

Table of Contents

- ***The many shades of Islamists***
 - ***Tunisian Islamist party leader argues for moderate Islam***
 - ***Religious minorities put faith in Tunisia's democracy***
 - ***Synagogue, schools attacked in Tunisia***
-

The many shades of Islamists

By Kamran Bokhari & Farid Senzai

Huffington Post (21.11.2011) / HRWF (30.11.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Even before Tunisia's Islamist movement Ennahda won the Oct. 23 national elections there was intense international concern that Islamists would likely dominate the post-authoritarian Arab political landscape. Ennahda led by its founder and Islamist theoretician Rachid Ghannouchi has emerged as the victor with the party obtaining 90 seats in a new 217-member constituent assembly. This first Islamist victory in the aftermath of the Arab unrest has magnified the fear that Islamists will sweep to power across the region, especially with Egyptian elections just around the corner and the Muslim Brotherhood poised to dominate.

These global apprehensions as well as those within the country (where well over half of the electorate didn't vote for Ghannouchi's group) has the Ennahda leadership going out of its way to prove its moderation and commitment to democracy and the secular state. Soon after Ennahda was officially declared the winner, Ghannouchi declared: "We will continue this revolution to realize its aims of a Tunisia that is free, independent, developing and prosperous in which the rights of God, the Prophet, women, men, the religious and the non-religious are assured because Tunisia is for everyone."

Many observers have suggested that the Tunisian movement is similar to Turkey's governing Justice & Development Party (AKP). Such comparisons are of course natural given that the AKP has come a long way from its own Islamist roots and is seen by many outside observers as a model worthy of emulation. And of course there is the need for a template on the basis of which to understand the nature of the Tunisian movement and what to expect from it as it moves from being an opposition group to holding the reins of power.

But the reality is that Islamism is a complex phenomena with many different shades. Most policy makers, including many experts, are unable to accurately distinguish between the various types of Islamist movements in a given country let alone across national boundaries. One way to conceptualize Islamism is in the form of a spectrum, which ranges from violent groups (such as al Qaeda) that reject secularism, democracy and the nation-state, to more moderate groups, like the AKP, which embrace these ideas. More importantly there is a desire that the meltdown of authoritarian republics will somehow lead to an atmosphere where eventually Islamists in the Arab world will behave more or less like Turkey's AKP. The problem with that expectation is that it ignores the fact that both Islamism and secularism have developed in different historic contexts. Therefore, each Islamist movement will seek accommodation with the incumbent secular order in their own particular way.

There is a reason why the AKP turned out the way it did. It grew out of the movement founded by Necmettin Erbakan, whose Islamism was shaped by the country's Ottoman

heritage, which since the 18th century had adopted a relatively liberal and modern view of the role of religion in public affairs. More importantly, it was tempered by the unique form of secularism instituted by the state founded by Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk," which was largely embraced by society.

In contrast, in the Arab world, by and large, religious discourse remained traditional and conservative and state-driven secularism never truly permeated the societies. Furthermore, unlike the democratic experience of Turkey, Arab states remained either autocratic republics or monarchies. The result has been that Arab Islamist groups (to varying degrees) have not exactly become comfortable with secularism.

This can be seen in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood response to the remarks made by Turkish Prime Minister Recep T. Erdogan during his recent visit to Cairo in which he called for a secular constitution for the Arab state. The Muslim Brotherhood quickly rebuked the Turkish premier suggesting his comments as interference in Egypt's local affairs. The brotherhood's spokesman, Dr. Mahmoud Ghuzlan, was quoted by an Egyptian daily as saying that the experiments of other countries should not be cloned. "Turkey's conditions imposed on it to deal with the secular concept," he said.

To a much lesser degree, it can be seen in Ghannouchi's statements, which speaks of the role of Islam in politics, even as the Ennahda leader stresses that his party seeks a constitution for Tunisia that is not based on religion. A clear difference between the AKP and Ennahda is that the latter's political program remains tied to religion while religion is virtually absent from discourse and behavior. Here it should be noted that Ennahda is the most liberal of all Islamist political parties, especially when compared to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its counterparts elsewhere who in turn are more moderate than the Salafists.

Islamist movements seeking power via democracy will behave differently based on the country's historic experiences with Islamism and secularism. What this means is that democratization in each country will lead to a particular hue along the political shades of Islamist movements. Thus, while Turkey's AKP might be a model that many desire for Islamists in the Arab world, we should not expect Islamists in the Arab world, or for that matter across the Muslim world, to start behaving like their Turkish counterparts.

Tunisian Islamist party leader argues for moderate Islam

(AFP (20.11.2011) / HRWF (30.11.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of Tunisia's moderate Islamist Ennahda party, on Sunday argued for a modern and democratic concept of Islam after talks with his Algerian counterpart.

Ghannouchi held talks with Bouguerra Soltani, president of the Movement for the Society of Peace, an Islamist party that is part of the ruling coalition.

"Tunisia wants to hold up a model to society in which Islam is not a synonym of terrorism, fanaticism, extremism or hostility to democracy," he said, the Algerian APS agency reported.

"The model the Tunisian nation has been working towards, through reform movements dating back to the 19th century, is a model that reconciles Islam, modernity and democracy," he added.

The new Tunisian parliament would allow Tunisia to reconstruct itself "on a truly democratic basis that reflects the will of the people", he added.

Ghannouchi's Ennahda emerged the largest party from the October 23 poll to elect a constituent assembly tasked with drawing up a new constitution for Tunisia.

On his arrival in Algeria on Saturday, he was met at the airport by the president of the Senate, AbdelKader Bensalah, an honour normally reserved for heads of state.

He is also due to meet Abdelaziz Belkhadem, leader of the FLN, also part of the ruling coalition, FLN spokesman Kassa Aissi told AFP.

"Mr. Ghannouchi is a political figure from a brother country," Aissi said, adding that during the 1980s he had been a refugee there.

Ennahda won 89 of the seats in the 217 strong assembly, ahead of the 29 won by the left-wing nationalist Congress for the Republic party (CPR) and the 20 seats of the leftist liberal Ettakatol (Forum) party.

Hamadi Jebali, Ennahda's second most senior figure, is set to be nominated as prime minister in a power-sharing deal worked out by the assembly's three main parties.

Religious minorities put faith in Tunisia's democracy

By Tom Heneghan

Reuters (09.11.2011) / HRWF (17.11.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Minority Jews and Christians are putting their faith in Tunisia's nascent democracy to ensure its new Islamist-led leadership respects their rights in this traditionally secular state.

Religious minorities in the Arab world have mostly lost out when dictators are toppled and radical Islamists exploit the power vacuum to attack non-Muslims. The targeting of Christians in Iraq and Egypt constitutes a frightening example.

Tunisia, birthplace of the first Arab Spring uprising, stands as a cautious exception. Minorities are staying here and hoping for the best.

"The Tunisian people, including the Jews, have understood that democracy is the best solution for everybody," said Khelifa Attoun, a Tunis businessman who is vice-president of the local Jewish community.

"The democratic spirit is there," said the Jordanian-born Roman Catholic Archbishop of Tunis, Maroun Lahham.

"This is not Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia - it's not Switzerland or Sweden either," he said. "This will be a real Arab democracy, with a Muslim colouring."

Their cautious optimism echoed comments by Muslim analysts who expect Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party that won 41.7 percent of the October 23 vote for a new assembly, to substantiate its claim that Islam and democracy are compatible.

"Ennahda is not going to throw away this opportunity that history has given it," said Sofiane Ben Farhat, a senior editor at the daily La Presse de Tunisie.

Initial unrest

Tunisia's religious minorities are tiny. There are only about 30,000 Christians, almost all foreigners of European and sub-Saharan African origin, and fewer than 2,000 Jews in a community that dates back to the Roman Empire.

The outlook for them was not reassuring in the weeks after autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fell on January 14. A synagogue in the southern city of Ghabes was set ablaze on February 1.

Two weeks later, several dozen radical Muslims massed outside the Tunis Grand Synagogue chanting "Allahu Akbar" and "The army of Mohammad is returning". Four days after that, a Polish priest was found murdered at his Catholic school in Tunis.

But civil society responded with a 15,000-strong protest march down Tunis's main avenue on February 19 chanting "Terrorism is not Tunisian" and "Religion is personal."

Police were posted behind barbed wire at the Tunis synagogue and at a Jewish nursing home in a Tunis suburb.

It eventually emerged that Rev. Marek Rybinski was murdered by a staff member after a wage dispute. Jewish leaders said the Ghabes synagogue attack looked like a provocation by supporters of the deposed dictator.

"There was unrest for the first two months, but then the government was able to calm things down," said Tunis jeweller Yonathan Rakkah after an evening prayer in the synagogue.

In early April, Israel announced a financial aid package for Tunisian Jews it said were in distress and eager to emigrate. Tunis Jews said only a handful took up the offer.

Autumn campaign

Still, security concerns persisted. In May, only about 100 Jewish pilgrims visited the famous synagogue in Djerba for Lag BaOmer, a holiday following Passover that usually attracts 5,000 Jews from Tunisia, France, Israel and other countries.

During the campaign for the October 23 election for Tunisia's new democratic assembly, moderate Islamists in the Ennahda party promised to maintain the country's secular state and respect human rights, women's rights and other freedoms.

Among the 10,000 candidates was one Jew, kosher restaurant owner Gilles Jacob Lellouche from the Tunis port area of La Goulette, where many Jews live.

"I wanted to break the taboo that someone from a minority can't get involved in politics," said Lellouche, who was not elected. "People saw me as a citizen who was getting involved. It all went very well."

The Ennahda candidate in La Goulette visited the Jewish nursing home to reassure the residents and party leader Rachid Ghannouchi met the Tunis community's leader.

The smooth voting process and the fact that Ennahda fell short of a majority, forcing it to seek a coalition with two secular parties, seems to have reassured the minorities.

"Ennahda will have to follow the moderate Tunisian tradition. Jews have no problem with Ennahda, only with the salafists," Attoun said, referring to the minority of radical Islamists. "But Ennahda won't let them do what they want."

"Everybody is watching Ennahda and knows what they have promised," Lahham said. "If they want to change anything, the street is there to protest."

A senior Western diplomat in touch with Jewish communities around the country said they were not getting ready to leave.

"Ennahda has gone out of its way to reassure the Jewish community," he said.

"It's in Ennahda's interest both as a political party and as the leader of the next government of Tunisia to show that this tradition of tolerance continues."

Synagogue, schools attacked in Tunisia

Reuters (01.02.2011) / HRWF (21.02.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A synagogue was set on fire in Tunisia overnight and gangs rampaged through schools in the capital on Tuesday, prompting the army to fan out to calm fears of chaos after the revolt that toppled Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali.

Major street protests have dried up in Tunisia in recent days, after a reshuffle purged the interim government of most Ben Ali loyalists and appeased public opinion.

But sporadic acts of intimidation and sabotage have broken out after weeks of protests forced Ben Ali to flee the country on Jan. 14, ending 23 years of strict police rule.

Peres Trabelsi, the spokesman for Tunisia's Jewish community, said he did not know who was behind the attack on the synagogue in the southern city of Gabes.

"I condemn this action and I believe those who did it want to create divisions between Jews and Muslims in Tunisia who have lived for decades in peace," Trabelsi said.

Mainly Muslim Tunisia has one of the largest Jewish communities in North Africa but attacks are rare. The last attack came in 2002, when al Qaeda killed 21 people in a synagogue attack on the island of Djerba.

In further sign of deteriorating security, witnesses said gangs marauded through several schools in Tunis, terrifying students. The army fired in the air in Carthage, to disperse gangs that stormed two schools, they said.

On Monday, youths armed with knives and sticks marauded through the streets of Gassrine, burning government buildings and intimidating residents, the state news agency said.

Gangs of youths marauded through central Tunis on Saturday, dispersing a protest by Tunisian women.

They were chased away on the central Bourguiba Avenue by vigilante shopkeepers, also armed with knives and sticks, who said they were protecting their businesses from attack.

Some shopkeepers suggested the gangs were either loyalists of the former ruling RCD party or paid by Ben Ali to create havoc in the streets. Like the youths marauding through Gassrine, they did not appear to be protesters with political demands but were aiming to intimidate residents.

"We're here to try to reassure people that we will protect them," said one soldier, posted in an armoured personnel carrier outside a school in Tunis.

Ben Ali, who was interior minister before he took power in 1987, had a vast network of police, security forces and spies.

That network has not been dismantled since the revolution.

Diplomats say that while Ben Ali's presidential guard had mostly been scattered or killed, a small number of armed loyalists may remain inside the country.

UN Calls for Security Overhaul

A U.N. human rights official said on Tuesday Tunisia's security forces must be overhauled to stop them from working against the people as they did during the country's uprising in which 147 people were killed.

"The main sector that needs reform is the security forces that must begin to work for the people not against them," said Bacre Waly Ndiaye, who is leading an eight-member team sent to Tunisia by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"The security system is at the heart of the reform process. There should be a limit placed on the police state."

Ndiaye told a news conference that 510 people had been wounded during the weeks of protests that began on Dec 17 and inspired a massive popular uprising in Egypt.

Tunisia's interim government has promised to investigate any deaths and injuries that took place during the uprising and has begun to compensate the families affected.

The government has also promised to take back the assets held by Ben Ali and his family in Tunisia and abroad.

French authorities seized a small aircraft belonging Ben Ali's family at an airport near Paris, the prosecutors office said on Tuesday.

The move comes a day after the European Union agreed to freeze assets belonging to Ben Ali and his wife.

Ben Ali and his family built up interests in many Tunisian companies and industries during his two decades in power, including hotels, banks, construction companies, newspapers and pharmaceutical firms.
