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Forces for political and religious identity – Women

NYT (11.11.2012) - On the Friday after Tunisia's president fell, Mohamed al-Khelif mounted the pulpit of this city's historic Grand Mosque to deliver a full-throttle attack on the country's corrupt culture, to condemn its close ties with the West and to demand that a new constitution implement [Shariah](#), or Islamic law.

"They've slaughtered Islam!" thundered Dr. Khelif, whom the ousted government had barred from preaching for 20 years. "Whoever fights Islam and implements Western plans becomes in the eyes of Western politicians a blessed leader and a reformer, even if he was the most criminal leader with the dirtiest hands."

Mosques across Tunisia blazed with similar sermons that day and, indeed, every Friday since, in what has become the battle of the pulpit, a heated competition to define Tunisia's religious and political identity.

Revolution freed the country's estimated 5,000 officially sanctioned mosques from the rigid controls of the previous government, which appointed every prayer leader and issued lists of acceptable topics for their Friday sermons.

That system pushed a moderate, apolitical model of Islam that avoided confronting a dictator. When the system collapsed last year, ultraconservative Salafis seized control of up to 500 mosques by government estimates. The government, a proponent of a more

temperate political Islam, says it has since wrested back control of all but 70 of the mosques, but acknowledges it has not yet routed the extremists nor thwarted their agenda.

"Before, the state suffocated religion — they controlled the imams, the sermons, the mosques," said Sheik Tai'eb al-Ghozzi, the Friday Prayer leader at the Grand Mosque here. "Now everything is out of control — the situation is better but needs control."

To this day, Salafi clerics like Dr. Khelif, who espouse the most puritanical, most orthodox interpretation of Islam, hammer on favorite themes that include putting Islamic law into effect immediately, veiling women, outlawing alcohol, shunning the West and joining the jihad in Syria. Democracy, they insist, is not compatible with Islam.

"If the majority is ignorant of religious instruction, then they are against God," said Sheik Khatib al-Idrissi, 60, considered the spiritual guide of all Tunisian Salafis. "If the majority is corrupt, how can we accept them? Truth is in the governance of God."

The battle for Tunisia's mosques is one front in a broader struggle, as pockets of extremism take hold across the region. Freshly minted Islamic governments largely triumphed over their often fractious, secular rivals in postrevolutionary elections. But those new governments are locked in fierce, sometimes violent, competition with the more hard-line wing of the Islamic political movements over how much of the faith can mix with democracy, over the very building blocks of religious identity. That competition is especially significant in Tunisia, once the most secular of the Arab nations, with a large educated middle class and close ties to Europe.

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia, and its ability to reconcile faith and governance may well serve as a barometer for the region.

Some analysts link the assertive Tunisian Salafi movement to what they consider a worrying spread of violent extremism across North Africa — including an affiliate of Al Qaeda seizing control of northern Mali; a murderous attack on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya; a growing jihadi force facing Israel in the Sinai; and a mob looting an American school and parts of the United States Embassy in Tunis.

Senior government officials said the various groups share an ideology and are in contact with one another, suggesting that while they are scattered and do not coordinate their operations, they reinforce one another's agendas. There have been several episodes of jihadists caught smuggling small arms from Libya to Mali or Algeria across Tunisia, for example, including two small trucks packed with Kalashnikovs and some manner of shoulder-fired missiles or grenades in June, said Ali Laarayedh, the interior minister.

President Moncef Marzouki and several ministers blamed the domestic spread of Islamic extremism on the ousted government, saying it created a vacuum by gutting traditional religious education over the past 50 years. Mr. Marzouki estimated that the number of violent extremists was only about 3,000, but he acknowledged that they were a growing menace to national security.

Aside from a few "zealous" leaders, most are misguided youths, said Mr. Laarayedh, the interior minister. Critics find their potential for violence unsettling, and repeated episodes — security forces shot dead a young Salafi in a confrontation last week — play havoc with the image of a country dependent on tourism.

The government, dominated by the Renaissance Party, is struggling to contain the problem without resorting to the brutal methods of the toppled dictatorship. It has jailed about 800 Salafis, said Samir Dilou, the human rights minister, and arrests of those

advocating violence accelerated after protesters looted the American Embassy compound on Sept. 14 in response to a video mocking the Prophet Muhammad.

The word Salafi encompasses a broad spectrum of Sunni fundamentalists whose common goal is resurrecting Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad when he founded the faith in the seventh century. Salafis range from peaceful proselytizers to those who spread Islam by force.

In Kairouan, 100 miles south of Tunis, Salafis control 5 of the city's 35 mosques, said Sheik Ghozzi, the Grand Mosque's prayer leader.

"The Salafis find themselves empowered because they have not faced any resistance from the government," said Sheik Ghozzi, 70, a slight man wearing a short-cropped gray robe. Without a "strict" reaction, along with dialogue, they will become "a danger to the state," he said.

The Grand Mosque, a sandstone citadel, reflects the martial origins of Kairouan, the capital of the first Muslim army to capture North Africa. It is Tunisia's oldest mosque.

Sheik Ghozzi and other critics accuse the extremists of pushing a far less tolerant version of Islam than that long practiced in Tunisia. Salafi prayer leaders recruit young men to die fighting in Syria, he said, although Islam forbids killing other Muslims.

Salafis repeatedly try to chase tourists from the Grand Mosque; have threatened to level the popular shrine of Sidi Sahbi, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad buried here, although so far they have only fought with worshipers trying to pray there; and imported Saudi Arabian clerics who demanded that Tunisians confront the West. At some mosques, traditional prayer leaders were threatened with beatings or even death if they did not leave, Sheik Ghozzi said. In others, the locks were changed to bar them.

In a few towns, the struggle degenerated into brawls with sticks and fists. The Salafists have also enforced Islamic law on their own. In Sidi Bouzeit this September, a group of about 70 Salafists sacked the only hotel in town that sold alcohol, shattering its outdoor fountains by heaving full cases of beer into them.

"They want their own imams who use their words, who speak their language," Sheik Ghozzi said. "They want someone who calls for jihad, who tells them to go fight in other countries, who curses the Shiites and who calls on them to go out to defend the Koran by force."

It was worshipers who asked Dr. Khelif not to return after that first Friday, Sheik Ghozzi said.

But Dr. Khelif, 60, a pediatrician and the son of a famous Grand Mosque imam, said only misguided Tunisians consider his preaching somehow foreign.

"Islam is the Islam that was revealed to the prophet — it was not Islam revealed to my father or any other Tunisian father," he said, speaking in his clinic, pictures of the Grand Mosque mingled on the walls with Walt Disney characters. Dr. Khelif, who has grown a long, shaggy white beard and assumed the duties of prayer speaker at another mosque since the revolution, denied that any Salafi preachers occupied mosques by force. Worshipers are free to pray elsewhere, he noted.

In a show of strength, the Salafi movement organized a huge rally at the Grand Mosque last May, drawing tens of thousands of followers from around Tunisia who voiced frustration at the slow pace of applying Islamic law.

But Nourredine Khadmi, the minister of religious affairs, said that his ministry was in the process of evaluating potential new imams and that he had appointed some 2,000 imams since January. "By winter, everything will be stable," he said in an interview, though last spring he predicted it would be by August.

"It is a difficult problem to resolve," said Abdelfattah Mouru, a Renaissance Party founder and himself the victim of several physical attacks by young Salafis. "You need either public opinion or a public force. You cannot dispatch the police into the mosques to put them in order, it is impossible, it is both immoral and against the religion."

In Tunis in October, five men set fire to the shrine of Leila Manoubia, a 13th-century saint. Young Tunisian women wrote their names on the walls if they wanted to get married or pregnant. Salafis condemn such prayers as idolatry, although who attacked the shrine remains unconfirmed.

"I want Tunisia to be a place where a woman can wear a veil or not, where we can pray or not," said Asma Ahmadi, 34, who said she started visiting the shrine at age 15 and considers it as much about tradition as religion.

"They are trying to break the mystical balance between tradition and religion in Tunisia," she said. "They are trying to burn our identity to replace it with something we don't know."

Tunisia Jews: A tiny community hanging on - and cooking

BBC News (24.10.2012) - Tunisia has a long Jewish history - Jews were present in North Africa before the arrival of Islam or Christianity. In good times they prospered and in hard times they bore the brunt of discrimination, but now they are at risk of extinction. Of 100,000 before the creation of Israel in 1948, only about 1,500 are left.

After the revolution that ousted President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali last year, there have been ominous signs. More than once, hardline Salafists have staged demonstrations shouting "Death to the Jews".

This has alarmed many in Tunis's tiny Jewish community.

"In around 15 years, we start to speak about the Jewish community in the past tense," says Jacob Lellouche, the only Jew who tried to win a seat on the assembly drafting Tunisia's new constitution. (He didn't succeed.)

But while he is gloomy about the future he is also a dreamer, and the centrepiece of his dream is a small villa in the seaside suburb of La Goulette.

The white two-storey colonial era house has a blue metal gate that carries a big sign - Mamie Lily Restaurant. Lily is his 85-year-old mother and the master chef.

She is the heart and the memory of Jewish cooking in Tunisia," says the chain-smoking Lellouche.

He left Tunisia in 1978 to study marketing and economics in France but decided to return to his roots in 1996, to live with his mother and to found "the last kosher restaurant in Tunisia".

"I want to invite my clients to a cultural trip... to an old Jewish house with a Jewish mamie in the kitchen," he says.

"When she speaks to the clients it's like a Jewish mother speaking to her kids. 'Don't put salt on this, it's not good... No, it's enough, you don't have to eat this or that,'" he adds, letting out a croaky laugh.

Lellouche says there are traces of Jewish culture everywhere in Tunisia, in music, handicraft, literature and names. He hopes that all Tunisians will one day become aware of their common culture and history regardless of their religion.

In the kitchen, Lily sits on a low stool. In front of her is a big bowl of okra - the dish of the day.

She has sparkling brown eyes, a deep voice and an unmistakable air of authority. Like most Tunisians she mixes Arabic with French freely. How is life in Tunisia today, I ask?

"On etait mieux avec Ben Ali," she says. ("Things were better under Ben Ali.")

Why was it better before?

"On a peur de Salafis," is her short answer. ("We are afraid of the Salafists.")

The emergence of the hardline Salafists - a brand of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia which adopts a literalist interpretation of the Koran and preaches strict separation of the sexes, and rejection of Western lifestyles - has taken everyone by surprise.

By all accounts they are a tiny minority, but they are vocal, active and prone to violence.

Lellouche foresees the end of Jewish life in Tunis - though he thinks it will survive on the island of Djerba in the south.

A few blocks away from Mamie's restaurant is Beit Mordechai, a small modern synagogue that is difficult to distinguish from the other residential houses on the narrow street.

When I arrive during the evening prayer the atmosphere is warm and informal. The grown-ups are praying, the kids are running around. It's a small congregation and someone has prepared a cake to share after the prayer.

Ellie Attoun, a 39-year-old businessman, is originally from the south, but during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 there were demonstrations against the Jews there and his family relocated to the capital.

He says he was optimistic when the revolution broke out last year, the first episode of the Arab Spring.

"At the beginning we wanted to see Tunisia open, modern with all what we see in Western Europe. We wanted to look like the modern world. But unfortunately, a few

weeks and months after there's a small part of Tunisian people [who] are against the modernism that the big majority of Tunisian people want."

One of his concerns now is that "we don't see a real will from the government to act against those people".

I put those concerns to the leader of the Nahda movement, Rachid Ghannouchi, the mainstream Islamist party that leads the current coalition government.

Ghannouchi says Tunisian law prohibits incitement to violence against any group, and that he has reassured representatives of the Jewish community that those responsible will be tried.

No-one has been tried yet, he concedes, but it took America 10 years to hunt down Bin Laden, he points out.

Nahda's attitude is regarded by some Tunisians as a form of double-speak. They accuse it of paying lip service to democratic values - freedom of expression, equal rights to all citizens, rule of law - while in reality having much in common with the ultra-conservative Salafists.

On Djerba, the heartland of Judaism in Tunisia and home to one of oldest synagogues in the world, El-Ghriba, the Salafists do not seem to have a presence, but the news of their threats has reached the small Jewish community.

A Jewish man, a 53-year-old father of six, says he has seen "Death to the Jews" scrawled on the wall. He writes over it "Death to those who want death to the Jews," he tells me.

He lived in the West for nine years, but he came back, he says, because he loves his traditional lifestyle.

I ask him what he feels about the future. He say it is all in the hands of the government - if it creates safety and stability then the Jews have nothing to fear.

None of those I asked said they wanted to leave Tunisia or have made such plans.

But none of the 800,000 or so Jews who used to live in Arab societies before 1948 had wanted to leave.

In most cases theirs was a forced departure. The majority went to Israel, while some 200,000 fled to the West. Now, it is thought there are less than 20,000 left.

At the synagogue in La Goulette, Attoun tells me he has studied in France but, unlike other members of his family, he returned through love of his homeland.

Part of his extended family live in Israel, but personally he has no plans to go anywhere.

"We are only Tunisians, me and my children. For us Tunisia is our country. We don't want to imagine the catastrophic scenario."

The wandering of a Blasphemer

Ghazi Béji, a young 28-year old Tunisian, fled his country after having posted caricatures and a pamphlet about Muhammad on the internet. Arriving in Paris at the end of September, after a long horrific journey, he has received support from numerous individuals and organizations. Here is his story.

By Camille Millerand

Le Monde (05.10.2012) - Except for the picture of a nasty wound in the chest, the photos taken by Ghazi Béji—posing in a tee-shirt, smiling—at different stages of his journey could pass for an ordinary vacation album. But the actual journey that this young 28-year old Tunisian describes is vastly different: seven countries crossed, seven months of trials, constant hiding, beatings, hunger, cold, exhaustion, fear. It is the story of the long wandering of a blasphemer, condemned in his country to seven years and a half in prison for having published on the internet caricatures and a pamphlet about the Prophet Muhammad. Ghazi Béji had never before left Tunisia.

Since the end of September, Ghazi has been in Paris, where he benefits from the help of several organizations which promote human rights. A self-proclaimed atheist, he hopes to find refuge there. A committee of international support has been established in his behalf, with some heavyweight signatories, including the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the editor Antoine Gallimard, the writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Abdelwahab Meddeb and Patrick Deville, and also the historians Benjamin Stora and Sophie Bessis. They act in the name “of the inalienable right to freedom of conscience as stipulated in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man passed by the UN in 1948” and for the protection of a person threatened with death. This situation makes Ghazi Béji the first candidate for political refugee status from post-revolution Tunisia. The case, however, is complicated. How does one acquire political asylum when the country that one left has just overthrown its dictatorship?

Seven months earlier, on March 8, Ghazi, an employee at a noodle factory in Mahdia, Tunisia, his place of birth, and who holds a BTS [Advanced Specialist Degree] in Agro-food, gathered all his savings, 1000 euros, and fled. His friend and associate, Jabeur El-Mejri, had just been arrested and imprisoned by the police. No lawyer wanted to defend him. After Ghazi Béji fled, Bochra Belhadj Hmida, a committed lawyer, well-known in Tunis, took his case, saying she did so “out of principle”.

There are two lawyers who filed a complaint against the publication by Jabeur and Ghazi of the caricatures of Muhammad in the blogosphere. Ghazi Béji, the author of the untranslated Arabic text, “The Illusion of Islam”, did not hold back in his on-line criticisms, particularly in accusing the Prophet of pedophilia. The Tunisian justice system handed down the same sentence to both Jabeur and Ghazi . Death threats poured in.

Obviously, Ghazi Béji would not have attempted such an act under Ben Ali. But once the regime of the elderly dictator fell, this man who had enthusiastically participated in the January 2011 demonstrations believed that everything he was doing would be permitted in the new Tunisia. In his apartment in Paris where he currently resides, Ghazi explained his actions, “The majority of Muslims know nothing of their religion. For me, all of the problems in the Arab countries are tied to religion. If not so, then why are the people of these countries poor while the countries themselves rich? The problem”, he insists, “is Islam.” Naïve or reckless, he will even go so far as to carry the proofs of his inflammatory book to the Tunisian Minister of the Interior, in order to obtain a permit to have it printed. Obviously, he will not succeed in obtaining one.

Thus, on March 8, a panicky Ghazi Béji, took a rented shared taxi and crossed the Tunisian-Libyan border. It was the first path of escape that came to his mind. One night spent in Tripoli, a city filled with fighting, was sufficient to convince him that he had chosen the wrong route. He retraced his path, crossed back over the border, and headed the other way for the border with Algeria. He went first to Tabessa, then to Alger by bus. However, observing men in the streets wearing beards and khamis, he said to himself, "Staying here is not a good solution." On March 20, he hesitantly—because "it is a Muslim country"—took a plane to Istanbul, Turkey.

On arrival, he found he did not need a visa. But things changed. One day, on the advice of an Algerian with whom he had left his passport as a precautionary measure he decided to try to go to Europe, by way of Greece. The path he chose was to swim across the Evros River, a route well-known by illegal immigrants. "It was 4:30 in the morning. It was cold but the crossing is not very wide," recounts Ghazi Béji stammering a little in broken English. He took off his clothes and put his belongings in a bag. In the middle of the river, the current was too strong and he lost everything, his glasses, his bag, and his camera. He relates, "When I arrived on the other bank of the river, I was completely naked."

A few kilometers further, the Greek police gave him a temporary one-way travel document. When asked how he had managed after losing his clothing, he responded smiling slightly, "Many people die at that part of the river. I took some clothing from one of the dead..."

This moment marks the beginning of Ghazi's difficulties in his incredible journey, a journey which forced him to experience the bullying and suffering that illegal immigrants endure, a life filled with the haunting fear of being deported back to one's home country. In spite of his sufferings, Ghazi Béji shows little emotion as he attempts to recount his escape by tracing the disconcertingly long route on a map, except when he speaks of "the barbarians" which he does not name other than to call them "terrorists."

The psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, who is part of Ghazi's support committee, notes, "He is someone who was subjected to terrible trauma and was several times exposed to death. His detachment is a type of defense." For many, he is also representative of a generation of young, defiant, anti-establishment Tunisians, who did not hesitate to oust Ben Ali. In Ghazi Béji's case, there is an added dimension of antagonism—such as his proclaimed desire to immigrate to Israel.

In exchange for a few Euros a taxi dropped him off in Alexandroupoli (he habitually received financial help from his family and friends through money transfers through Western Union). He spent a night in an abandoned house, fighting with "Algerians who wanted to steal his money" and left for Thessalonica and then Athens. There he met an Algerian who offered him a gîte [a vacation home] for two nights. The rest of the time, he slept in a public garden.

He began to make the rounds of western embassies. All of them rejected him. The French embassy even warned him that after thirty days he risked being imprisoned for illegal residency. Ghazi Béji made up his mind to cross the Macedonian border through a forest on April 21. There he met a group of eight illegal immigrants from North Africa that he then followed. "The Macedonian police caught me and beat me. I was held in jail for seven hours. They then released me into the forest on the Greek side. I waited one night. I drank water from a spring and the next day I re-crossed the border."

In the first village that he came to across the border, he was informed on by a shopkeeper. Captured again by the police, he was sent back to the forest. The next day he tried one more time. He hid under a bridge and managed to catch a bus to Skopje, the capital. He did not stay there long. He quickly headed on foot toward the Serbian

border, crossing over the mountains with great difficulty. "It was very hard. I hid from every patrol," he said.

In the first locality—he forgot the name of the village but still keeps the posters of Milosevic that he found there as a souvenir—he was caught by the police and placed in a retention camp. He relates that the conditions there shocked him: "It was very crowded. There were Pakistanis, Afghans, Africans....In the morning, the police lined us up against a wall, and one of them had a photo taken of himself flexing his muscles in front of us. Then they piled us into a bus and drove us back to the other side. After we got off the bus, they made us lie down on the ground, with our hands behind our heads, and beat us with sticks. I was exhausted and ill."

After a day, he crossed back over the border again. He took a bus for Belgrade and then obstinately pursued his way toward Romania, the destination that he had decided on, though he can't really explain why. At the border, he was again arrested. He offered the police 50 euros to be released, and finally arrived, on April 27, in Romanian territory at Jimbolia.

From there, Ghazi says, the police led him directly to Timisoara, to a refugee camp "divided into two parts, one side of the camp ate, while the other side watched. The first part was made up of Syrians and Iraqis aided by an American organization; the other part was made up of Africans, many Algerians, and Asians...." One day he noticed an American humanitarian worker and called out to her: "Over here the people have nothing." The next day, Ghazi Béji was sent by the Romanian authorities by train to another camp at Raduati near the Ukrainian border, where he stayed for 25 days. He says, "We were given only 10 euros per month. We ate nothing but potatoes. It was cold, cold, cold."

Ghazi Béji had been through all of this before. But the situation grew much worse with the discovery, by other refugees through his imprudent telephone conversations to his family and to journalists, of his identity and his situation. "There was a mosque inside the camp and each day some refugees discussed the best way to kill me. They did not call me by my first name. They called me 'the pig'. They struck me, forced me to eat my socks..."

One night, Issam, a Palestinian refugee, viciously bit his chest and the wound bled profusely. The camp administration, therefore, made the decision to send him back. He signed papers—which he still possesses along with the documents that verify his journey—and obtained from Romanian officials, in exchange for 70 euros, a grey passport, a "temporary travel document, valid until August 2014", and, for 60 more euros, a residence permit.

For two months, Ghazi Béji would hide in Radauti in a studio tracked down for him by a priest...who urged him to go pray there. After that, a support network (notably the Comité pour le respect et la liberté des droits de l'homme en Tunisie [Committee for Freedom and Human Rights in Tunisia], le Manifeste des libertés [the Manifesto of Freedom]...) was in position to organize his coming to Hungary, Vienna, Lucerne, Zurich, and finally Paris, where he waits since then, cloistered, in the apartment of an activist.

Translation French-English by Human Rights Without Frontiers

Salafists raid Tunisian hotel bar for serving alcohol

BBC News (05.09.2012) - Muslim hardliners known as Salafists have attacked a hotel in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid because its bar still served alcohol, reports say.

Dozens of activists smashed bottles and chased away customers at the Horchani hotel, news agencies reported.

The sale and drinking of alcohol is legal in Tunisia, which is popular with foreign tourists.

The country has witnessed a resurgence of Islamist hardliners recently since the overthrow of President Ben Ali.

The central Sidi Bouzid is the cradle of Tunisia's revolution, which ended secular rule and triggered the Arab Spring.

Threats

Hotel owner Jamil Horchani told Reuters the Salafists "attacked the hotel on Monday night and smashed all its contents. They entered the rooms and damaged furniture and smashed bottles of alcohol."

They had previously threatened to attack the hotel if he did not stop serving alcoholic drinks, he said.

In May, Salafists in Sidi Bouzid staged an anti-alcohol protest demanding that hotels and bars be relocated outside the town, some 300km (186 miles) west of the capital Tunis.

The Tunisian uprising in January 2011 unseated veteran President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and inspired a wave of pro-democracy movements across North Africa and the Middle East.

But since the government's overthrow, Salafist fundamentalists have been gaining in power.

The movement's most radical branches are demanding the reintroduction of Sharia law into Tunisia.

Tunisian alarm at Salafi assault on 'un-Islamic' culture

AFP (17.08.2012) - Tunisian Salafis are stoking fears of a rising Islamist tide after the hardliners disrupted a string of cultural events they deemed un-Islamic, culminating in an attack that left five people wounded.

Artists and opposition media accuse the Islamist-led government of failing to do more to rein in the Salafis, who attacked the Bizerte music and theatre festival on Thursday evening armed with swords and sticks.

The interior ministry said that five people were wounded in the attack, and that police dispersed the assailants with tear gas, arresting four of them.

But some complained that police waited an hour before intervening.

It was the third and most violent such incident in just three days, after Salafi prevented an Iranian group from performing at a Sufi music festival in Kairouan, south of Tunis, saying their Shiite chanting amounted to a violation of Islamic values.

On Tuesday, renowned Tunisian actor Lotfi Abdelli was prevented from performing his comedy act "100% Halal" by hardline Islamists who had occupied the auditorium.

So far the incidents have not triggered wider violence, as happened when suspected Salafi attacked a Tunis art gallery in June, sparking riots that left one person dead and more than 100 injured.

But since then, emboldened hardliners have disrupted at least five cultural events, in the middle of the festival season and during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, heightening concerns in Tunisia about their influence and ability to operate.

Last week, the director of a festival at Gboullat, in the northern Beja region, announced he was cancelling the event under pressure notably from the Salafi -- adherents of a strict Sunni interpretation of Islam similar to the one practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Another festival had been cancelled at the end of July, in Sejnane, with the organizers again blaming radical Islamists, who interrupted the event, saying it was unacceptable during the month of Ramadan.

No group has yet claimed responsibility for the disruption. The main Salafi organization, Ansar al-Sharia, refuses all contact with the media.

Ruling Islamist party blamed

The security forces have been swift to disperse anti-government protests in recent weeks but have appeared softer towards the Islamists, according to some, prompting accusations of complicity against the ruling Islamist party Ennahda.

"They leave the Salafi alone," said Tunisian actress and playwright Leila Toubel.

"How can we believe that this government and Ennahda are not involved? I would like to think that there is nothing to it, but these people (the Salafi) go unpunished, they make their own law," Toubel said.

She accused the ruling Islamists of "complicity at least by silence."

Some Tunisian media share her concerns.

"What is serious about all this, more than the activism of these religious extremists, which grows by the day, is the laxity of the authorities who give in every time when faced with the diktats of some bearded fanatics," said the online publication Kapitalis, which is strongly critical of the government.

The interior ministry declined immediate comment.

But the culture ministry responded to the forced cancellation of Lotfi Abdelli's stand-up comedy show by accusing those responsible of an "attack on freedom of expression and a dangerous threat to cultural rights."

Ennahda is already under fire from human rights activists for drafting a law, yet to be debated in parliament that could see anyone convicted of violating religious values jailed for up to two years.

Critics say the bill is an attempt to curb freedom of expression.

Hardline Islam threatens democracy gains

CBS News (30.07.2012) - Tunis, Tunisia - Thousands of hardcore Muslims chant against Jews. Youths rampage through cities at night in protest of "blasphemous" art. A sit-in by religious students degenerates into fist fights and the desecration of Tunisia's flag.

In the birthplace of the Arab Spring, the transition from dictatorship to democracy has been mostly smoother than in neighboring countries, with no power hungry military or armed militias to stifle the process. But as a moderate Islamist party rules with the help of secular forces, an unexpected threat has emerged: the increasing boldness of ultraconservative Muslims known loosely as Salafis, who want to turn this North African country of 10 million into a strict Islamic state.

Tunisia's hardcore Salafis are estimated to number only in the tens of thousands. But their organized and frequent protests against perceived insults to Islam, especially by artists, have rocked the country and succeeded in mobilizing disaffected and angry youth much more effectively than secular opposition parties.

Experts warn that an economic downturn could turn these spasms of religious-tinged rage into the new language of the opposition. Tunisia's economy shrank by 2 percent last year and unemployment stands at 18 percent — even higher among young people.

"There's no question that unemployment aggravates the situation," said William Lawrence, the North Africa representative for the International Crisis Group. "They go to Salafism because they have nowhere better to go socially, politically and spiritually."

As Salafis thrive in the new atmosphere of freedom of expression, they are aggressively attacking the free expression of those they see as insulting Islam. Their main target: artists who themselves have used democratic upheaval to raise sharp, often provocative, questions about the relationship between religion and society.

Tensions that were bottled during the regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali are bubbling to the surface.

A film called "Neither Allah nor Master" about secularism by an atheist director, an animated film portraying God as an old man that was broadcast on TV, and most recently an art exhibit dabbling in religious themes have all provoked the wrath of the Salafis.

The Spring of the Arts exhibit in the wealthy Tunis suburb of La Marsa triggered June riots that left one dead and 100 injured. Many of the paintings questioned religion's role in society, including some clearly skewering Salafis. There were images of veiled women hanging from punching bags in a boxing ring, veiled women buried in stones, and paintings of demonic bearded faces.

The Islamist-led government has tread carefully around Salafi demonstrations, conscious that they themselves were once victims of government oppression and fearful of further radicalizing the Salafis.

That has exposed the government to accusations by the liberal and leftist opposition that they are unable to preserve stability, or even worse — complicity in the extremist violence.

For Tunisian authorities, grappling with the Salafis is made all the harder by the fact that they have not coalesced into an articulate, united movement but are rather comprised of different groups, some which may even be under manipulation of secular remnants of the old regime. That contrasts with Egypt, where Salafis have formed political parties and participate in politics.

Salafis did not pop out of nowhere in Tunisia after the revolution. The movement grew quietly under Ben Ali, who vigorously repressed the moderate Islamists of the now dominant Ennahda Party, heirs to Tunisia's own indigenous tradition of reformist Islam.

Under Ben Ali, imams were appointed by the state and religious schools closed. Many of those alienated by the official secular culture of the French-speaking elite turned to the strict Salafi Islam of the Arabian peninsula.

"They were influenced by the Salafi discourse coming out of the Gulf countries and diffused by the Salafi satellite channels all through the 1990s," explained Slaheddine Jourchi, a Tunisian writer and human rights activist who has closely studied Islamist movements. "They saw the Salafi discourse as the most pure in Islam."

With the fall of the dictatorship, Salafis are now free to spread their message to the rest of the country.

One of the biggest flashpoints was Manouba University near the capital where conservative students and their allies staged a months-long sit-in protesting restrictions on the Islamic veil and lack of prayer halls on campus. They fought with secular students and in one case tore down the national flag and replaced it with a black one bearing the Islamic profession of faith.

"Our current benefits from the new climate of freedom to get out its message and preach to people," said Bilal Chaouachi, a bearded theology student who describes himself as a follower of Salafi Islam and gives religion classes in his local mosque.

Redha Belhaj, head of the recently legalized Hizb al-Tahrir, or Liberation Party, which calls for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate, said that Ennahda betrayed the country when it declined to enshrine Islamic law as the basis of all legislation in the new constitution.

Speaking from his modest offices at the edge of Tunis' medina, Belhaj claimed that Tunisians long for an Islamic state.

"People want Islam as a solution, they want Shariah as a system and a regime," he said. "Ennahda deceived public opinion."

Belhaj does distance himself from the riots, such those in June, emphasizing that his party rejects violence of any kind. "They are all young and without education and lack understanding," he said of the rioters, hinting that these youths were being manipulated into violence to make Islamists look bad.

For Tunisia's secular-minded elite, the Salafis represent everything they fear with the fall of the dictatorship and the rise of Islamist politics.

A rally in May by the group Ansar al-Shariah, or the followers of Islamic law, led by a veteran of the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, alarmed many Tunisians. Some 4,000 Salafis gathered outside the revered main mosque in the city of Kairouan to voice calls for an Islamic state, chanting about conquering the Jews and cheering speeches calling for an Islamic state.

Especially popular were four masked men performing martial arts moves known as Zamaqtel, a kind of Islamic kung fu. The discipline's founder, Mohammed Moncef Ouerghi, developed the martial art during 16 years in Ben Ali's prisons. While happy to be out of prison and enjoying the new freedoms, he was dismissive of Tunisia's embrace of democracy: "Democracy was conceived of by humans, not Muslims, before the time of the Prophet Muhammad — if democracy is important, why is it not in the Quran?"

In many cases, people joining Salafi demonstrations may have been motivated less by piety than a chance to loot or express dissatisfaction over a lack of jobs for young people. Some of the June rioters broke into shops and attacked courthouses and police stations.

The Interior Ministry has also alleged that some of the rioters were being paid by wealthy businessmen loyal to the old regime.

The La Marsa art exhibit violence appears to have been provoked by a former member of Ben Ali's political party who had grudge against the gallery unrelated to the exhibit. He snapped pictures of some of the more provocative paintings and showed them at a nearby mosque. He also uploaded them onto a Facebook page — along with some paintings that weren't even in the exhibit — with captions condemning them as blasphemous.

Sami Brahim, an expert on Islamist movements in Tunisia and who runs a cultural center right near the art gallery in La Marsa, expects the whole Salafi movement to subside with time because it is a cultural import funded by the Gulf states.

Since the movement was nurtured under the oppression of Ben Ali, he said, it should eventually wither in the face of greater freedom of expression and debate.

"Salafism doesn't yet have the courage to take part in politics since from the beginning it hasn't been an organized movement and it doesn't have a very well elaborated discourse," said Brahim. "It would just need a healthy atmosphere, real freedoms and a relatively successful economy for the Tunisian Salafi movement to be marginalized."

Tunisia safe from Islamic extremism

By Antoine Lambroschini

AFP (13.07.2012) - Carthage, Tunisia - President Moncef Marzouki stressed Tunisia does not face the threat of Islamic extremism and is run by a partnership which includes centre-leftist parties, in an interview with AFP.

Marzouki, who on July 17-19 visits France, where he previously lived in exile, said his mission was aimed at erasing tensions that arose during the 2011 revolution that swept away president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime.

The Salafist trend of radical Islam was "a nuisance but not a force capable of endangering the republic," he said.

"When the Salafists wanted to add oil to the fire by pretending religion was being insulted, they had to step back because they realised the whole of the security establishment was absolutely opposed," said Marzouki.

He was referring to an attack on an art exhibition in June that led to riots and a curfew being imposed on the streets. It included a painting of a naked woman with bearded men standing behind her.

Such extremism was the work of "the poorest sector" of society, with "wretched poverty the cause," said the president.

He repeatedly pointed out that the Islamists of Ennahda, which dominates the government, share power with two centre-left parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, which won 33 percent of the seats in the assembly.

"The claim that Tunisia is governed by Islamists is an aberration ... Tunisia is governed by a coalition ... in which the secular partners have as much weight as their Islamist partner," he insisted.

"Ennahda are people who we somehow 'converted,' in quotation marks, to democracy during the 1980s and 1990s," he said, likening it to Christian Democrats in Europe.

He stressed Ennahda was committed to human rights and the rights of women despite the political crisis sparked by the June extradition of Libya's former premier, Baghdadi al-Mahmudi, over the president's opposition.

"The coalition almost fell apart ... because you must not touch human rights," said Marzouki, adding he had been on the verge of resigning.

But "I received all sorts of assurances from Ennahda and from the prime minister," Hamadi Jebali, the Islamist leader who instigated the extradition, said the president.

He also argued that "never in the history of Tunisia has the press been so free" and full of criticism of the way the country was being run. "I'm even happy when I'm being caricatured because it shows we're no longer in a dictatorship."

1 dead, 62 injured in riots by Islamists

By Ben Bouazza

Associated Press (13.06.2012) - Tunisia's leaders on Wednesday condemned extremists after days of riots by radical Islamists left one man dead, injured 62 security personnel and led to more than 160 arrests.

Ultraconservative Islamists known as Salafis attacked an art gallery Sunday in a Tunis suburb for an exhibition they said insulted Islam. After security forces dispersed them with tear gas, gangs attacked police stations around the country over the next few days.

Clashes between secular groups and religious hardliners have been on the rise in recent months, but this week's violence is unprecedented and comes just two days after the terror group al-Qaida urged Tunisians to rise up against the governing moderate Islamist party Ennahda.

In the coastal town of Sousse, 22-year-old Fehmi Aouini, a university student, died of his wounds Wednesday after being shot in the head during clashes between security forces and Salafists, the Farhat Hached hospital said.

The North African nation that held its first free election last year is bracing for renewed unrest on Friday, the Muslim holy day, when conservative religious groups have called for renewed demonstrations against insults to the faith.

A joint statement Wednesday by the president, prime minister and head of parliament condemned unidentified "extremist groups" for "threatening the freedoms of Tunisia" and noted that these riots were taking place just as the country was getting back on its feet and the economy improving.

Tunisia for half a century was ruled by a secular dictatorship that fiercely repressed any Islamist sentiment. Since the overthrow of the regime in January 2011, religious groups have sprouted up. Ennahda won an historic election last fall and allied itself with two secular parties, but hardline groups, including al-Qaida, say the government is not doing enough to implement Islamic law.

The leader of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, said in an interview that Ayman al-Zawahri, the leader of al-Qaida who recently condemned Tunisia, was "a catastrophe for Islam and Muslims."

"We are against extremism regardless of the ideology, whether secular or Salafi, and the law must be applied to all those who violate it," he said.

Tunis, the capital, was calm on Wednesday after days of violence swept across the country.

On Tuesday in Sousse, a mob attacked the local palace of fine arts and attempted to set it on fire with firebombs. In some areas young men took up weapons to protect their neighborhoods from religious extremists, according to the state news agency.

Late Sunday, hundreds of extremists destroyed artworks at an exhibit in the Tunis suburb of La Marsa that included paintings that caricatured Mecca, portrayed a nude woman and showed the word "Allah" spelled with strings of ants.

Monastir on the coast, as well as Ben Guerdane on the Libyan border also witnessed similar violent protests.

The art gallery in Tunis has since been closed by the government. Minister of Culture Mehdi Mabrouk said while the government supports the freedom of expression, it is opposed to any insults to religion.

Interior Minister Ali Larayedh accused "extremists from the right and left" of being behind the violence. He also said remnants of the old regime and bands of criminals could also be involved and warned that "no one was above the law."

The government, many of whose members were once imprisoned by the old regime, had taken a cautious approach to the Salafist protests but appears to be taking a firmer line after this week's riots.

Tunisian Islamists riot over "insulting" art show

By Tarek Amara and Mohammed Argouby

Reuters (12.06.2012) - Hundreds of Salafi Islamists, angered by an art exhibition they say insults Muslims, clashed with police in Tunis on Tuesday, raising religious tensions in the home of the Arab Spring and piling pressure on the moderate Islamist government.

Protesters hurled petrol bombs at officers in some of the worst confrontations since last year's revolt ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and launched uprisings across the Arab world.

Salafis, who follow a puritanical interpretation of Islam, blocked streets and set tires alight in the working class Ettadamen and Sidi Hussein districts of the capital overnight.

By morning, protests had spread to a number of residential districts. Stone-throwing youths stopped trams from passing through the capital's Intilaqa district where demonstrators entered mosques and used the loudspeakers to call on Tunisians to defend Islam.

An interior ministry official on Tunisian state TV said 97 people had been detained during the unrest, including dozens of Salafis and some "criminals".

Tuesday's clashes came a day after a group of Salafis forced their way into an art exhibition in the upscale La Marsa suburb and defaced works they deemed offensive.

The work that appears to have caused the most fury and polarized Tunisians, spelt out the name of God using insects.

"These artists are attacking Islam and this is not new. Islam is targeted," said a youth, who gave his name as Ali and had removed his shirt and was preparing to confront police in Ettadamen.

In a statement released before the protests, Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party that now leads the government, condemned what it described as provocations and insults against religion but urged its own supporters to respond peacefully.

Difficult position

The violence puts Ennahda in a difficult position.

While Islamists did not play a major role in the revolution, the struggle over the role of Islam in government and society has since emerged as the most divisive issue in Tunisian politics and several clashes have erupted in recent months.

Salafis, some of whom are loyal to al Qaeda, want a broader role for religion in the new Tunisia, alarming secular elites who fear they will seek to impose their views and ultimately undermine the nascent democracy.

A Tunisian official told Reuters seven members of the security forces were wounded as they tried to quell the riots by using teargas and firing into the air.

State television reported the offices of Tunisia's main labor union in the northwestern city of Jendouba had been set alight by Salafis overnight while the offices of secular parties were attacked.

The powerful union is considered a bastion of Tunisian secularism in a country that was seen as one of the most secular in the Arab region under the rule of Ben Ali and his predecessor, independence leader Habib Bourguiba.

A group of youths cut off the main road linking the capital to Bizerte, about 60 km to the north.

A day before the clashes, the leader of al Qaeda called on Tunisians to defend Islamic law from Ennahda, which won the first post-revolutionary election in North Africa in October and has said it would not seek to impose sharia (Islamic law) in the new constitution that is being drawn up.

The audio recording, attributed to Ayman al-Zawahri and released on Islamist websites, said Ennahda, which leads Tunisia's government in coalition with two secular groups, had betrayed the religion.

While pushing for a greater role for Islam, Tunisian Salafi leaders have said they would do so peacefully and did not intend to clash with Ennahda. However, Salafis say they draw the line at actions they believe humiliate Muslims or Islam

Secularists have defended the offending art, criticizing the Islamists they say are bent on curbing freedom of expression. They say Ennahda has been too lenient with Salafis, giving them the confidence to step up their demands.

Al-Qaida incites Tunisians against ruling party

"CBS News(12.06.2012) - Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri called on the Tunisian people to rise up against the country's Islamist ruling party for accepting a constitution not based on Islamic Shariah law, according to a recording released Sunday.

In an audio recording posted on militant forums, al-Zawahri said the leaders of the Ennahda party, a moderate Islamist group that formed a new government after October elections, are violating Islam's teachings by accepting a constitution that does not consider Shariah the sole source for legislation.

Al-Zawahri said Ennahda favors "an Islam accepted by the U.S. State Department, the EU and the sheikdoms of the Gulf, an Islam that accepts gambling clubs and nude beaches."

"It is strange to see a leadership party that claims to be associated with moderate Islam and at the same time it says it does not call for ruling by Islam," he said.

He said that the moderate Islam meant that an "Islam which accepts Muslims to fight alongside the American army in Afghanistan."

"Rise up to support your Shariah and incite the people for a popular uprising instigating them to defend the Shariah and tell them what about what (plot) is being hatched against Islam," he said.

Al-Zawahri took over as leader of al-Qaida after its founder, Osama bin Laden, was killed in a U.S. military strike last May. He compared moderate Islam that does not depend on the Shariah to "a hospital that has nothing to do with treatment, or a pharmacy that has nothing to do with selling drugs, or an army which is not interested in fighting."

Islamism and secularism in Tunisia

By Rory McCarthy (Rory McCarthy is the former Middle East correspondent of the Guardian and author of *Nobody Told Us We Are Defeated: Stories from the New Iraq.*)

Open Security - Some Tunisians see a worrying confrontation developing in their country a year after the fall of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the first dictator toppled by last year's Arab uprisings. Salafists have been demonstrating at Manouba University against a ban on female students wearing the niqab, the full-face covering. A crowd chanted anti-Semitic slogans as they gathered at Tunis airport to greet the arrival of Ismail Haniyeh, a leader of the Palestinian Hamas movement, earlier this month. Salafists have already led demonstrations against the screening of two films they deemed unacceptable, one an investigation into Tunisian secularism and another the Oscar-nominated animation *Persepolis*[†], which tells the story of a young girl growing up in Iran during the Islamic revolution.

Many among the middle class and on the left complain that Ennahda, the Islamist party that won the first elections in October, speaks a double language, sounding moderate in public while secretly drawing up a radical programme that threatens Tunisia's progressive achievements. "Tunisia is not a country made for Islamism," said Noura Borsali, a member of the transitional commission created after the revolution. "We have a relationship with Islam that's very moderate. You have people who are believers, they believe in God, but the Tunisians are open, they are *bonsvivants*. We don't have intolerant people or terrorists or violence."

This seems to echo a similar polarisation in Egypt, where liberal parties have been overshadowed by the comprehensive success of Islamists and more radical Salafists at the ballot box. Is the post-revolutionary landscape in the Arab world to be a battleground between Islamism and secularism?

There are valid concerns about the divide inside these movements between the base and the more moderate-sounding leaders, about ambiguous rhetoric and about the rise of the Salafists. But in Tunisia at least, this is not the whole story.

Firstly, Tunisia is not quite as secular as the guidebooks suggest. Ben Ali used secularism above all as an instrument of coercion. After a brief flirtation with pluralist politics in the late 1980s he began a wave of repression against this Islamists on 'security' grounds, but it soon spread to targeting parties across the political spectrum and the press too. Above all he wanted control, of the state and of the official interpretation of Islam. To make the point he built a vast mosque in his name near his palace in Carthage[†], the scene of Tunisia's great archaeological heritage. The secularist parties that tried to emulate Ben Ali's anti-Islamist agenda won remarkably few seats in last October's elections.

Secondly, Ennahda developed an unusually moderate Islamist philosophy and made an explicit commitment to democracy from the outset. "We tried to make a co-existence between democracy and Islam," Rachid Ghannouchi, the movement's leader, told me. "So our view of Islam has become very open." Often overlooked is the fact that in 2005, Ennahda sat down with several opposition parties, including leftists and communists, and agreed a joint platform on issues such as women's rights, gender equality, freedom of opinion and relations between the state, religion and identity. Two of the leftist parties involved in those meetings are today part of the coalition government alongside Ennahda. One of the first decisions of the new government was to announce that the Personal Status Code, a progressive piece of legislation protecting women's rights, would be enshrined as a fundamental law to give it extra protections. In other words, radical Salafism is not just a challenge to secularists: it's also a challenge to moderate Islamists like Ennahda.

In fact there is some debate among academics about whether Ennahda should even be considered a straightforward Islamist movement, since it does not seek to establish an Islamic state but rather works within the electoral system and since it does not espouse an exclusivist Islamist vision. This is a case the party is keen to make for itself. "For us to be an Islamist party à la Tunisienne is to be realist and pragmatic and to accept that the Muslim religion is not a programme but a background," said Samir Dilou, a senior party figure who is now the Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice.

After all, the primary challenge for the new Tunisian government today is not polarisation between Islamists and secularists, but instead the social and economic crisis that fuelled last year's revolution. In its election manifesto Ennahda promised to create 590,000 jobs within five years, increase investment, cut inflation and push annual economic growth up to seven percent from 0.2 percent estimated growth for 2011. Those seem extraordinarily ambitious goals. At the same time it must write a new constitution, maintain the cohesion of the new coalition and then contest elections all over again in a year's time.

Ghannouchi told me people voted for his party out of "recognition of its oppression" at the hands of the former regime and because it offered "morality" in politics and economics. Recognition of oppression may not endure as a source of legitimacy for too much longer and morality in politics is likely to be elusive. Retaining power will be less about the debate over Tunisia's identity and more about whether the country's first Islamist government can deliver its promise of economic prosperity and national dignity.

Challenge to Tunisia's secularism

By John Thorne

The National (20.04.2012) - Every Friday, Abderraouf heads to a mosque near Al Manar University, where he and other traders sell Islamic books, alcohol-free perfume and face veils displayed on mannequins.

Under the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali they risked arrest. But since Mr Ben Ali was forced from office in January, Abderraouf, a recent university graduate, and other conservative Muslims have begun openly selling their wares to help Tunisians - as he puts it - "to know and follow Islam better".

In claiming their rights, Abderraouf and other more traditional Muslims are challenging Tunisia's secular values as the country struggles to reinvent itself in the post-Ben Ali era.

A council set up by Tunisia's interim government to oversee political reform finalised a new electoral law last week that reserves 50 per cent of places in electoral lists for women - a key goal of women's rights groups seeking to safeguard secular values.

"Islam is our religion, and it's not anything I want to hide or criticise," said Khediya Arfaoui, a member of Femmes Démocrates and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development, two progressive women's organisations. "But I don't want anyone to impose the veil."

These contrasting views of religious practice reflect longstanding attitudes in Tunisia, said Sami Brahem, a specialist in Islamic movements at the *Institut Préparatoire d'Études Littéraires et Sciences Humaines* in Tunis.

During his three-decade rule, the president, Habib Bourguiba, a secularist, closed religious schools, outlawed polygamy and banned the Islamic headscarf in public places.

In 1987 an ailing Bourguiba was replaced by Mr Ben Ali, who jailed thousands of conservative Muslims after members of the moderately Islamist Nahda movement fared well in elections in 1989.

Within a decade, Salafism, an austere expression of Islam, was filtering into Tunisia from the Middle East via television stations and the internet, Mr Brahem said.

Calling for Islamic government and the strict segregation of the sexes, Salafis seek to emulate the salaf as-salah, or "pious predecessors" - the first three generations of Muslims.

For some of Tunisia's estimated several thousand Salafis, doctrinal rigour is an antidote to what they describe as the spiritual ambiguity of modern life.

"Until I was 25 I had never read the Quran, never set foot in a mosque," said Abu Abderrahman, 34, a builder in Tunis who helps to run the mosque near Al Manar University. "Something was missing. I needed food and drink for my soul."

One day in 2002, Mr Abderrahman overcame his ambivalence and visited a mosque. Around him were men hunched in prayer. At first, he felt out of place.

"But whoever seeks and reads the Quran, the word of God plants a seed in his heart," he said. "Islam cannot be applied 70 or 80 per cent. It must be 100 per cent."

Since Mr Ben Ali's departure, conservative Muslims have taken to the streets to demand legal changes that would make it possible to live along what they consider more Islamic lines.

In February, hundreds demonstrated in Tunis's old city to call for the closure of a brothel there, prompting police to fire shots in the air to disperse crowds.

Two weeks ago, Salafis rallied and held evening prayer in Tunis's central boulevard to protest against a Ben Ali-era law banning the wearing of headscarves for identity card photos. Tunisia's interim government said the same day that it would remove the ban.

Such public activism has rattled more secular Tunisians, who often accuse Salafis of aspiring to impose a single brand of Islam.

"It's good to have people talking about Islam in public, since Ben Ali restricted it," said Adam Mars, 21, a medical student who prays every Friday at the campus mosque. "But the Salafis want to tell everyone how to live."

Others worry that if conservative religious practices are allowed to flourish, religious doctrines supporting violence will sprout alongside them.

In February authorities speculated that "terrorist fascists with extremist tendencies" had murdered a Polish Catholic priest, and secularist protesters rallied to condemn religious extremism. Police later arrested a local handyman in connection with the murder.

Meanwhile, authorities have barred the Islamist group Hizbut-Tahrir from legislative elections scheduled for July. In an interview with France's Jeune Afrique magazine, the prime minister, Béji Caid Essebsi, called the group's platform anti-constitutional.

While separate from the Salafi movement, Hizbut-Tahrir similarly supports the strict application of Islamic law. Founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, the group seeks to weld Muslim countries into a single Islamic state through peaceful means.

"Tunisians want Islam," said Nabil Manai, a member of Hizbut-Tahrir's political bureau in Tunisia. "They're fed up with the dictators and capitalism that have borne down on them for over a century."

According to Mr Manai, Hizbut-Tahrir would impose the Islamic headscarf on women, ban non-Islamic political parties and partly collectivise the economy based on its reading of Islamic scripture.

Mr Brahem, however, said most Tunisians reject Hizbut-Tahrir's style of political Islam, while the normal course of open public debate might actually moderate the views of Salafi activists.

"For example, Salafis are now obliged to express themselves through mixed-sex street demonstrations," he said. "Men and women have begun talking to one another."

Outside the Al Manar University mosque, the 25-year-old Abderraouf, who refused to give his surname, chatted with worshippers who passed by his stall while he struggled against the winds to keep his stock of abayas pinned to their line.

He insisted that his faith and his business were intertwined. "You can engage in trade that is either Islamically permissible or forbidden by Islam," he said. "I'm trying to sell what is permissible."

Then the adhan soared from the minaret, and he hurried towards the mosque gate.

"It's time to pray."

Head of leftist independent list assaulted during political meeting in South-western Tunisia

On Saturday, April 21st, the head and spokesman of the Tunisian Leftist-Secular independent list *Doustourna*, (made up of political candidates) Jawhar Ben Mbarek, and a group of other activists were attacked during a political meeting at the regional office of the Union of Tunisian Unemployed Graduates in the community of Souk El Ahad, in the Governorate of Kebili.

A Doustourna activist, Khemaies Bahri, told a TAP correspondent in Kebili that a group of Salafist youth burst into Doustourna's meeting room and prevented the activists from leaving the premises.

He said the group of young people assaulted the members of Doustourna by throwing chairs at them, bruising different Doustourna activists including Jawher Ben Mbarek and ZohraTriki. The injuries required some of the activists to be transported to the hospital for emergency care. After causing injuries, the attackers left the premises. Bahri also reported that the attackers smashed the windows of two cars. Shortly afterward, a video circulated on facebook in which Mbarek said that he heard one of the attackers was calling for his killing.

On Friday April 20th Dr.Hamad Ben Massaoud, a Doustourna activist, reported to TAP that a Salafist group had prevented members of Doustourna from holding a meeting at the Mohamed Marzouki Cultural Center in Douz, in the governorate of Kebili. They had to hold their meeting instead in a local hotel.

Controversial Tunisian court ruling reflects dilemmas of the Arab Spring

By Viviane Walt

Time (03.05.2012) - In a sign that conservative Islam could yet take hold in this modern, largely secular country—home to the Arab Spring's first revolution—a feisty, blunt-talking TV executive was convicted on Thursday of airing an animated depiction of the Prophet Mohamed in the American-French film "Persepolis," suggesting that Western-style free speech might yield to stronger demands from hardline Muslims.

After months of legal battle, Nessma TV owner Nabil Karoui was fined 2,400 Tunisian dinars (about \$1,400) for violating public morals and disturbing public order, a small sum for a man whose channel is wildly popular across North Africa for its glitzy entertainment shows like Star Academy, the region's equivalent of American Idol, and for sponsoring sporting events.

The timing of Thursday's judgment against Karoui could hardly be more awkward for this government. It came, no less, on World Press Freedom Day, whose U.N.-sponsored meeting is taking place this year in Tunis, where the government has pitched itself as a moderate Western-friendly ally since the 24-year dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali collapsed in January last year, setting off the revolutionary wave that has upended this entire region. Hundreds of journalists and diplomats on Thursday began gathering in this breezy Mediterranean capital for meetings about free speech on Friday and Saturday. In the presidential palace, Tunisia's interim President Moncef Marzouki told TIME that while the country has an independent judiciary, he himself abhorred the judge's decision against Karoui. "I think this verdict is bad for the image of Tunisia," he said. "Now people in the rest of the world will only be talking about this when they talk about Tunisia."

Karoui, meanwhile, has seen his life transformed into a nerve-racking nightmare since Nessma TV aired "Persepolis" last October, a week before the country's first democratic elections.

Days after the broadcast, about 150 hardliners torched Karoui's house with firebombs. Karoui briefly fled to France with his wife and two children, but returned shortly after. Now, he says, bodyguards escort his children to school, and stand inside the school building until driving them home.

Lighting a cigar up in his top-floor office of Nessma's downtown headquarters, Karoui points out the window to two beefy bodyguards on the sidewalk below.

Among the crowds that demonstrated during Karoui's trial, outside the courthouse, some have even chanted for the media boss to be hanged. A popular religious rap star Mohamed Jendoubi, who calls himself Psycho M, told TIME after the verdict that many, including him, believe the government should shut Nessma permanently. And in an interview on Wednesday, one of the lawyers who brought charges against Karoui, said the West should not expect its own form of democracy in Tunisia. "The definition of

freedom is very different in Islamic countries than in the West," he told TIME. "There is no division in Islam between life and religion."

"Persepolis" is the French-Iranian filmmaker Marjan Satrapi's story of growing up in Tehran, and had been shown several times at Tunisian film festivals during Ben Ali's dictatorship. But with the emergence of political Islam, the broadcast became a flashpoint in a much broader struggle. Nessma became an increasingly obvious target for those seeking to inject more Islam into Tunisian life, since the network's mission is to offer alternative, modern programming to most of the region's fare. "It was just as if we had decided to show James Bond," Karoui says. "They were simply looking for some excuse to hurt Nessma."

Now, Karoui's movements outside work are severely restricted. He says he could not attend this week's Tunisian tennis tournament, of which Nessma is a sponsor. "I am really scared," he says. "I cannot walk on the street. I cannot go shopping. I have to change my routine all the time." For all that, he says his trial has made him world famous—the phone rang throughout our 90-minute meeting on Thursday, with interview requests from around the world. "I've bought myself a global advertising campaign for 2,500 dinars," he laughs.

Jokes aside, both the West and secular Tunisians were unsettled by Karoui's conviction, fearing that fierce battles over personal freedoms could lie ahead. As hated as Ben Ali was, he imposed secularism on this country, banning the wearing of the Islamic veil in public institutions and allowing free access to alcohol, for example. Washington, for one, is watching closely to see if those liberties come under threat. "This country is the home of the Arab awakening, so what happens here is particularly important," Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for International Organizations Esther Brimmer told TIME in Tunis, after arriving here on Thursday, shortly after Karoui's conviction. "Here was a major media outlet trying to express their point of view."

The interim President Marzouki, a secular human-rights leader who was appointed to his post four months ago as part of a coalition with the far more dominant Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party, said he would fight to defend free-speech rights especially since Tunisia's new constitution will be an example for the region's other new democracies. Perhaps no issue so neatly encapsulates that test as freedom of expression. "I am opposed to any kind of censorship," he says. "I prefer the bad side effects of free expression."

Tunisia faces a balancing act of democracy and religion

By Anthony Shadid

New York Times (30.01.2012) - The insults were furious. "Infidel!" and "Apostate!" the religious protesters shouted at the two men who had come to the courthouse to show their support for a television director on trial on charges of blasphemy. Fists, then a head butt followed.

When the scuffle ended a few minutes later, Tunisia, which much of the Arab world sees as a model for revolution, had witnessed a crucial scene in what some have cast as a gathering contest for its soul.

"We're surrendering our right to think and speak differently," said Hamadi Redissi, one of the two men, still bearing a scab on his forehead from the attack last week.

The challenges before Tunisia's year-old revolution are immense — righting an ailing economy, drafting a new constitution and recovering from decades of dictatorship that cauterized civic life. But in the first months of a coalition government led by the Ennahda Party, seen as one of the most pragmatic of the region's Islamist movements, the most emotional of struggles has surged to the forefront: a fight over the identity of an Arab and Muslim society that its authoritarian leaders had always cast as adamantly secular.

The popular revolts that began to sweep across the Middle East one year ago have forced societies like Tunisia's, removed from the grip of authoritarian leaders and celebrating an imagined unity, to confront their own complexity. The aftermath has brought elections in Egypt and Tunisia as well as more decisive Islamist influence in Morocco, Libya and, perhaps, Syria. The upheaval has given competing Islamist movements a chance to exert influence and define themselves locally and on the world stage. It has also given rise to fears, where people in places like Tunis, a seaside metropolis proud of its cosmopolitanism, worry about what a revolution they embraced might unleash.

An opposition newspaper has warned darkly of puritanical Islamists declaring their own fief in some backwater town. Protests convulsed a university in Tunis over its refusal to let female students take examinations while wearing veils that concealed their faces. Then there is the trial Mr. Redissi attended on Jan. 23, of a television director who faces as many as five years in prison for broadcasting the French animated movie "Persepolis," which contains a brief scene depicting God that many here have deemed blasphemous.

The trial was postponed again, this time until April. But its symbolism, precedence and implications infused a secular rally Saturday that drew thousands to downtown Tunis in one of the biggest demonstrations here in recent months.

"Make a common front against fanaticism," one banner declared.

Tunisia and Egypt are remarkable for how much freer they have become in the year since their revolts. They may become more conservative, too, as Islamist parties inspire and articulate the mores and attitudes of populations that have always been more traditional than the urban elite. Some here hope the contest may eventually strike a balance between religious sensitivity and freedom of expression, an issue as familiar in the West as it is in Muslim countries. Others worry that debates pressed by the most fervent — over the veil, sunbathing on beaches and racy fare in the media — may polarize societies and embroil nascent governments in debates they seem to prefer to avoid.

"It's like a war of attrition," said Said Ferjani, a member of Ennahda's political bureau, who complained that his party was trapped between two extremes, the most ardently secular and the religious. "They're trying not to let us focus on the real issues."

Nearly everyone here seems to agree that "Persepolis" was broadcast Oct. 7 on Nessma TV as a provocation of some sort. Abdelhalim Messaoudi, a journalist at Nessma, said he envisioned the film, about a girl's childhood in revolutionary Iran, "as a pretext to start a conversation." But many in Tunisia, both pious and less so, were taken aback by the brief scene in which God was personified — speaking in Tunisian slang no less. A week later, a crowd of Salafis — the term used for the most conservative Islamists — attacked the house of Nabil Karoui, the station's director, and he was soon charged with libeling religion and broadcasting information that could "harm public order or good morals."

The trial, which Human Rights Watch called "a disturbing turn for the nascent Tunisian democracy," was originally scheduled for Nov. 16, then postponed until January.

On Jan. 23, crowds gathered outside the colonnaded courthouse, along a sylvan street in Tunisia's old town, known as the casbah. Tempers flared and, in a scene captured on

YouTube, Mr. Redissi and Zied Krichen, the editor of the newspaper Al Maghreb, tried to leave.

"All I could think was to not look behind me, walk ahead, and not open my mouth," said Mr. Krichen, who is 54. A man rushed toward him, hitting him from behind. When Mr. Redissi, 59, turned to defend his colleague, he was head-butted. At first, the police did nothing, then helped escort the two men to a police station down the road.

Mr. Messaoudi, who was sitting at a cafe across the street, was also assaulted.

Two days later, in a statement many secular figures deemed too timid, Samir Dilou, a government spokesman and a member of Ennahda, reiterated the party's view that the film was "a violation of the sacred." But he condemned the violence and promised to act. One of the assailants, identified in the video, was later arrested.

For people like Mr. Messaoudi, though, the incident reflected a months-long trend of thuggery by Salafis, from an attack on a theater airing a film they deemed objectionable to their brief control last month over a northern Tunisian town called Sanjan. Some secular figures acknowledge that Ennahda is embarrassed by the incidents, loath to be grouped with the Salafis. Others view both as part of a broader Islamist outlook that celebrates Tunisia's Muslim identity as a way to promote a more conservative society.

"Certain Islamist factions want to turn identity into their Trojan horse," Mr. Messaoudi said. "They use the pretext of protecting their identity as a way to crush what we have achieved as a Tunisian society. They want to crush the pillars of civil society."

The debates in Tunisia often echo similar confrontations in Turkey, another country with a long history of secular authoritarian rule now governed by a party inspired by political Islam. In both, secular elites long considered themselves a majority and were treated as such by the state. In both, those elites now recognize themselves as minorities and are often mobilized more by the threat than the reality of religious intolerance.

Mr. Redissi, a columnist and professor, predicted secular Tunisians might soon retreat to enclaves.

"We've become the ahl al-dhimma," he said, offering a term in Islamic law to denote protected minorities in a Muslim state. "It's like the Middle Ages."

As in Egypt, the prominence of the Salafis since the revolution has taken many Tunisians by surprise. Their numbers pale before their brethren in Egypt, but like them, they are assertive and determined to make their presence felt, often embarrassing more moderate counterparts like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood. On Friday, they organized a demonstration in front of the Foreign Ministry in support of Syrian protesters. For weeks, they held a sit-in at Manouba University here in Tunis to demand that women in full veils be allowed to take exams, eventually forcing the campus to close for a time.

"There are red lines not to be crossed," said Abdel-Qadir al-Hashemi, a 28-year-old Salafi activist who helped organize the protest at Manouba. "The film 'Persepolis' was a provocation, simply a provocation, with the goal of driving us toward violence."

A few of his colleagues turned out for the secular protest Saturday.

"Go back to your caves and mind your own business!" someone shouted at them.

They heckled back.

"You lost your daddy, Ben Ali!" one of them taunted, referring to the Tunisian dictator, President Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali, who was forced into exile in Saudi Arabia last year.

Even secular figures like Mr. Redissi suggest that Ennahda would rather avoid the debate over "Persepolis." He predicted the trial would be postponed until after the next elections that follow the drafting of the constitution, in a year or so. Others insisted that Ennahda take a stronger stand against the Salafis before society became even more polarized.

"I don't see either action or reaction — where is the government?" asked Ahmed Ounaïes, a former diplomat who briefly served as foreign minister after the revolution. "What is Ennahda's concept of Tunisia of tomorrow? It hasn't made that clear."

In Ennahda's offices, Mr. Ferjani shook his head. He complained that the case had been "blown out of proportion," that media were recklessly fueling the debate and that the forces of the old government were inciting Salafis to tarnish Ennahda. But he conceded that the line between freedom of expression and religious sensitivity would not be drawn soon.

"The struggle is philosophical," he said, "and it will go on and on and on."

Tunisia Manouba University students face off over Islamic veil on campus

By Ben Bouazza

Huffington Post (04.01.2012) - Around 200 students and professors demonstrated in Tunisia's capital on Wednesday calling for an end to the standoff by ultraconservative Muslims at a nearby university.

For more than a month classes and exams at Manouba University's humanities department have been put on hold by a sit-in demanding students be allowed to attend class in the conservative face veil, known as the niqab.

"Science before the niqab," and "no to shackles, no to niqab, knowledge is free," read the signs of the demonstrators, who urged the minister of higher education to resolve the dispute so that classes could resume.

University policy prevents students from covering their faces during class.

The sit-in has been the latest crisis faced by Tunisia since it overthrew its long-serving dictator last year, who had aggressively promoted secular policies.

In his absence there has been a resurgence of ultraconservative Muslims known as Salafists, who are seeking a greater role for Islam in public life.

The department's dean, Habib Kazdaghli, attended the protest and said that the people blocking classes weren't even university students.

Kazdaghli said the Salafists attacked him and prevented him from going to his office.

"The people not from the department should leave the premises and they represent a majority of those at the sit-in," he said, calling for the police to clear out the conservatives so classes could resume.

The actions by the Salafists, including calls for more public prayer, have put the new Tunisia government, headed by a moderate Islamist group, in an awkward position.

The governing moderate Islamist Ennahda Party originally did not speak out against the actions of the Salafists, but subsequently has condemned any violence or interruption of classes.
