

Viewpoints
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Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

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David Ottaway is a senior scholar at the Wilson Center who has recently returned from Tunisia. The following piece is an overview of his observations of current challenges faced by Tunisia's leadership.



Tunisia's new Islamist-led government is finding governance a daunting challenge in the midst of an economic crisis and conflicting militant secular and religious forces, whose battle over the future character of this highly Westernized Arab nation is intensifying.

Islamic zealots known as Salafis are asserting their presence as never before in the streets and on university campuses. They are demanding the new constitution, still under debate, commit to Islamic law as the sole basis for legislation and that women don traditional dress, including face veils. The French-educated elite, long-liberated Tunisian women, and leftist labor union activists are fighting to prevent any backsliding in the country's strong secular traditions ever since its independence 56 years ago.

In the middle of an increasingly tense "cultural war" stands Ennahda, the Islamic party that won 40 percent of the vote in elections last October, the first since the popular uprising in early 2011 that toppled the 23-year-old regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Similar street revolts have since swept away Arab dictators in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen and triggered a civil war in Syria.

Tunisia's uprising has proven the least violent and raised the highest hope for a successful fusion of Islam and multi-party democracy that will provide a model for the Arab world. It would also reassure European nations and the United States that they can deal with the new Islamists coming to power in a number of Arab countries.

The four-month-old experience here, however, already suggests that even under the most favorable political circumstances the road from autocracy to democracy will not be smooth, and the outcome remains far from clear due to the economic crisis and bitter rivalry between Islamists and secularists. If Tunisia were to falter, it would leave the Arab world still in search of a successful model of democratic Islamic rule.

Signs of mounting social tensions are everywhere, from constant strikes to near daily demonstrations. Yet another clash between Islamists and secularists on the capital's broad, tree-lined Avenue Bourguiba (the equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square for protests) led the government on March 27 to ban all further demonstrations there. A

perverse sign of the hard economic times is that suicides by self-immolations among jobless Tunisians have become so common they are no longer reported in the local media.

Tunisia remains strongly influenced by the secular culture of the former colonial power, France. Following independence in 1956, the country had been ruled until last year's uprising by two autocratic leaders, first Habib Bourguiba and then Ben Ali. Both were dedicated secularists and suppressed any attempt by militant Islamists to assert themselves or their values. Under Bourguiba, Tunisian women became the most emancipated anywhere in the Arab world.

Ennahda seeks to replace the secular "Bourguiba model" with its own vision of a moderate Islamic society and government. But the party commands only 89 out of 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly writing the new constitution, and it has to govern in an uneasy coalition with two secular parties, at least until new parliamentary elections are held about a year from now.

Though led by relatively moderate Islamists, Ennahda has its own assertive Salafis inside the party who are pushing for the rapid transformation of Tunisia's culture toward an Islamic state. Disagreements within the party have been so intense Ennahda has yet to hold a national congress to determine its policies and elect a new post-uprising leadership.

In the meantime, Rachid Ghannouchi, its 70-year-old spiritual and temporal leader, has been holding the party together with a small coterie of like-minded aides. He has found himself under enormous pressure from both Salafis within and outside Ennahda and secularists whose most powerful defender has become the 500,000-member General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) led by communists, socialists, and Arab nationalists.

In an interview at his party's Tunis headquarters, Ghannouchi reflected in his replies his difficult balancing act between warring Islamists and secularists. Pleasing the secularists, he said the controversial first article of the present Bourguiba-era constitution regarding Tunisia's Islamic character was "enough." It states that Tunisia is an Arab country and its language Arabic and makes no mention of the Shari'a (Islamic law) as either "a" or "the" source of legislation.

On the other hand, he supported the Salafis' campaign to allow female university students to wear the equally controversial *niqab*, or face veil. Manouba University's Faculty of Arts in Tunis has been in turmoil the past three months over the demand by

half a dozen women to wear the *niqab* in classes and during exams. The university has refused to give in to their demand.

Ghannouchi defended their “freedom of behavior and dress” and blamed the controversy on the “French culture of secular extremism” that had led to the French Parliament’s decision two years ago to ban Muslim women from wearing the *niqab* in public. “In Europe, it is only an issue in France. In the Arab world, it is only an issue in Tunisia,” he remarked.

The scholarly Islamic leader also blamed the resurgence of Salafism on Bourguiba and Ben Ali, who had banned Ennahda in 1989 and thus created a religious vacuum filled by “Muslim extremism” coming from Saudi Arabia and other Arab gulf states. “They got rid of moderate Islam in favor of extreme Islam,” he said. Ennahda’s task was to restore the former historic tradition of Tunisia.

Ghannouchi predicted confidently that Islamic extremism had “no future in Tunisia” and would soon be marginalized, comparing violence-prone Salafis to small urban terrorist groups in Europe like the now-defunct Baader-Meinhof Gang in former West Germany. Ennahda officials estimate the number of violence-prone Salafis at only 300 and total Salafi followers at 15,000. If they were allowed to form their own party, which he said he favors, they would get only two to five percent of the vote.

Tunisian secularists are far from convinced the Salafis are being marginalized or that Ennahda is much different in its ultimate objectives. They feel Ghannouchi speaks with two voices depending on his audience and that Ennahda is deliberately giving the Salafis free reign to press their causes. Tunisia, in their view, is being swamped by Saudi and other Arab gulf Salafi preachers and its air waves saturated by “120 satellite channels preaching Salafism.” Estimates of mosques under Salafi control range from as high as 450 out of a total of 2,000 to 2,400. “They are pushing into schools, mosques and setting up hundreds of day-care centers,” said Salahuddin Jorchi, a political rights activist.

Mohammed Bennour, an official from the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (Ettakatol), compared the Salafis to “a militia in formation” for Ennahda, one it might resort to in the future to stay in power. His Ettakatol Party is part of the uneasy ruling troika running the government with Ennahda. He described the troika as a marriage of necessity that had enjoyed “no honeymoon” and said he had refused a request from Ghannouchi to make a joint public appearance.

“No,’ I said. You defend the *niqab* and I defend the mini-skirt.”

The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) has emerged as the main bulwark to Ennahda, the two sides fighting right now over endless strikes, worker demands for higher regular salaries, and a minimum wage hike. The UGTT has a long history of confrontations and general strikes, and both Bourguiba and Ben Ali had showdowns requiring takeovers of its leadership. Ennahda is not yet in a position to do this, while the union, with an extremely militant base, has been more assertive and demanding.

Meanwhile, the economy still has not recovered from last year's uprising. Unemployment is now officially 18 percent, up from 13 percent a year ago. The gross domestic product (GDP) that had been expected to grow three percent last year actually contracted by 1.8 percent due to the closure of 170 foreign companies, decreased phosphate exports due to strikes, and two million fewer tourists. The total number of jobless has reached close to 800,000 in a population of 10.5 million.

The mutual dislike between UGTT and Ennahda is palpably visceral, made only worse recently by the dumping of garbage bags in front of union offices. One Ghannouchi adviser referred to UGTT leaders alternatively as "Salafis of the Left" and "Stalinists." Ennahda officials fear the real goal of labor activists is to bring down the government through a general strike, which in fact UGTT has repeatedly threatened. Ennahda has been pressing for a one-year moratorium on strikes and a freeze of wage increases to pay for new programs for jobless youth.

For their part, UGTT officials point to skyrocketing food prices, made worse by massive fruit and vegetable exports to neighboring Libya, as the cause for labor unrest together with broken promises by some ministers to raise wages. "Ennahda knows what UGTT can do in terms of a general strike," said Kacem Afaya, head of its international relations department.

Still, UGTT was aware, he said, of the "big danger" of an open confrontation. "The country cannot afford it. Our problem is how to avoid a confrontation but preserve our rights."

Another UGTT official in Sousse, Bashir Tenjel, predicted the economy would eventually prove the Achilles' heel of the new Islamist-led government. "It was social and economic problems that brought Ben Ali down, and it will be social and economic problems that bring Ennahda down, too."



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

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