

Report

Tunisia: Ennahda's 'Second Founding'

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The leader of the Ennahda Party, Rached Ghannouchi [Zoubeir Souissi – Reuters]

Abstract

In 1981 the Islamic Tendency Movement, a precursor of Ennahda, saw the day of light. Its agenda in the final years of Francophile Bourguiba's rule in Tunisia was to safeguard the country's Islamic identity. It stood for objectives not too dissimilar from those that shaped the brand of Muslim Brotherhood activism: Greater observance of Islamic law, safeguarding Islamic identity and cultivating a polity, society, economy/welfare, education, culture, and morality informed by Islam. The year 2016 during Ennahda's 10th Congress will go down in the annals of political history as a 'second founding'. Ennahda transcends its past positions, and it is a red-herring how it will go about separation of the civic and the religious. Nonetheless, Ennahda has entered into a post-ideology phase. This may be the onset of quasi 'post-modernist' rebranding of Islamism. Or is it?

Introduction

Ennahda's tenth congress has been a leap of faith into re-endorsing the movement's historical leadership as well as into learning to 'Tunisify' its specific brand of Islamism – or whatever is left of it. However, the stakes are high and so are the challenges lurking ahead. At a historical juncture of intra-Islamists divisions over matters of substance and organisation, from Morocco to Egypt, and parallel divisions within secularists, Tunisia's Islamists seem to be favouring the contest of power over the contest of ideology. Policy is primary; ideology is secondary.

Have they 'killed' Imam Hassan Al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, the late Hassan Al-Turabi, and Imam Khomeini and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (both prominent religious references or marja' in the Twelver Shia school), all iconic ideologues whose writings have stamped Islamist dogma with the dictum that Islam is din wa dawlah (religion and politics)?

Tunisian Islamists, like their Moroccan and Turkish counterparts before them, seem to have rethought their ideas, which have over nearly a 100-year period postulated the inseparability of Islam and politics.

Ennahda's resolve to put to bed once and for all the conundrum of religion and politics, by finally declaring their separation, in its 10th Congress in May 2016, may be a turning point in the movement's 36-year history. It amounts to quasi- 'second founding'. This is not necessarily motivated by tactical manoeuvring. 'Civic habituation' is a moderating force too, as I shall argue below.

Neo Political Islam and the Primacy of Practical Knowledge:

Why a 'second founding'? Three key observations are in order.

Firstly, the tendency today by Islamists such as in Morocco and Tunisia to 'separate' religion and politics or more aptly deemphasise religion in their brand of politics speaks to the failure within political Islam to translate theoretical ideals, agendas and knowledge into a convincing and satisfactory practice in terms of political behaviour, and civic engagement in many Arabo-Islamic settings. There are qualified exceptions (Turkey and Malaysia may be imperfect examples but both function well).

Secondly, separation of religion and politics by Islamists subverts the original paradigm: instead from moving from theory to practice, the new trend to focus on the experience of political Islam has the potential to inform theory-building. Perhaps it will be the practice of political Islam at the level of the state that will eventually enable deeper appreciation of the theoretical potentialities of Islam as a religion. This will help the incorporation of practical knowledge into the organisation of politics by Islamists informed by theories that have thus far eluded application. Reconciling this 'contradiction' is a huge challenge for Arab politics, in general. It is easy to pontificate about an ideal, such as social justice, or its ethical foundations as do many Islamist theoreticians, as being an indispensable virtue of Islamic democracy or governance. It is more of a challenge to apply it as part and parcel of lived Islam.

Thirdly, the tendency today to separate religion and politics may bode well for levelling the playing field. The interpretation of religion ceases to be the exclusive bastion of righteous voices whose missionary zeal in some settings may have turned them into self-appointed speakers on behalf of 'Islamic correctness'. No one reserves the right to claim the moral high ground and dictate what religion in the public sphere should and should not mean.

The Tunisian Context

Islamism is not going away. Scholars ranging from John Esposito and John Voll⁽¹⁾ to Khaled Abou El Fadl⁽²⁾ have established this axiom. What comes under close scrutiny or is subject to tactical shifts or rethinking is the dogma that underpin the variety of Islamisms vying for attention in the Muslim world. Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori view "Muslim politics" as involving "the competition and contest over both the interpretation of religious symbols and the control of the institutions that produce and sustain them." Consequently 'Muslim Politics' is a sophisticated analysis of the ever-changing correlation between the sacred and the profane in the Muslim world.

They advance the idea that the politics of language that embed the expression and organisation of Muslim politics must be "deconstructed". The Muslim world has witnessed a process of "objectification of consciousness", a process leading to fundamental questions in the minds of the community of believers. This objectification has come about as a result of mass education and wider channels of communication in the Muslim World, rendering exegesis widespread.⁽³⁾ Tunisia, like other Arab Spring countries, is today awash in contestation over meaning, in politics, religion and culture. It is a facet of maturing pluralism, civic engagement and freedom.

Political Islam or Islamism is simply refashioning itself according to the exigencies of time and space. Old conundrums are being tackled head on. Tunisian Islamists are no exception. In his recent book *Young Islam*, Avi Spiegel makes a few points – with special reference to Morocco – of relevance to those pondering the state of play within Islamism today.⁽⁴⁾ Taking a leaf from the book of Eickelman and Piscatori about how 'Muslim politics' is actually lived, Spiegel considers political Islam in practice, the way it is being operationalised, especially by the younger generation of activists. This is where research on Islamism leaves much to be desired.

He makes two points worthy of consideration when accounting for transformative processes within Islamism.

1. Islamist-Islamist relations inform behaviour and thinking more than external factors: This is more relevant to Morocco than Tunisia. Morocco's Islamism is more dispersed and plural. There are competing versions of Islamism, including establishment Islamism, that compete for influence in the monarchy's 'public sphere'. Ennahda in Tunisia has been shaped by its relationship to the state (which Spiegel says is not the case in Morocco). A brand of secular nationalism led by Bourguiba did provoke Islamists into voicing opposition to the suppression of Tunisia's Islamic identity and heritage in nation and state-building. Ennahda today says that the question of identity no longer divides Tunisians. It is doubtful

whether Ansar Al-Sharia,(5) now much weaker than three years ago, has forced policy rethinking within Ennahda.

2. Separation of civic activism/politics/or al-siyasi and religious/proselytisation activities/or da'awi has been in the offing within Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD – known by its French acronym). Through the examples of Abdelali Hamiddine, amongst others, Spiegel, marshals evidence of how there is a separation between the religious movement (harakah) and the political party.(6) This is the direction taken by Ennahda today.

Ennahda's emerging brand of rethought Islamism provides a more open engagement in the socio-political sphere after the democratic reforms that routinized the Islamist party as a major stakeholder in Tunisia's fledgling 'public sphere'. This brand of civic Islamism that slots the political and the religious into two different compartments works in tandem with increasing civic engagement, contest of power, a power-sharing record since 2011, and massive investment in the professionalisation of the Islamist party.

Concomitant with this newly-found status as a power broker in Tunisian politics, Ennahda is engaging with deeply entrenched leftist and secularist forces through both dialogic (including alliance with secularists in government in 2011 and currently) and concessionary means. Ennahda has adopted a declaratory policy of deference to the state when it comes to the management of mosques – leaving them as venues of worship. It has also supported current plans to re-educate Imams and professionalising their functions. This may also be a defence mechanism at a time when the state is eager to counter terrorism and overall religious radicalisation, especially amongst youth.(7) Religiously inspired actors in the Muslim world are trying to define themselves in opposition to the likes of ISIL. Ennahda is no exception. A narrative pitting 'moderates' versus 'radicals'.

Distinguishing between the fixed (al-thabit) and the mutable (al-mutaghayyir) may explain Ennahda's recognition of the state. Politics belongs to the sphere of the changing. There's a question of public utility or 'maqasidi framework' at play here I would propose. Exigencies and necessities of the Tunisian context have influenced this move.

In the Tunisian national milieu, Ennahda is also probably responding to the misgivings of its detractors that it is hiding a secret theocratic agenda: that once in power it will impose dictatorship. The shift is intended also to pre-empt criticisms from liberals and secularists that it does not respect Tunisia's political identity. Ennahda can now claim it is transcending politics of identity.

In a nutshell, the plan to refashion Ennahda as announced in the movement's 10th Congress in May 2016 can be summed up in the following areas:

It commits to a civic state (*dawlah madaniyyah*), which rethinks earlier Islamist positions to make shariah (Islamic legal system) the law of the land. (For example, Imam Al-Banna did commit to this objective).

It moves away from the revivalist brand of Islamism, by locating itself as a national actor which shares a political space with other power claimants and contestants. The old claim by Muslim Brotherhood movements that 'Islam is the solution' is no more (Ennahda did not really make use of this motto in its discourse).

It Redefines Islamism more or less as 'political ethics' rather than ideology that informs political ends in the contest of power. In this sense Ennahda is attempting to become post-ideological. This is a quasi 'end of ideology' moment.

It embraces the market unambiguously. This position breaks with earlier Islamist reservations about capitalism (Sayyid Qutb is a leading voice in this regard, with Islam's social justice being a key tenet of his political thought). Ennahda's discourse after the revolution embraces social justice.

It renounces moralisation in the social realm in a society which is 99 per cent Sunni Muslim. This aims to end the pursuit of da'wah or call for religion by the newly professionalised political party and monopoly over the interpreting of religious dogma -- much less endeavouring to implement it.

Where Ennahda is concerned all of the fundamentals (e.g. "The Quran is our Constitution; jihad is our method) that defined Muslim Brotherhood-type movements no longer apply to it in any evaluative (normative) or practical (political) sense.

Civic Habituation

Like other Islamist parties in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Sudan, Ennahda is undergoing a phase of 'civic habituation'. Islamists today are faced with real power, reversing exclusionary practices of the past.⁽⁸⁾ So moderating policy and political behaviour may not be tactical or ephemeral. The party has a fixed constituency and following (sympathisers and members) that secure it political visibility and prominence, not always as the winning party as was the case in the 2014 parliamentary elections. It has gained kudos, status and know-how that deepen civic habituation. Ennahda was before the revolution at the receiving end of the dictatorial proverbial 'stick'. Now its political fortunes have improved and with the gained territory come increased legal participation, recognition of the political system, legitimacy, and shared power.

As a stakeholder, Ennahda is now concerned with self-reproduction: via the contestation of power, effective political strategies and responsive public policy platforms. Ideology ceases to be a guiding force. Even if in the minds of many members and the wider Islamist transnational community the separation of religion and politics may seem heretical.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt showed how contest and acquisition of power play a moderating role, thus informing incipient civic habituation. Most of the MB have observed a de facto separation following the Arab Spring, the Egyptian MB founded a party, the Freedom and Justice Party, open to members and non-members, which accepted the civil state and political pluralism, at least in theory.

Adaptation is the name of the game: the challenge to measure up to the demands of pluralism, freedom and democratic transition through constant training into the art of politics. That is, finding a shared or 'wasati' space for engaging self and other through clear messages, legal and democratic strategies, shared values and rallying multi-partisan objectives. Thus Tunisia's Islamists may contribute in a practical sense to a form of "Islamic democracy", an 'oxymoron' for many of their detractors.⁽⁹⁾ In fact, as the so-called 'Arab liberals' continue to fragment or are slow at self-reforming,⁽¹⁰⁾ it is legalised Islamists that seem to be turning the learning curve of democratic government.

Of course, it is a moot point whether civic habituation through increased participation as a result of the adoption of the separation of religion and politics produces radicalisation or de-radicalisation within society. It is undeniable that there is demand for a role for religion in political affairs in Tunisia, as in many other Arab states. Abandoning a powerful tenet of Islamism may be read as a form of retreat, which may have a radicalising effect.⁽¹¹⁾ Nonetheless, the rule of thumb is that civic engagement spells moderation and de-emphasis of ideology, not radicalisation.

'Neo-Ennahda'?

Is Ennahda renouncing 'Islamism', its doctrinaire sine qua non and the basis of its foundational identity? Since its emergence in the late 1970s as the 'Islamic Tendency Movement', identity politics, namely, promoting the idea of Islam as an organic frame of reference for imagining polity, society and economy has defined the movement's declaratory policy, rhetoric, discourse and political engagement.

This template and attendant agency came at a high price: exile, imprisonment, and exclusion under both Habib Bourguiba and his successor, ousted dictator, Zinelabidine Ben Ali. Under Ben Ali, Ennahda sought accommodation and even contested bi-elections showing in the late 1980s early indications of electoral support, which made the then

dictator buckle and shift policy from co-existence to systematic exclusion and coercion. No single political current in Tunisia's history suffered as much at the hands of Ben Ali's police machinery.

Neo-Ennahda over a three-day historic congress punctuated by fascinating and heated but pluralist debates, part of which I witnessed first-hand, is refigured into a national political party with an Islamic frame of reference that deploys democracy as a mode of political engagement. To this end, Neo-Ennahda is now committing to separate the religious (al-da'awi) and the political (al-siyasi).

A vision that was upheld for more than three decades has ceded to a new brand of civic Islamism. That is, as an analogy neo-Ennahda has not only edged closer to the notion of a civil state, but also to Turkey's AKP and further from Egypt's standard Muslim Brotherhood or 'Ikhwani' model: the former operationalises politics with minimum ideology, the latter has historically harboured ambitions of Islamising polity.

This is why in one of his interventions during the congress, the party's president Shaykh Rachid Ghannouchi adopted a new discourse angled at stressing the primacy of the market, economic growth, renouncing the politics of identity (huwiyyah), very much part of the fundamentals of his thought for over 30 years.

I think there are three interconnected motivations.

First, normalisation of Ennahda with the 'deep state', which has preserved the imprints of Bourguiba's political modelling of it a la Francophile: secular in nature. Tunisia's society is similarly shaped, manifesting a deeply hybrid national persona that reveres Islam but with a bent for civic engagement of all aspects of the horizontal side of life, including politics. Ennahda is finally being intelligently and deftly adaptive, seeking a brand of 'Tunisification' of its identity as a major political force with a fixed 35 to 40 percent political following.

Second, professionalisation, and this is common to all major parties anywhere as they mature politically. So by defending a new identity that separates the religious and the political, Ennahda has turned an important learning curve on the way to a fully-fledged civic political party. The amendments that have all passed with absolute majority – 800 plus votes by the conferences – all prove that several months of internal debates have come to full fruition for the reformists within the party. This includes further empowerment of the party's Shura Council, of which 100 are directly elected by the conferences, and another 50 by the Council's elected 100 representatives. Ennahda's partnering in the troika government that delivered the country's democratic constitution

in early 2014 provided the party with an invaluable 'reality check', which it used to reflect, revise and adjust.

Third, democratisation via 'factionalisation': a salient feature of maturing political parties anywhere. One of the most fascinating debates and the first ever in the history of Ennahda took place on the morning of May 22. Three leading leaders representative of first and second generations took to the floor to openly contest and defend their respective views of how the party should be internally organised, led, and administered (I am not at liberty to disclose more). This was un-thinkable before the revolution. Ennahda's practice of internal democracy has produced a kind of factionalisation. Factionalisation may over time serve to reduce huge concentration of power in party executive. Islamist parties, like Arab secularist parties tend to be resistant to democratic transformation in party structures and internal democracy. From this perspective, factionalisation must be seen as having a democratising effect, at least in the long term.

Al-Banna's Islamism no more?

Surveying the state of political Islam (Islamic movements) in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, what is most conspicuous is the presence of a spectre of stagnation, crisis and fragmentation. From Egypt to Tunisia there are signs that there is confusion in the 'Islamic project' adopted since the days of Hassan Al-Banna (assassinated in 1949), the founding father of the Muslim Brotherhood ideal and model of socio-politico-moral organisation.

Morally, the flame of the ideal has not dimmed. It still lights up millions of 'subaltern' lives. Al-Banna – and after him other like-minded iconic figures ranging from Sayyid Qutb (seminal ideologue and scholar, Egyptian, hanged by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966) to Maulana Abu Ala Maududi (leading Scholar of Indian-Pakistani origin, d. 1979) – have made a strong case for 'Islamic governance'. They find in Islam an organic repertoire not only for giving the former colonised a voice, but also the means to resist subjugation, Westernisation including secularisation, moral decay, and dissolution into followers of Euro-American models of organising polity, society, economy and morality.

In a brilliant but short 'foreword' to Sayyid Abul Hassan Al-Nadwi's famous book , *Islam and the World*,⁽¹²⁾ Sayyid Qutb seconds the author's ideas of an Islam that sanctions liberation from "superstitions and banalities", "slavery and degradation", and from religious and political "tyranny". Islam, Sayyid Qutb argues, blesses life with faith, a font of "knowledge, fraternity, justice and self-confidence." These are in turn life-giving values that through hard work maximise humans' potential for realising the quest for a "just, healthy and balanced system."⁽¹³⁾

The genius of Islam resides in the telos of a “just” and “balanced system”. Just as in social justice, and a balanced system defuses the tension between dualisms such as God/man, this world/the hereafter, Muslim/non-Muslim (or peoples of the Book), community/individual, and theory/practice.

Sayyid Qutb does not mince his words when it comes to articulating the primacy of Islam (as *din wa dawlah* or religion and state) but also in terms of visibility and leadership in world (and worldly) affairs. He affirms that there is ‘good’ to be had when Islam assumes a leading role “to fashion life according to its own special genius.”(14) There is no doubt in his mind that justice and a balanced society or polity derive from Muslims leading not following. He takes leadership to be intrinsic to Islam. Moreover, he affirms that “proving” and “testing” Islam’s mettle obtains only when assuming responsibility. Thus in his view Islam is predisposed to “lead the caravan of life. It cannot be a camp follower.”(15)

Perhaps this is no longer the case. Muslims, being today plugged into the international economy, integrated in an international order not of their making, and, of late, as they are being converted to the view of separation of religion and politics, cannot be but ‘camp followers’.

The issues that shaped the thinking of Sayyid Qutb more than fifty years ago(16) – the ideological standoff with the ‘West’, colonial penetration, Muslim identity – do not seem to feature large in the thinking of current Islamist ideologues. Sayyid Qutb found both capitalism and communism to be inferior to Islam.(17) He found both to be steeped in materialism and even when they valorise justice, such as communism, they expunge it of all spiritual content.

So in its continuous transformation, Islamism has shifted emphasis according to time and space, oscillating between phases of confrontation and reconciliation, and of rejection and accommodation:

1. Deployment of Islam as a moral and educational medium for raising levels of consciousness and resisting colonialism.
2. As a medium of resisting secularisation to the point that mere political participation in secular politics was considered a heresy.
3. Resurgence or *sahwah islamiyyah* that positioned the question of identity at the heart of the quarrel with national-secular elites and states.
4. Islamisation of state, society, morality and knowledge, all overlapping agendas that gave rise to transnational rethought Islamisms, recognising authoritarian

regimes (what the Muslim Brotherhood and the PJD did respectively in Egypt in Morocco) and approving of engaging the secular state by equating shura with democracy.

5. Islamism going hand in hand with revolution, and emergence of Islamist resistance movements.
6. Wahhabi Salafist explosion promoting literalist interpretations of Islam spread to all corners of the Muslim world.
7. Intra-Salafist divisions and the rise of intellectual and radical salafisms.
8. Divisions within moderate Islamisms (Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, etc.) and attendant 'rationalisation' of Islamism through adoption of formerly rejected positions such as separation of religion and politics.

The End of Political Islam? End of Ideology?

It is too early to state with confidence the shift marks the end of political Islam. Because it depends on how one defines political Islam in the first place. A strict ideological one will inevitably lead to the conclusion that in a certain sense it is the end of political Islam. But if one allows for the elasticity of ideas and practice then no. Islamists come in all shapes and colours: they are neither fixed nor unitary.

For me, as a Tunisian who follows closely the politics of a fledgling democracy, I never cease to remind myself of the enduring legacy of Bourguiba's secularism. It lives on and today reshapes Tunisia, including obviously its Islamists.

Many Tunisians and even Ennahda sympathisers and members are left with a big question: has Bourguiba been right all along? This is a question Ennahda has to ponder. For, after the tragic experiences of torture, martyrs, exile and suffering doing a big volte face on this issue is not easy. Was the suffering for nothing at all? Has Ennahda abandoned its original vision that Islam and politics belong to an organic sphere in which they are mutually reinforcing as a matter of conviction or necessity? These are questions that will not for some time go away.

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