

**Spoken Testimony of William R. Sweeney, Jr.**  
***Political and Electoral Status of Tunisia***  
**December 4, 2013**

**Time: 5 minutes**

Mr. Chairman and Congressman Deutch, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Tunisia's transition and democratic development.

IFES has received grants from the U.S. Government and other international donors to conduct an on-the-ground assessment of the electoral environment and provide technical expertise to the Court of Accounts, civil society, various ministries and the country's first independent election management body – the Independent High Commission for Elections – known as the ISIE (ee-zee).

**Introduction**

Almost two years ago, Tunisians held their first democratic elections – after the fall of President Ben Ali – and elected a National Constituent Assembly (called the NCA). The 2011 NCA elections were administered by the ISIE. They were seen as inclusive and competitive and public confidence was high in the electoral process. The ISIE received high praise for its independence, commitment, honesty, and successful delivery of elections in a short timeframe and under difficult circumstances.

Since those elections, frustration and disappointment have dominated. The NCA was granted legislative powers and mandated to draft a new constitution. However, progress in adopting a new constitutional, institutional and legal framework for elections has been slow and limited. The parliamentarians elected in 2011 have received most of the criticism and blame. Opposition parties are contesting their legitimacy and calling for dissolution. As a result, Tunisia has yet to adopt a new constitution and develop a new legal framework for the upcoming elections.

On top of this turmoil, the ISIE's 2011 mandate ended in May 2012. This means no electoral preparations have occurred since then.

Tunisia did gain valuable experience in managing the 2011 elections. However, there are still enormous challenges and risks, and the country is losing valuable time in the current political stalemate. While minor difficulties with the 2011 elections were largely accepted in stride, the same tolerance may not be forthcoming for the next elections – particularly if competition is fierce.

Simply put, if administration of the next elections does not meet public expectations, internal stability and the nation's democratic transition will be threatened.

**Accomplishments**

To help the transition over the last few years, IFES has:

- Provided technical expertise and guidance to the ISIE
- Trained election management staff in charge of administering the NCA elections
- Led the design, management and funding of the ISIE Media Center that served as a platform for all election-related communications before, during and after Election Day
- Assisted the ISIE in creating, printing and disseminating 10,000 posters and 2 million flyers for voter education efforts throughout the country

- Partnered with the Ministry of Social Affairs to increase the level of information received by illiterate voters on election and political processes and
- Trained members of I Watch – a youth-led civil society organization – to be the first independent organization to monitor campaign finance expenditures during the next elections

Mr. Chairman, IFES is very proud of its work in Tunisia for the 2011 NCA elections. We contributed to local efforts to increase access to information about the elections and helped create an environment where citizens had greater trust in their first, crucial step toward democracy.

After the 2011 elections, IFES focused on ISIE's performance and lessons learned. With funding from the United States Agency for International Development, IFES carried out a technical evaluation of the NCA elections and in-depth analyses of the current legal framework for elections and campaign finance regulations. These reports were first-hand records of Tunisia's historic election, and went on to help shape IFES programming.

Thanks to ongoing support from the U.S. Government, IFES has remained in country and continues to play a role in helping Tunisians in their democratic transition. IFES regularly meets with legislators to advise them on electoral legal reforms; trains judges in charge of monitoring campaign finance expenditures; and works closely with local civil society organizations to help them become advocates for an inclusive democracy. With support from the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme, IFES created a platform for sustained dialogue and debate among Tunisian stakeholders on electoral topics such as voter registration, electoral system design, election management bodies and campaign finance.

### **Continued Support**

Mr. Chairman, although Tunisia is often forgotten among the other countries that rose up against their repressive governments during the Arab Spring; it is arguably the most important since it is key to the entire region's successful democratic transition. Not only did Tunisia initiate the Arab Spring, Tunisia is also the farthest along in its transition and has the greatest capacity to succeed. Tunisia's success will be a model for other transitioning countries in the region and around the world.

Despite setbacks, Tunisians are highly engaged. I was in Tunisia this past February. IFES held the largest-attended forum in the region on voter registration and the importance of a reliable voter register. Tunisians know an accurate voter register is a crucial pillar of democracy.

The next few months are critical, as Tunisia appoints a new government, selects new election commissioners, finalizes its constitution and develops a new electoral law.

IFES is in an ideal position to provide continued support. We believe the United States should increase its engagement in Tunisia's transition process to ensure the nation's success.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your time and this concludes my remarks.