



The Role of Islamists in Embracing Democracy in Tunisia

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Abstract:

The Arab spring time line begins in Tunisia, a smallest Muslim country in North- Africa and spread across the Middle East. The protesters in Tunisia were less concerned about Islam's role in transition and demanded a new government, and political institutions based on legitimacy and political liberty. In Tunisia 99 percent of population are Muslims and rest one percent is jew. In 2011, it was seen 27 percent of Tunisians voted for Enhanda were in favour of close relationship between religion and politics and 32 percent of those polled put economic growth and employment at the top priority lists. This paper attempts and examine the role played by Islamists to shape the future of the country by advocating political reforms and a system of government based on democratic message of political inclusion, pluralism, political and socio-economic freedoms.

Key words: Middle- East., Legitimacy, Enhanda, Religion, Reform, Pluralism, Freedom.

Introduction:

The revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both violent and non-violent) riots and civil wars against the governments in the Arab world called The Arab spring that begin on 18th December 2010 after the self-immolation of a Tunisian 26 year old street vendor Mohammed Bouzazi which died at hospital after few days .His suicide triggered a series of protests that swept from the coastal town of Sidi Bouzaid across Egypt , Libya , Syria to Bahrain and Yemen ,reflecting a deep seated anger and resentment against autocratic Arab leaders.¹

Under Ben Ali regime (1987-2011) Bouzazi's act struck a chord among Tunisians as protests erupt and protesters brought a number of issues on the table, unemployment, corruption, poor living conditions, lack of basic freedoms, food inflation, and lack of government responsiveness. The Tunisians were fed up with the inefficient policies of Ben Ali, who stood up for only his lust for power and does not took account of problems and miseries of common masses.²

¹ Espito, L.John, Sonn Tamara and Voll. O. John "Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring". Oxford University Press, 2016

² Gelvin, L, James "The New Middle East" 'what everyone needs to know' Oxford University press, 2018.

The autocratic ruler Ben Ali, though promised to bring reformative policies for the welfare of the masses, but his actions only aggravated growing crowds who believed his assurances were disingenuous and simply an attempt to save his office. When all his concessions failed, he imposed state of emergency and appointed his prime minister to head caretaker government. Due to continued protests, the caretaker prime minister resigned and appointed another prime minister, not as closely identified with regime. Tunisian uprising was the first ever in the modern Arab world to bring down a dictator.

Ben Ali left country on January 14, 2011, with its military, police and security apparatus, dysfunctional bureaucracy and corrupt officials remained. The leader of Islamic party Rachid Ganouchi was one of the many groups that were outlawed and repressed under the reign of Ben Ali. On 27 October Tunisian election officials declared and confirmed the Islamist Ennahda party as the winner of the country's election.³

Islamists and secular liberals:

Tunisia, despite its difficulties has moved rapidly toward a democratisation, seems destined for success⁴. Islamists and secular liberals were meeting regularly eight years before Ben Ali's fall, in order to bring and reduce mutual fears and agree up on democratic principles. These meetings resulted in the creation of a political society which laid basis for consensus with which roughly 155, selected members of the country's key post-Ben Ali's, reform commission voted for the six major principles and rules to lead and govern the selection and proceeding of a constituent assembly.

After the uprising of 2011, Tunisian Islamists came out cold. Leading politicians ended decades, in exile, while a variety of Islamist organizations were first able to conduct and regulate their activities open. They feel the need of both religion and democracy should flourish.⁵

Ennahda adopted and developed usually a moderate Islamist philosophy with an explicit commitment to democracy from the outset. Rachid Ganouchi the popular leader of Ennahda party tried to make coexistence between democracy and religion. In 2005, Ennahda sat down with several opposition parties including leftists and communists and agreed on joint platform on issues such as women rights, gender equality, freedom of speech, and relation between state religion and identity. The agreement resulted into two of the leftist are involved in coalition government including Ennahda. One of the first decisions of the newly elected government was to announce the personal status code, a progressive piece of legislation, protecting women rights (men and women are free and equal) would be

³ Conflict Trends, issue 1,2015

⁴ Ramdan Tariq, "Islam And The Arab Awakening". Oxford University Press,2012.

⁵ Islamists and the "Arab Spring". Journal of democracy, April 2013, Vol-24,Number 2.

enshrined as a fundamental law of governance and to give it extra protections. In other words radical salifism is not just a challenge to secularists, it is also challenge to moderate Islamists like Enhanda.⁶

Islamists and democracy:

Tunisia – the only one country which has indeed made a formidable progress in consolidating its democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring –since a popular uprising toppled and ousted its long time dictator Zine el Abdine Bin Ali in 2011.A close look at Tunisians democratic transition reveals that much of the credit should go Enhanda-the country’s largest Islamist party because of its willingness to embrace consensus and compromise with secular political forces.⁷

Enhanda has often to change and adjust its positions-sometimes awkwardly in response to pressure from the voters. In fact with the passage of time in government, the party was forced to abandon the most religious aspects of its ideology. Enhanda responded rationally, reneging on positions that it realized were not acceptable to important constituencies, but hanging on to others that were necessary to maintain certain votes. This was particularly obvious during Tunisia’s contentions but ultimately successful, constitution drafting process.

Such compromises enabled to party to survive in Tunisia’s burgeoning democracy .More importantly they made a crucial contribution to keeping that democracy afloat.in the end the behaviour of Tunisia’s major Islamist party has played a crucial role in ensuring that the country’s new democracy would survive.⁸

Rachid Ganouchi, on his return to Tunis, a few thousand people welcomed him in the light of Tunisian revolution. The Party by taking part in demonstrations and meeting with Prime minister has been described as moving “quickly to carve out a place” in the Tunisian political scene. Ganouchi announced that the party had reached and signed an agreement of shared statement of principles with other Tunisian opposition groups. As reported by “the New York Times” mixed predications among Tunisians for the party’s success, a few believing the party would enjoy support in the inland part of the Tunisia. Ganouanchi confirmed, in an interview with “Aljazeera TV”, confirmed that he is against Islamic Caliphate and support democracy unlike, Hizb-ut-Tahir whom Ganouchi accuses of exporting a distorted understanding of Islam.⁹

⁶ Tunisia’s Women are at the Heart of its Revolution. The Guardian, Friday 23, March 2012.

⁷ “How Tunisia’s Islamists Embraced Democracy”. Foreign Policy –Accessed Dec,27,2018
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/31/how-tunisia-islamists-embraced-democracy-enhanda/>

⁸ Danahar ,paul “the New Middle East”. The world after the Arab Spring. Bloomsbury , paper back revised edition –September 2015.

⁹ “Enhanda Movement” Wikipedia –Accessed Dec 15,2018

The party 's president and co-founder ,Rachid Ganounachi instructed his supporters not to come airport to meet him upon his return(Tunisia) for fear of creating images bringing in to mind Khomeini's return to Iran.

The Enhanda won Tunisia's first free election in October 2011, not on the religious platform, but on its commitment to break down the repressive tactics of former regime. The party conducted a costly electoral campaign extensively providing potential voters, especially from the downtrodden sections of the society with promotional gifts, by providing Ramadan feasts and sponsoring events. Enhanda was the only party that didn't structure its campaign wholly and solely around religion .To their own harm, Enhanda's secular rivals focussed on the dangers of its religiosity and performed poorly as well.

Ben Ali's former government officials, worried Enhanda would win elections formed several parties including Al- Watan (The Nation), The Justice and The Liberty Party and Al Moubedra (The Initiative) .Rachid Ganounchi that the forces of old regime were attempting to dodge the revolutionThrough the new parties and behind the scenes manoeuvring powerful figures of Ben Ali's era. Rachid Ganounchi made it clear during the campaign that party had no intentions of implementing Sharia .His daughter Somaya al Ganounchi declared, "we don't believe in theocracy that imposes life style or thoughts or ways of life on people; we believe in right way of every Tunisian women and men to make that choices". Many viewed Enhanda as "more honest than corrupt secularists" and "true to their values".¹⁰

In December, the Enhanda dominated assembly, elected Moncef Marzouki, a physician and the founder of the Congress for the Republic, whose opposition to Ben Ali's abuse of power resulted his move to Paris. Both Ganounchi and Marzouki had mutual commitment to Tunisian democracy that generally transcended ideological differences and put the national interests above the interests of their parties. They agreed on maintaining the language of the first article of The 1957 Constitution, refraining from mentioning Islamic law: "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state .Its religion is Islam".

Conclusion:

Tunisians were able to move along the road of democratisation avoiding its derailment though there were remarkable rivalries and differences because of its strong civil society organisations, the military's professionalism and the responsiveness and vital concessions made by Ganounchi and Enhanda.

The new government and leadership of Tunisia is challenged by major economic problems and unemployment rates needs to enact structural reforms and revisions of investment and labour codes along with exhibiting to commitment to human and civil rights. Violence carried out by political or

¹⁰Freedoms at risk "Arab Women Fight to Defend Their Rights", Spiegel Online-Accessed on Dec 20, 2018.www.spiegel.de/international/world/freedoms-at-risk-arab-women-fight-to-defend-their-rights-a-800447-2.html

religious extremists must be dealt swiftly and effectively under the laws of the country. Nidaa Tounes and more hard-line secularists will continue to be challenged to demonstrate a commitment to political inclusion, not exclusion, in its future dealings with Ennahda and other non-violent Islamists.

At the end of the day, Tunisian politics cannot be perceived as or become a simplistic contest between secularists and Islamist forces that desire a democratic or undemocratic future. The Islamist-secularist divide must give way to a more delicate understanding of democracy; a system of government that brings together multiple voices and actors, considers the desire for public order and emphasises the effectiveness of the democratic process and the welfare of the country, instead of ideological differences and repression of the dissent. This understanding must include recognition of the legitimacy of political opposition as long as it is a loyal opposition, an opposition whose ultimate loyalty is to national unity and the equality and prosperity of all.
