



Politicians or Preachers? What Ennahda's Transformation Means for Tunisia

FABIO MERONE

Last August, Nouredine Khademi, a former religious affairs minister and an important member of Tunisia's leading Islamist party, Ennahda, led a large [protest](#) in front of the country's parliament. A coalition named the National Coordination for the Protection of the Quran, the Constitution, and Equitable Growth, had mobilized the demonstrators to protest a report on individual rights drafted by the Commission on Individual Freedoms and Equality, a presidential commission better known by its French acronym COLIBE.

For theological reasons and because the religious authorities were not consulted for the report, the demonstrators [were unhappy with the commission's recommendation](#) that men and women should enjoy equal inheritance rights. It was intriguing that an Ennahda member directed the march, since, in 2016, the party claimed to have abandoned Islamic activism. To some observers, this suggested that Ennahda was not fully committed to its break with religious engagement and was merely projecting an image that would appease Tunisian secularists and their allies in the West.

However, the reality is more complicated. The attitude of Ennahda leaders can only be understood in light of the constitutional pact agreed to in 2014 among Tunisia's leading parties, civil society organizations, and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). In January 2014, a new constitution was approved as a result of a compromise between Ennahda, broadly representing the Islamist spectrum, and Nidaa Tounes, broadly representing secular forces. Article 1 referred to Islam as the state religion, while Article 6 affirmed that the state was the protector of religion. Ennahda's leaders saw these articles as a culmination of the party's historical mission to provide a clear Islamic identity for Tunisia. Consequently, the leadership no longer saw a reason to pursue an explicitly Islamist platform. This allowed them to formally separate Ennahda's political ambitions from its preaching activities, which are known as *dawa* and are identified with its religious movement. As a party, Ennahda would advance a political agenda, while militants who wanted to continue engaging in religious proselytism were invited to leave the party.



After Tunisia's uprising in 2010–2011, Ennahda developed dual roles in the country's institutional setup. Politically, it was a guarantor of democracy, while socially, its members upheld a reformist version of Islam that accommodated both traditional Islamic prescriptions and liberal democracy. And despite its assurances in 2016, Ennahda's politics and *dawa* were not forever sundered, and instead they functioned in parallel to one another. For Ennahda, the constitutional compromise was nonnegotiable. If Tunisia's Islamic framework was threatened, the party and movement would reunite to defend the previously agreed constitutional arrangement. COLIBE's recommendation was viewed as such a threat, which explains Khademi's role in the 2018 protest.

More broadly, Ennahda has been reacting to several dynamics. First, it adapted to a new balance of power in Tunisia from 2013 on, even as it sought to navigate the preferences of its supporters and constituencies. It also aimed to defend a national consensus over the role of Islam in Tunisia—a moderate Islam that would reinforce Tunisian democracy. Yet there were risks involved in all this, and Ennahda's efforts demonstrated both its flexibility and limitations.

DIVIDING THE PARTY AND THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

After its legalization in 2011, Ennahda was shaped by a debate over its identity in the new context that followed the uprising. This debate was influenced by changing circumstances in Tunisia, particularly new power relationships among the country's political forces after 2013. From Ennahda's perspective, the two party congresses, in 2012 and 2016, opened and closed the democratic transition.

Soon after the overthrow of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Ennahda **emerged as the single largest party** elected to Tunisia's first constituent assembly. This allowed the party's secretary general, Hamadi Jebali,

to form a coalition government in December 2011. Tunisia's situation was characterized by street politics and political mobilization, primarily driven by radical Islamists, including Salafists. This polarized the country's political landscape, **leading to the creation of an equally radical secular front** gathered around a politician from the era of former president Habib Bourguiba, Beji Caïd Essebsi, **who in 2012 founded Nidaa Tounes**, a big-tent party that brought together a range of secularists.

During the 2012 congress, Ennahda delayed the decision to separate the party's political and religious roles. The leadership felt that the political environment was still too unstable to implement such a dramatic change without disastrous consequences. At the time, Ennahda was being pulled in two directions: secularists were asking the party to demonstrate its democratic credentials, while radical Islamists were demanding that Ennahda play a revolutionary role. Since the political moment favored the Islamists, the party could not completely sever ties with this constituency.

The congress ended in a compromise. Ennahda created an association called *Dawa wa Islah* (Preaching and Reform) to coordinate Ennahda-linked Islamic civil society associations and encourage members to spread a reformed version of Islam, while also challenging radical Islamists and Salafists (both theologically and politically). The charismatic preacher Habib Ellouze was tasked with leading *Dawa wa Islah*. Ellouze was Ennahda's most respected leader in Sfax, Tunisia's second-largest city and the center of an important Islamist and Salafi social movement. From the latter emerged a network of Islamic associations that evolved into an anti-secular front in 2012–2013. This Islamist public provided a constituency of **activists ready for mobilization** when needed. This front spearheaded Islamist contestation, as in March 2012 when it supported introducing a reference to sharia in the constitution.

In 2013, however, the atmosphere changed. The military coup in Egypt in early July against then-president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood galvanized

regional hostility to the organization, with which Ennahda was associated. Responding to the subsequent assassination of a Nasserite parliamentarian, Mohamed Brahmi, Tunisian opposition leaders organized a “salvation front,” mobilizing several thousand people against Ennahda. In August, Ennahda’s president, Rached Ghannouchi, met with Essebsi in Paris and began preparing for national reconciliation. During the following months, four civil society organizations, led by the UGTT, helped forge a political consensus that saw the Ennahda government step down and a new constitution get approved in January 2014. Most radical Islamist activities were banned, and the new government initiated a campaign against activist imams and Islamic associations, obliging them to follow Ennahda’s lead in terms of moderation. This process continued when Tunisia’s first head of government, Habib Essid, took office in February 2015.

Following the 2016 congress, Ennahda officials declared that it had become a party of “Muslim democrats” for whom religion functioned as a moral inspiration rather than a comprehensive, ideological vision of the world, as Islamist movements frequently do.

In reality, the outcome was more a division of labor than a clear break between party and movement. Members preferred to talk about specialization, meaning that the political and religious sides of Ennahda each specialized in their own fields. A parliamentarian illustrated this by comparing the separation between the party’s political and *dawa* activities with that in European left-wing parties between the parties and their trade union activities. Ennahda members who favored proselytism were free to pursue this within society. Those more interested in party politics were encouraged to be involved in governance issues. The arrangement was not a Machiavellian effort to deceive political opponents and the international community, but rather a response to the new political situation.

THE TRICKY MANAGEMENT OF POLITICS AND DAWA

Ennahda’s congress in 2016 created the impression of a triumphant party, responsible for consolidating democracy in Tunisia. Yet internal tensions simmered. On the one side were those, such as Ghannouchi, who thought that the movement’s long-term mission was to provide Tunisia with an Islamic identity. This would be accomplished within a democratic framework, in particular a constitution that would ensure institutionalized recognition of Islam. On the other side were activists and supporters of *dawa*, who wanted to keep the party focused on Islamist grassroots politics to foster social change in an Islamic direction. This dichotomy mapped onto preexisting fault lines within Ennahda and affected the party’s base of support. Yet Ennahda showed it could manage its contradictions, and that in its political and *dawa* activities, it could move toward greater compromise and moderation.

One of these older fault lines lay between those people who had remained in Tunisia during the years of Ben Ali rule—in prison or under surveillance—and those who had fled abroad and benefited from relatively more comfortable lives. Another split was generational, with Ennahda members divided roughly into three age groups. The founding fathers were one group, represented by co-founders Ghannouchi and Abdel-Fattah Mourou, who led the renewal process. The second group was made up of younger, more radicalized members in the 1980s, who were politicized students rather than preachers. They were represented after 2011 by individuals pushing for government responsibilities, such as Jebali, the prime minister (2011–2013); Ali Larrayedh, the interior minister (2011–2013) and then prime minister (2013–2014); and Noureddine Bhiri, the justice minister under Jebali.

The third generation included the children of older members who had faced repression or exile. This group was itself divided because of their past experiences. Those who had remained in Tunisia when their parents



were imprisoned or under surveillance are more radical and well represented in the student movement today. The most famous of them is Hichem Larrayedh, Ali Larrayedh's son, who was suspected in 2013 of being close to the Salafi movement.

Those who lived in exile in Europe grew up in a very different setting, sometimes without experiencing any Islamist militancy. The exiles are represented, for instance, by Oussama Sghaier, a parliamentarian elected from Italy and the party's spokesperson at the 2016 congress, or Sayida Ounissi, a former Ennahda parliamentarian elected in France who was in the vanguard of the party's modernization. How each group, or members in them, reacted to the disputes within both the party and movement varied considerably, so it is difficult to summarize. However, Ennahda was able to remain united and showed how adaptable it was at a crucial moment in Tunisia's changing environment.

This adaptability had already been underlined when Ennahda came to power and sought to rebrand and legitimize itself. For example, it integrated a new entrepreneurial class of Tunisian Islamists who believed in an Islamic-oriented form of capitalism, replicating the model of Turkey's Justice and Development Party.¹ It also supported an equal-opportunity agenda for women by promoting charismatic female leaders, such as the vice president of the former constituent assembly, Mehrezia Labidi, and the recently elected mayor of Tunis, Souad Abderrahim, who does not wear a veil and therefore fits the image of liberal Islam. Ennahda was criticized for proposing a constitutional article in August 2012 relegating women to a "complementary" role to men. However, the party has had many female parliamentarians and has accepted Tunisia's personal status code that defends women's rights.

Ennahda's pragmatism and adaptability notwithstanding, the decision to separate the party and movement has had consequences among its base. Ennahda has been losing public support since it created the impression of giving up on *dawa*. The Arab Barometer conducted

surveys in 2011, 2013, and 2016, and found that the percentage of respondents expressing a "great deal of trust" in Ennahda fell from 22 percent in 2011 to 8.5 percent in 2016. The party will have to watch out for this, especially if negative polling trends are confirmed in the next parliamentary elections. Despite its relative decline, Ennahda can take heart that it still obtained a plurality of votes in the 2018 municipal elections.

After its 2016 congress, Ennahda was occupied with both politics and *dawa* to advance the ideological project of a "Tunisian Islam." This underlined how Ennahda's separation of party and movement never fully disconnected them from each other. Its political strategy was built on defending democratization and managing a delicate equilibrium within a national unity government. In this respect, following the Carthage Agreement of July 2016, which served as the basis for cooperation between Tunisia's major political forces, Ennahda joined the unity government of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. It did not focus on gaining key positions but instead on embracing inclusion and ensuring that the coalition remained stable. Nor was this the first time it had done so: Ennahda had already welcomed inclusion after the 2014 parliamentary elections when joining the coalition government of Essid.

As this took place, Ennahda's established *dawa* leaders, such as Ellouze, occupied the religious space. Their declared mission was to reform the teaching of Islam in Tunisia. This aim was shared by a spectrum of new preachers with a more Salafi orientation. However, Ennahda's ideologues reflected the theological and intellectual trend known as *wasatiyya*, the Arabic term for "middle" or "moderate." It was developed by the Islamist thinker Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, who coined the term from a Quranic verse interpreted as justifying Islam's moderate nature. Qaradawi is also president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), whose vice president for a long time was Ghannouchi.

The Tunisian section of the IUMS is led by another Ennahda member, Abdel Majid al-Najjar, a Tunisian Islamist figure famous for his studies on Maqasid, a discipline that [seeks the renewal of Islamic jurisprudence](#) in the contemporary world. Like *Dawa wa Islah*, the IUMS aspires to advance a reformist Islam and to oppose extremism. Since 2012, several Islamic studies associations have joined several umbrella organizations—the most well-known being the network of organizations in Sfax coordinated by *Dawa wa Islah* and the more recent National Coordination for the Protection of the Quran, the Constitution, and Equitable Growth, which organized the protest against the COLIBE report. Their goal is to promote a milder form of Islam based on what is specific to Tunisia. According to their leaders, Tunisia’s previous governing institutions should not have completely pushed aside Islam. For them, [religion has to be a part](#) of what it means to be Tunisian.

Though Ennahda’s *dawa* component has been largely downgraded, it retains an important role. For members, politics and *dawa* are different sides of the same coin—the result of a consensus that Islam should be part of the nation and that its teaching must be ensured. Ennahda’s leadership regards the constitution as guaranteeing a shared vision of a new Tunisia with the nationalist secularists. It establishes a Muslim democratic framework based on political openness. As long as its principles concerning Islam and Tunisia’s identity are preserved, the party sees no need to resume Islamist activism and proselytism. However, if members think those boundaries are transgressed, Ennahda will remobilize *dawa* activists to defend the constitutional compromise.

A YEAR OF UNCERTAINTY LIES AHEAD

Ennahda remains a major actor in Tunisian politics, even if it has lost some support by creating the impression that it has given up on *dawa*. The party will have to ensure any internal divisions do not become permanent.

Ennahda must also take into consideration that in Tunisia, there is a general climate of dissatisfaction with party politics, which potentially can affect it in adverse ways.

Ennahda has two paths to choose from in the coming year. If Ennahda wins a majority in this year’s parliamentary elections, it might consolidate its position as the major political player in the country, gaining confidence in its transformation that began in 2016. If, however, the party loses ground, critical voices inside Ennahda could break away, significantly affecting the separation of politics and *dawa*.

Yet current conditions create many other uncertainties. First, there are no assurances that secular forces would accept Ennahda’s participation in government. Second, the widespread social and economic distress in Tunisia has the potential to lead to chronic unrest and rioting. Such a situation, along with the continuing terrorist threat, could lead to a form of quasi-tutelage by domestic technocrats and international financial institutions, making it more difficult for Ennahda to play a governing role.

This scenario poses fundamental risks for Ennahda and would represent a serious blow to the Tunisian democratic exception. Tunisia continues to face the contradiction of having political elites that call for democracy without having fully accepted a strong Islamist party. Since 2011, the country has wrestled with this dilemma. The atmosphere of mistrust prevailing in national politics today could well mean that this state of affairs will continue, without resolution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fabio Merone is a postdoctoral assistant in the Middle East and North Africa Research Group at Ghent University in Belgium, where he teaches classes on Islam, political Islam, and contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

NOTES

- 1 Author interview with lawyer and Ennahda activist Lubna Moalla, Sfax, September 2014 ,23.

For complete source notes, please see the online version of this article in which source material is hyperlinked.



© 2019 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.