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Islamists of Tunisia: Reconciling national contradictions

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This article is second in a [special series of posts](#) commissioned by LSE IDEAS exploring Islamism and the Arab Spring. The series also includes articles on the [history of political Islam](#), [Egypt](#), [Libya](#), and a concluding post on [pluralism and minorities](#).

By Fatima El-Issawi.

The decision of moderate Islamists ruling Tunisia not to impose Islamic Sharia as a main source of legislation in the new Constitution have appeased secularists' fears of an Islamic state in Tunisia without fully exorcising them: the ghosts of Sharia influence remain and the tension in the street between Islamists and secularists is at its summit. The Islamic victory at the historic first free elections in staunchly secular Tunisia put the question of the relationship between religion and Tunisian society and the state in the spotlight. Clearly divided between Muslim conservatives and secular Francophiles, the dual identity of Tunisian society could be the most crucial challenge of the post-dictatorship era, along with restoring economic activity and setting the basis of a modern political system. The Islamist Ennahda party has released multiple declarations aiming to appease international and local fears of an Islamist state. Its renunciation of Sharia contributed greatly to alleviating these fears. However, the continuous clashes between the adepts of the secular State and those calling for a clear Islamic identity are not likely to end soon. Secularists are claiming their demonstrations are being repressed not only by the security forces but also by Islamist 'militias' linked to political parties. This is vehemently denied by the Ennahda-led government.



[An editorial](#) of the prominent French newspaper 'Le Monde' celebrated Ennahda's statement on Sharia: 'Ennahda performed its first act of a real state party. The party chose reality over ideology, it has acted as a responsible party. It took the risk of confrontation with a part of the Islamist family. It chose state empiricism over sectarian purity.' If this optimism signifies recognition from a secular French institution of the wise strategy of moderate Tunisian Islamists, it is not enough to reconcile the contradictions of the new and the old Tunisia: moderate Islamists, radical Islamists, conservative secularists, Francophile elitist secularists and so on. The current divide is not only over the legacy of the secular state but the future Tunisia: 'which Tunisia do we want?' The dynamism of Tunisian streets buzzing with diverse and opposing slogans reflects of this identity struggle clearly: "The people want Sharia!", "The people want theatre!", "The people want to change the [national] media!"

By deciding to renounce the imposition of Sharia in the constitution, Ennahda is cementing its leading role in the current Arab uprisings as the model of mainstream moderate Islam that will focus on a liberal socio-economic model far from Jihadi Islam. This decision confirms optimistic views of the ability of political Islam to lead the Arab region in the post dictatorship era while respecting democratic values. However, this thesis still leaves many skeptical. Most importantly, by renouncing to Sharia, Ennahda confirmed its independence from the Muslim Brothers of Egypt whose ability to accommodate democratic values appears to be narrower.

The party is confirming its position at the centre of the wide spectrum of political Islam swamping the region, following the model of the Justice and Development parties in Turkey and Morocco. The leader and spiritual figure of the party, Rached Ghannouchi, even says that his books were 'the reference point' for the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) with whom he [proudly claims](#) to have solid ties. According to Robin Wright, Ennahda does indeed have the [potential to be a model](#) as long as it follows through in forming a coalition with two secular parties and honouring women's rights.

Ghannouchi, a former philosophy professor (69 years), was always a prominent figure in opposing the former regime, though with little impact. The Ennahda party (Al-Nahda means 'renaissance' or 'awakening' in Arabic) fought a long battle for political legitimacy. After a short period of tolerance – occasioned by the whim of then President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in the 80s – was revealed to be an illusion, the growing popularity of the Islamic party in a Tunisia becoming more and more socially conservative transformed the party into the enemy number one of the regime. After an attempted coup against Ben Ali, which was blamed on the Islamists, the long persecution of activists and supporters escalated. This led to Ghannouchi finally leaving Tunisia for Europe in 1987.

After weeks of heated debate about the place of Sharia in the new constitution, the statement of Ennahda on the issue helped reduce tensions without settling the dilemma. Ghannouchi, who has [frequently defended](#) the possible existence of multi-party democracy under Islam, explained the decision as a reflection of the party's program of unifying Tunisian society beyond the legacy of the dictatorship. "We do not want Tunisian society to be divided into two ideologically opposed camps, one pro-Sharia and one anti-Sharia," he said, stressing that the party "want above all a constitution that is for all Tunisians, whatever their convictions." In the vision of Ennahda's leader, the constitution should emanate from a broad consensus between Tunisians, something that Islamic Sharia cannot achieve in the current conditions of Tunisian society.

However this does not mean Islam has no place in the new constitution. Ghannouchi [acknowledges](#) that a system based on Islamic values "does represent consensus so we will build our constitution on Islam." The first article of the [1959 constitution](#) recognizes Islam in a manner that allows interpretation. It states that "Tunisia is a free, sovereign and independent state, whose religion is Islam, language is Arabic and has a republican regime". Ennahda decided to retain this clause without any change. In statement to the press before returning to the country on 30 January 2011 after a general amnesty, [Ghannouchi stressed](#) that his commitment to democracy is strategic:

"Democracy is crucial to dealing with and reconciling different and even conflicting interests in society. Islam has a strong democratic spirit as it respects religious, social and political differences. Islam has never favoured a monolithic state. Throughout their history Muslims have objected to the imposition of a single all-powerful interpretation of Islam. Any attempt to impose a single interpretation has always proven inherently unstable and temporary."

In the same statement, Ghannouchi refuted the idea of the Islamic Caliphate defended by Salafi groups, [arguing](#) that "the notion of Caliphate... is not a religious one as some groups claim. It reflects a period of time." This tolerant rhetoric is crucial for the Islamist party whose leadership will be mainly tested on its ability to restart economic activity, with high unemployment and economic sectors severely impacted by the upheaval of the revolution and the continuing disruption led by secularist trade unions.

Ennahda's position towards the Salafi, a small but vocal group with increasing popularity, was viewed by secularists as lax and permissive. This position is shifting more and more towards a tougher approach, confirming again the desire of Ennahda to be seen as a party able to lead the country through a successful transitional phase. However, the party is accused of applying double standards, accused of dealing passively with violent demonstrations by Salafi activists and using excessive force against secular movements. These secular demonstrations have regained vitality by using the deteriorating economic situation against the new government. A recent demonstration by this new secular opposition was heavily repressed by security forces who claimed the activity was illegal. The [demonstrators claimed](#) that civilian 'militias' from Ennahda were helping the police in repressing them.

However, the apparent tolerance of the new leaders of the country towards Salafis seems to be nearing its end. The coming battle will not only be between Salafi and secularists but between two visions of Islam: the tolerant moderate-conservative version, and the radical Jihadi model which completely rejects the civil state. In recent statements, the Minister of the Interior Ali Laarayedh [predicted](#) "a major battle with Jihadi Salafi who resort to violence, and represent a threat to the Tunisian society", [adding](#) that the new government might allow Salafis to form a political party on the condition that "they adhere to the law, in order to isolate the minority who use violence." The fears of the Minister of the Interior reflect the growing anxiety over a new jihadi battlefield in Tunisia, with the proximity of Libya and the difficult task of securing the border between the two countries adding to concerns. According to Laarayedh, the ties between Jihadi Tunisian groups and like-minded factions in Libya and Algeria mean the danger of al-Qaeda cells emerging in Tunisia is quite real if neglected by security forces.

In statements to Le Figaro, the leader of Ennahda admitted that the decision to renounce Sharia would [probably anger](#) and radicalise Salafi groups, adding, "I don't mind if they are angry. What counts for me are the interests of Tunisia. If we had organized a referendum, we could have won more than 51% of the vote in favour of Sharia but that would have divided the Tunisian society. Salafis know it, but do not understand that a Constitution is always the fruit of a consensus." Unlike his Minister of Interior, Ghannouchi has opted for dialogue over confrontation:

"Beginnings are always difficult but the dialogue is developing gradually. I myself have spoken with several of their sheikhs. I encouraged them to work within a legal framework, either within organizations or within political parties. Even if they will compete with us and win some of our electoral base, it's not a problem! The key issue for us is to avoid a confrontation."

If these words seem reasonable, the facts on the ground do not always reflect it. From the secularists' point of view, there are no tangible signs that the Ennahda-led government will finally impose law and order on Salafis. Recent months have witnessed a continuous show of force by Salafis, raising fears of a gradual imposition of radical Islam at the social level, using pressure and intimidation. Recent outbreaks of violence inside university campuses over the dilemma of niqab wearing for women were transformed into a symbolic attack on the county when a Salafi activist removed the Tunisian flag from the rooftop of the University of Manuba and replaced it with the black Salafi flag. A few thousand Salafi activists demonstrated in the capital's Habib Bourguiba Avenue, the symbol of the 2011 revolution, shouting slogans demanding the adoption of sharia as the main source of legislation in Tunisia's new constitution. Some [chanted](#) "the people want a Caliphate!" A confrontation with a secular demonstration of artists on the same day led the Ministry of the Interior to ban demonstrations in the avenue, sparking sharp [criticism](#). The secularists' [defiance](#) of this decision sparked a tough response from the security forces. Moreover, a group of fundamentalists styling themselves after the Taliban managed to briefly gain control of the small town of Sejane, declaring it the first 'Salafi emirate' and imposing their hard-line interpretation of Islam on its inhabitants with total impunity. The mayor of the city, an Ennahda member, defended the party's inability to stop them, arguing that the incident was [exaggerated](#) by

notables close to the former regime in order to discredit the Islamist party. Unconfirmed reports from news websites [cited](#) 'lists of good behavior' distributed by Salafis in some Tunisian villages to monitor the morality and code of society.

Nevertheless, Salafi groups are as diverse as Tunisia's other emerging political movements. Among them is Hizb et-Tahrir (Liberation Party) which, although not legalized, is becoming active in the public sphere. The women's branch of the party organized a celebration of International Women's Day, in which female activists wearing a black abaya and a pink hijab explained how a Caliphate political system would enhance women's rights. The spokesperson of the party, Ridha Belhaj, vehemently [expressed](#) his disappointment with Ennahda's decision not to implement Sharia as a main source for legislation; "It is an affront to the demands of the people who made the revolution. If the future constitution does not meet our expectations, it would be a kind of diktat and we will respond". Equally, it is not clear how different factions within Ennahda itself will react to the decision to renounce Sharia law. There are rumours of divisions based on an alleged break between some young activists in favour of a more radical approach and the centrist old leadership of the party. There are fears that Salafis could benefit from the disappointment of these young activists, fears which have been clearly admitted by the leadership of Ennahda in various statements and occasions.

Despite the challenges, [consensus](#) remains the key principle. "We think that in the interim period — five years for example — Ennahda cannot face challenges alone. That is why the most important slogan that we can raise at this moment is consensus and not strife." But ruling by consensus is proving to be a challenge. Although Ennahda is the leading party of the new coalition, it has to govern in cooperation and agreement with two secular parties which are its partners in government. Without an absolute majority in the Constituent Assembly, this is a tough task given the absence of a common background with its coalition partners.

In line with the position of most of Islamist parties in the region, Ennahda is strongly lobbying for a parliamentary political system which, according to its leader, allows power to be 'more directly invested in the people'. For Ghannouchi, "a Presidential system risks inviting authoritarianism as occurred under Bourghiba and Ben Ali. We need a system that [distributes power](#) across the country at all levels." On the other side, secularists are lobbying for a presidential system which will allow small groups to form coalitions and lead the country. Ennahda is under continuous scrutiny from the secular opposition, which organizes demonstration after demonstration and is reacting toughly to any act or decision that could be considered to be an abuse of power. However, the Islamist party is not yet facing an organized and unified opposition. A new secular coalition gathering two parties was born recently (Attajdid and the Tunisian labour party) and some independent figures. The program of this new political coalition is [not yet clear](#).

Although the new position of Ennahda on Sharia was largely praised locally and internationally, it is perceived by some as a manipulation aiming to settle fears and to marginalize radical voices within Islamists groups. Ghannouchi's view that Tunisian society lacks the maturity to adopt Sharia law at this time [is seen](#) by some as an implicit recognition that Islamic law will be implemented in the long run. Given Tunisia's diversity, the meaning of being secular is as diverse as the meaning of being Islamist. While Tunisian society tends to be conservative, even under the former regime, the most prominent interpretation of secularism is the separation between religion and the state, without denying the importance of religion in private life. Ghannouchi has finally accepted this interpretation of secularism, [declaring](#) that there is a need to distinguish the difference between secularism and atheism.

The performance of Ennahda in government so far is consolidating the stance of those who support the idea of a moderate Islamic Arab Spring. Yet, the spread of a more radical version of Muslim Brotherhood leadership in the region, especially in the Egyptian government, could challenge the centrist position of Tunisian Islamists. The growing popularity of radical Salafi factions is also a phenomenon that needs to be taken seriously, despite being until recently a small group not represented in the post-revolution political system. But the continuous focus on their extremist actions is diverting attention and efforts from the crucial debate on the construction of the new political system. However, the increasing vitality of the new Tunisian society and its continuous diversity is proving effective, at least for the time being, in preventing the hegemony of any one group and in maintaining checks and balances. Success is a long term challenge for Tunisian Islamists. The praise of the West is not enough for reconciling the contradiction of the new and the old Tunisia. The facts in the streets show daily that this will be a difficult task.

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Editor's note: Since publication the government's ban on protests in Habib Bourguiba Avenue [has been reversed](#).

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