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Tunisian newcomer spends big on campaign

The Free Patriotic Union compensated for a lack of history with lavish campaign, testing limits of electoral authority.

Yasmine Ryan: 21 Oct 2011



Slim Riahi, One of the Founders of The Free Patriotic Union

SOUASSI, Tunisia - The music thumps across the dilapidated football stadium in the small Tunisian village. The atmosphere is part-rodeo, part-rock concert.

Like most of those who live in rural Tunisia, the people of Souassi have long been excluded from political and social life, and young people here have little chance of finding work.

Today, they are being introduced to democracy by loudspeakers blasting "I like to move it move it, move it" and "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard".

The Free Patriotic Union (UPL by its French acronym) was created by a group of Tunisian businessmen who have lived abroad for years without much previous involvement in politics.

What it lacks in history, the UPL compensates for in exposure. The party has resources that few of Tunisia's longstanding opposition groups can match. It has outspent every other party in advertising. Its extensive resources have been used to run a campaign reaching out to the country's most marginalised areas, promising investment and job opportunities.

Mohamed Mechti, a 60-year-old from the nearby town of Mahdia, says he is here today because a bus showed up outside his home offering rides to people in his neighbourhood.

"I'd never heard about them [the UPL]," he says. "There was a bus that came to Mahdia to take us here."

Mechti, a father of six young children who had to give up his job as a builder a decade ago following an operation, has come along to learn about the UPL's programme, but seems bemused by all the noise.

There are some 81 parties running for Tunisia's constituent assembly, yet only two have the resources needed for nationwide penetration on the campaign trail: the UPL and the moderate Islamist party, al-Nahda.

Mechti would like to know more about the other parties, but as the election day of Sunday October 23 draws ever closer, time is running out. Aside from the UPL, the only other party Mechti has heard of is al-Nahda, a party he says he will not vote for.

"I want to hear what all the parties are offering and then make my decision," he says.

Most Tunisian political parties rely mainly on volunteers to win over potential voters. The UPL has an army of youths wearing red t-shirts bearing its slogan. Several of them in Souassi told Al Jazeera they had been on staff at the local office.

Paid activists

Boutas Abdallah, 28, is one of several dozen young men working to control the crowd at the rally.

Though he has a degree in information technology, Abdallah was unemployed until he joined the UPL in early June. He now earns a salary of \$211 a month, respectable by local standards.



Mohamed Mechti had never heard of the UPL until a bus showed up near his home [Aude Osnowycz/Al Jazeera]

Under Tunisia's election regulations, the UPL has the right to pay activists such as Abdallah and his friends, so long as the total amount spent is within the limit for the electoral district.

"I need work, I've been unemployed for three years," he says. "I like the party's values, I trust the UPL."

After the crowd is warmed up, the UPL's leaders arrive in a fleet of black luxury cars.

My interview with Slim Riahi takes place several hours later outside a gas station on the outskirts of town, in the front seat of his Porsche Cayenne.

An entourage of Riahi's associates stand outside as dusk falls, their black Mercedes creating a protective barrier. Amongst those travelling with Riahi on the campaign trail is Balti, one of Tunisia's most famous rappers (on a similar note, Riahi has several football stars running as candidates for major electorates, including Chokri el-Ouaer, a former national team goalkeeper, at the top of the UPL's list for Tunis).

Few details of 39-year-old Riahi's biography are known. He sticks to the basics.

Originally from coastal town of Enfidha, his family moved to Libya when he was a child. His father was an Arab nationalist, opposed to both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes.

He studied management at Al Fateh University in Tripoli, and went on to make his fortune in Libya's oil, aviation and real estate industries, working closely with British and US corporations.

Later he moved to the UK, and his family all now live in London. His wife is Tunisian. Riahi himself has dual Tunisian-British nationality.

The UPL's apparent success is due to its ability to connect with people, not the amount of money that has been spent, he says.

"We speak the same language as the people," he says. "The money just helped us to put the word of the party on

people's minds."

The party is running on a platform advocating a regional development model based on a market economy and large projects involving mainly private investment.

They pledge to "preserve the country's Arab-Muslim identity", whilst respecting "universal values".

Asked about his political ideology, Riahi says: "I'm pragmatic and modern. There is no ideology in my party."

Imed Belkacem, one of the party's cofounder who has known Riahi since childhood, says they had been talking about founding a political party for years, and that they aim for it to become one of the country's most important parties.

"The idea of the party started with me and him," he says.

Belkacem is clear about where the party fits in Tunisia's political terrain, saying it fills the centre-right void left by the dissolution of the former ruling party, the Rally for Constitutional Democracy.

The party is trying to position itself as the main opposition to al-Nahda. Indeed, the UPL is about to open an office in Montplaisir, opposite al-Nahda's headquarters.

Sources within the party, who spoke on condition of anonymity for their own protection, told Al Jazeera that when the party was created in June, its leaders initially focused on recruiting young people at the forefront of the continuing protests against the interim government (known as the Kasbah protests).

Imed Belkacem told them that Riahi, still abroad at the time, had little political ambition of his own and was willing to offer them a platform to create a new party, better able to change Tunisia than the older opposition parties and their aging leadership.

Representatives of the party have tried to build contacts with grassroots activists in the marginalised towns that have come to symbolise the uprising, including Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Gafsa and Siliana.

The reception has been mixed.

Abdennaceur Laouini, who had led the lawyers' protests in December and January, was one of several revolutionary figures who told Al Jazeera that he felt the UPL tried to "buy" him as a candidate for their lists. Like many others, he turned them down.

"The UPL is a company, not a political party. They try to buy people," Laouini says.

Riahi denies any knowledge of the attempt to get Laouini onboard, saying it might have been local members of the UPL.

Another lawyer in Sidi Bouzid says he was assaulted in August by "random thugs", shortly after he refused to join the party.

When Riahi arrived in Tunis on July 4, the pro-revolutionary slant changed and the party allied itself with certain members of the old regime.

"Everything changed. We realised that Imed Belkacem wasn't the real leader, Slim Riahi was," one man inside the party says. "The dream of a revolutionary party disappeared."

'Neo-RCD'

It emerged that Riahi had been a friend of Imed Trabelsi - the notorious nephew of Tunisia's former first lady, Leila

Ben Ali - and that they had often partied together in London.

Riahi also shared a property with Ben Ali's son-in-law, Sakher el-Materi, in the Berges-du-Lac suburb of Tunis.

Chafik Jarraya, a prominent associate of the Trabelsi clan in the city of Sfax, became a regular fixture at the UPL office, playing a prominent role in the party's media strategy.

Jarraya, most infamous for his decades-long monopoly on bananas, has been in court on corruption allegations in recent months.

In August, Jarraya made bids for minority shares in *Dar Assabah* - a Tunisian media group - after el-Materi's shares were confiscated earlier in the year.

Riahi has said he hopes to obtain a 20 per cent share in Dar Assabah.

Riahi's investments, such as those of his acquaintances, drew some to speculate whether he was moving in to claim the turf once occupied by the ruling clans, ousted by the uprising at the beginning of the year.



In depth coverage of first Arab Spring vote

"He's not a politician, not someone who is going to do what is best for Tunisia. He's someone who has a lot of money and who wants to do everything with his money," a source within the party says.

"I would compare him to Sakher el-Materi. He's someone who sees Tunisia as a moneymaking scheme. He wants to invest and buy, that's it. People are mosquitoes to him."

As reported by *The Financial Times* in September, he has brought \$20m in shares in Carthage Cement, moving in where Belhassen Trabelsi, Ben Ali's brother-in-law, was once a leading shareholder.

The resemblances - both in the overlap of Riahi's political and business interests, and in his personal style - have led some cyberactivists to label his party as "neo-RCD".

Pushing the boundaries

With its lavish spending and sophisticated advertising campaign, the UPL has tested the tolerance of the ISIE, the body charged with overseeing Tunisia's election.

The electoral body was moved to introduce regulation banning advertising from September 12 until the start of the official campaign period on October 1, to help allow the many parties with far smaller budgets the ability to compete.

Even during the ban, there were some incidents reported where the UPL, along with the centre-left Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), continued its campaign advertising.

The UPL challenged the ISIE's authority to regulate on advertising in a late September court hearing, arguing that the party had been directly targeted by the ban. The party lost its case.

Beyond its spending on advertising, the source of the UPL's money also raises concern from some quarters.

Opposition politicians such as Moncef Marzouki have called for the source of the UPL's funding to be carried out. But with only speculation to go on, the ISIE is unable to investigate the UPL until the audits after the election.

Under the electoral rules for the upcoming election, parties are supposed to keep campaign accounts separate from their general accounts. Money must be raised purely in the form of donations from individuals in Tunisia. Funds from corporations and from abroad are forbidden.

Riahi runs his private businesses out of the same building that is the UPL headquarters, a sources told Al Jazeera. The director of administration and finance takes care of the accounts for both the political party and Riahi's business interests.

Kamel Jendoubi, the president of the ISIE, says that the gaps in regulation concerning the financing of political parties leaves his agency in a difficult spot in living up to its role of election watchdog.

"We have a problem in Tunisia today, which is that we don't have a law regulating the funding of political parties," he says. "It's a very awkward situation for us."

The punishment for overspending on the campaign trail are strict - the offending list in any given electoral district will lose their seats in the constituent assembly. Yet the ISIE must first find concrete proof of the source of funding and how it is being spent.

Accounts will only be audited after the election, Jendoubi says.

"If we have proof that a party is benefiting from foreign funding [or funding from private sources], we can act and sanction that party," he says.

Some say that the controversy over financing and advertising spending is largely the fault of the ISIE, for failing to introduce clear rules early on.

The Carter Center, an international NGO that specialises in election observation, argued in a press release on October 3 that the regulation on advertising was released "at a relatively late stage in the process and has been enforced unevenly".

There have been some cases in which the UPL has received at least a slap on the wrist.

The Independent Regional Authorities for the Elections (IRIE) for Gafsa, a group of regional bodies which fall under the control of the ISIE, opened an judicial inquiry into Slim Riahi on Monday for allegedly breaking articles 38 and 57 of the electoral code, which relate to electoral list irregularities and financial corruption.

Two of the parties' lists were also cancelled during the week after it was discovered that one candidate was running in two separate electorates, according to the Tunisia Live news website.

Tunisians will be heading to the polls on Sunday for what they hope will be their country's first genuine shot at political pluralism, but Riahi's controversial campaign has raised questions about the influence of money in this blossoming democracy.

Source:
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