a ten-point program to improve La Marsa. First, they will reform the urban development plan so it aligns with a shared vision for La Marsa. Second, Houmet will organize “*mairie mobiles*,” or traveling town halls, in each neighborhood. Third, Houmet will ensure a strict application of the law in La Marsa. The fourth point is to allow the *Avenir Sportif de la Marsa* (ASM) to develop its programs through fundraising activities related to the club. Houmet will write a plan to clean La Marsa, improve garbage collection, and invest in recycling. The sixth objective is to reinforce social solidarity in La Marsa. The seventh point involves restoring architectural, cultural, and touristic attractions in La Marsa to bring economic development. Houmet also promises to make La Marsa the town of startups and to improve traffic flow and public transportation. Finally, Houmet will create an ecological park in the Gammarth forest.<sup>32</sup>

*Campaign:*

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<sup>30</sup> Radhia Ben Abdallah, “Groupe de la Soutien à la Liste Houmet El Marsa,” Facebook video, May 2, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dorra.douda.kh/videos/g.2104350519851664/1120478668094651/?type=2&theater&ifg=1>.

<sup>31</sup> Chekir, Hafedh. 2018. Interview by Danielle Ziegelheim. Email, May 10.

<sup>32</sup> Houmet El Marsa, “Nos priorités en 10 points.” Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://houmetelmarsa.wordpress.com/2018/04/16/nos-priorites-en-10-points/>

Houmet El Marsa used a combination of online campaign materials and events to promote the list. Houmet has a Facebook group with 2,759 members, a Facebook page with 6,700 likes, and an Instagram account with 52 followers. Houmet El Marsa uses its Facebook page to post videos of the candidates and photographs from events. Additionally, Houmet has a website with a brief description of the list's objectives and a summary of its ten-point program. Ms. Ben Abdallah participated in a debate hosted by Dimo:qratiyoun, a nongovernmental organization monitoring the elections in La Marsa, although the candidates from the other lists—Amal El Marsa, Nida Tounes, and Tayyar—did not show. Ms. Ben Abdallah also had local radio and television appearances. During the campaign, Houmet El Marsa frequently used their list number, eight, in its marketing and campaign materials.

#### *Themes:*

Houmet El Marsa is a list by young Marsois for young Marsois. Houmet's general goals as described on their website are "*sécurité, travail, propreté, trafic fluidifié... Bref, fierté de vivre dans une ville exemplaire et dynamique.*"<sup>33</sup> Houmet recognizes that each neighborhood in La Marsa faces its own, unique challenges. New neighborhoods are forming and old neighborhoods need renovations, infrastructure improvements, and adequate public services. Houmet promises to draw upon the skills and experiences of its candidates, while forming partnerships with civil society organizations, to respond to citizens' needs in La Marsa.

#### *Election Results*

As of Thursday, May 10, ISIE has released preliminary election results. As of this date, it appears as though the election results for La Marsa are as follows: La Marsa Change won eleven seats, Alwen El Marsa won seven seats, Nida Tounes won five seats, Ennahdha

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<sup>33</sup> Houmet El Marsa, "Houmet El Marsa : Communiqué Electoral." Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://houmetelmarsa.wordpress.com/2018/04/15/houmet-el-marsa-communique-electoral/>.

won four seats, Amal El Marsa won two seats, Tayyar won one seat, and Union Civile and Houmet El Marsa did not win any seats. ISIE has also released voter participation levels, with a dismal 33.7% voter participation rate at the national level and 33% for the Tunis 2 district.<sup>34</sup> According to Dimo:qratiyoun, however, the voter participation rate in La Marsa was between 40 and 45%.<sup>35</sup>

In the days immediately following the election, speculations have been made about the coalition council that will be formed in La Marsa with the absence of a majority winner. The possible coalitions are La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa for a total of 18 out of thirty seats; La Marsa Change and Nida Tounes for a total of 16 out of thirty seats; Alwen El Marsa, Nida Tounes, and Ennahdha for a total of 16 out of thirty seats; La Marsa Change, Ennahdha, and Amal El Marsa for a total of 17 out of thirty seats; and La Marsa Change, Ennahdha, and Tayyar for a total of 16 out of thirty seats.<sup>36</sup>

Based on the programs proposed during the campaign cycle, it would be logical for La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa to form a coalition. However, possible tension between Dr. Meherzi of La Marsa Change and Mr. Bouraoui of Alwen El Marsa might lead Alwen to seek a coalition council with other lists. The composition of the coalition will speak to the lists' values and willingness to keep campaign promises and proposed programs; if Alwen aligns with Ennahdha, for instance, rather than with Marsa Change, Alwen will

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<sup>34</sup> Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections – ISIE Facebook page, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/isietn/photos/a.1690228254388306.1073742265.141662475911566/1690228511054947/?type=3&theater>.

<sup>35</sup> Dimo:qratiyoun Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dimoqratiyoun/>.

<sup>36</sup> Dimo:qratiyoun Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dimoqratiyoun/photos/a.280539675408047.63463.121069774688372/1520681401393862/?type=3&theater>.

certainly upset a significant portion of their voters who selected Alwen as an independent alternative to the corruption of party politics.

Overall, the election results regarding La Marsa's independent lists are representative of both disapproval of political parties and of La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa's campaign efforts. Both lists worked to inform La Marsa's citizens through a variety of media, including in-person events, canvassing, physical campaign materials, online campaign materials, and *cafés citoyens*. Additionally, both lists emphasized their commitment to representing all of La Marsa's neighborhoods and their intentions to use "positive discrimination" to reduce social and economic disparities between these neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Amal El Marsa and Houmet El Marsa focused less on planning the specifics of their programs and spoke more broadly about their ideals and their hopes for La Marsa.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

La Marsa's four independent lists have some common objectives, but each list took a different approach during the campaign. La Marsa Change, Alwen El Marsa, Amal El Marsa, and Houmet El Marsa all seek to strengthen infrastructure in the town, decrease traffic, create more athletic programs, and attract more tourists through archaeological and cultural preservation and restoration projects. La Marsa Change, Alwen El Marsa, and Houmet El Marsa also include environmental goals in their programs.

The similarities in all four lists' programs uncover the areas in which La Marsa desperately needs change, according to its citizens. In April 2018, Dimo:qratiyoun conducted a Facebook survey asking La Marsa citizens about the most important points that La Marsa needs to address. The first concern was lack of transparency in policy and in resource management, the second was social exclusion and elitism, and the third was corruption. The fourth largest concern was marginalization of working class neighborhoods and favoritism of

wealthier neighborhoods regarding “access to basic services and infrastructure [including] public lighting, roads, and water distribution.” The fifth concern was traffic and parking, especially during the heavy tourism season in the summer. The next point of concern was environmental issues including pollution and waste collection, and the seventh largest issue was voted to be vandalism and violations of public and private property. The issue that came in eighth place was illegal business and kiosks in the city. The ninth and tenth gravest concerns were for deteriorating public parks, beaches, and archaeological sites. The final issues that Marsois citizens voted for were the lack of career prospects for young people in marginalized neighborhoods and lack of public spaces and athletic centers for children and youth.<sup>37</sup> The presence of all of these issues across the four lists’ programs—although more for La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa than for the others—indicates that La Marsa’s independent lists have the ability to listen to citizens’ concerns and address the issues that they most want solved.

The main difference between the lists is the level of detail that each attributed to their respective programs. La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa both developed comprehensive programs with thorough explanations as to how they would accomplish their objectives. La Marsa Change has an easy-to-navigate website that outlines their program in French, while Alwen El Marsa distributed brochures written in both French and English. La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa also both have professionally-made videos on their Facebook pages that cover topics related to the lists’ programs.

While Houmet also has a website and a Facebook page with campaign videos, the content on both webpages is less substantive and informative about Houmet’s program relative to La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa’s campaign content. Amal El Marsa

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<sup>37</sup> Dima:qratiyoun Facebook page, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dimoqratiyoun/>.

arguably has the least comprehensive program; in fact, I was unable to find a written version of Amal's program entirely. While there are videos on the Amal Facebook page, they do not discuss the details and logistics of Amal's program.

It is possible that both Houmet and Amal have programs that are as exhaustive as those of La Marsa Change and Alwen, but because I was unable to contact candidates from Houmet and Amal I did not have the opportunity to inquire about their programs and objectives in-person. I recognize that La Marsa Change and Alwen might seem more comprehensive simply because I have more online and in-person information from these lists. However, the preliminary election results suggest that La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa truly were the best-prepared and most appealing lists.

Another distinguishing factor between the lists is the process by which each list was formed. La Marsa Change was the only list that used an entirely democratic process from start to finish with a primary election for the head of the list and a subsequent primary for the other 29 seats. Alwen used the next most participatory approach with their selection committee and application process. Both La Marsa Change and Alwen El Marsa were certain to have the first six candidates on the list represent the different neighborhoods in La Marsa. Meanwhile, Amal El Marsa was formed through social connections. It is unclear how Houmet El Marsa created its list, so it is possible that it was formed in a somewhat participatory manner or through acquaintances of Radhia Ben Abdallah. However, La Marsa Change made it clear that it was the only list with a democratic, primary election system.

Although I was only able to meet with three candidates from two of the independent lists, I have concluded that the two primary motivations behind running on an independent list are the fundamental lack of trust in political parties and the idea that local governments should be free from national-scale party politics. This idea was expressed by Mourad



Louhichi, Nabila Hamza, and Imen El Fehri early in our conversations without any prompting on my part.

Through interviews with candidates, attending campaign events, and studying campaign materials, it is evident that La Marsa's independent lists all recognize the fact that there is substantial room for improvement in their city. The number of independent lists in La Marsa, as well as in Tunis 2 overall, is indicative of the mistrust in and disapproval of Tunisia's political parties and political system entirely. Additionally, the idea that local governments should be managed by local citizens, not national political parties, appears to be a factor in some candidates' decisions to run on independent lists. While all four independent lists in La Marsa share similar objectives for their city in a broad sense, each list is unique in the way it formulated programs and ran campaigns.

In the future, it will be interesting to follow the municipal council's progress in La Marsa. The composition of the coalition council will speak to the values and priorities of each list, namely whether they are more interested in political power or in effecting change. It will also be important to compare the projects and service that are implemented in La Marsa to the winning lists' programs proposed during the campaign and study whether the new local government in La Marsa has at all changed citizens' opinions of democratic governance and politics in Tunisia.

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