

Assessing Ennahda, Tunisia's Winning Islamist Party

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Brief Analysis

Washington's embrace of Ennahda, Tunisia's leading Islamist movement, should be predicated on the party's actions matching its promises to foster an open, democratic society.

On October 23, Tunisians participating in their first post-revolution election handed the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance) Party 41.7 percent of the popular vote and 90 of 217 seats in parliament. The secular Congress for the Republic Party received the second-highest share, with 14 percent and 30 seats, while the leftist Ettakatol came in third with 10 percent and 21 seats. Ennahda and the Congress party are joining forces to form a coalition government, while Ettakatol has suspended coalition talks pending clarification of controversial remarks by Ennahda's prime minister-designate that Tunisia is now entering the "sixth Caliphate." Ennahda's plurality puts the Islamist faction at the forefront of Tunisia's democratic reform effort and gives it a leading voice in redrafting the constitution. Despite concerns about women's rights and free speech, the party has promised -- publicly and often -- that it will support an open, democratic society, and its actions and preliminary agenda seem to support this.

What Is Ennahda?

The party was founded in 1981 as the "Movement of the Islamic Tendency" by Rachid Ghannouchi, Hmida Ennaifer, and Abdelfattah Mourou, who had together led a clandestine Islamist political organization since the early 1970s. They strongly opposed President Habib Bourguiba's secularist policies, which included the use of French as the official state language and a ban on headscarves. Influenced by Sayyed Qutb, Maulana Maududi, and other Sunni Muslim revivalists, Ghannouchi and his colleagues advocated the use of Islamic ideas and the Arabic language as a basis for political thought. Unlike other Islamist movements with a similar intellectual pedigree, however, Ennahda supported democracy and political pluralism from its founding and has never advocated that Tunisia break ties with the West -- policies that led many to label the party "moderate."

To be sure, Ennahda's record was decidedly mixed during its first years. The early writings of Ghannouchi -- who remains the movement's leader but has no official role -- called for a parliamentary democracy with the Quran as the ultimate source of authority and Islam as the official state religion. Yet he moderated his position in the early 1980s during a prison sentence following the arrest and torture of many of his followers. After his release in 1984, Ghannouchi stated that he would accept true democracy even if the result was not favorable to his party or Islam. Meanwhile, several Ennahda members were blamed for bombing four hotels during this period, though the group's leaders were never implicated.

The party was banned from participating in the 1989 parliamentary elections. In response, some of its members ran as independent candidates, receiving more than 10 percent of the popular vote. In 1991, perhaps in retaliation for the group's growing popularity, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali had Ghannouchi and 25,000 other Ennahda

members arrested. In response, supporters attacked the headquarters of the Constitutional Democratic Rally, Ben Ali's ruling party, killing one person and severely wounding three others. Upon his release in 1992, Ghannouchi sought asylum in London, where he lived until his return to Tunisia earlier this year.

During his time in Britain, Ghannouchi continued to support democracy in Tunisia. He also began speaking on behalf of women's rights, education, labor unions, and religious tolerance, disseminating ideas that became influential among leaders of Turkey's Justice and Development Party, among other Islamists. Much of his support during this period came from Tunisian expatriates in Europe, though he also remained popular as a pro-democracy opposition figure back home.

Upon his return to Tunisia in January, Ghannouchi alleged that the transition government was merely a continuation of the old regime. He called for open elections and the subsequent formation of a council that would rewrite the constitution as the basis of a democratic government. Ennahda was permitted to participate in the electoral process for the first time in many years, culminating in last month's victory.

Yet not all of Ghannouchi's activities suggest moderation. For example, he supported Iran during the 1979 U.S. embassy hostage crisis and strongly condemned Saudi Arabia for allowing U.S. troops on its soil during Operation Desert Storm, going so far as to call America the "enemy of Islam." And despite promoting pluralism in Tunisia during his exile in Britain, he sometimes condemned other Europe-based Islamists and secular authors as infidels. He is also on record supporting Hamas and its use of rockets against Israeli civilians, describing the tactic in February 2009 as "a civilized weapon" that "creates balance in power." More recently, in May 2011, he referred to Israel as "a germ" and predicted the state would "disappear" before the year 2027.

At the same time, however, Ghannouchi has toned down his criticism of Washington, even welcoming U.S. support for the Tunisian revolution. He has also called for a closer trade relationship with the United States. Indeed, he is visiting New York and Washington later this month.

Seeing Is Believing

Ennahda's relatively liberal political stance and commitment to pluralism have raised hopes among some Western observers that it will provide the Arab world with a strong example of an Islamist party that is committed to democracy and human rights. Others, however, worry that Ennahda is not as moderate as it claims to be, and that it will impose changes in personal-status codes relating to divorce and inheritance based on Islamic law, resulting in a rollback of women's rights.

Although Ennahda has yet to announce the new government's composition, its previously mentioned partner in the planned coalition is secular and leftist. Accordingly, Ennahda has pledged not to introduce Islamic provisions into the new constitution or make any law promoting religion, and most of its concrete policy proposals have focused on the economy. For example, it plans to revitalize the tourism sector, deregulate the airline industry to bring prices down, diversify the banking sector, improve infrastructure, decrease inflation, and pursue a "common market for the Maghreb" as well as stronger economic ties with the United States and Japan.

Although most of what Ennahda says is reassuring, party members have made some worrisome statements. Earlier this month, for example, parliamentarian Suad Abdulrahim announced that single mothers were a disgrace to Tunisia. The party's secretary-general, Hamadi Jebali, refuted the comment and declared support for all Tunisian women. Yet a week earlier, Ghannouchi himself issued a statement defending protestors who had attacked a Tunisian television station for airing *Persepolis*, a film criticizing the Iranian revolution. Such remarks suggest that not all speech will be equally protected under his leadership.

Nevertheless, the party has pledged to strengthen the role of women in Tunisia, a promise perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that the only woman to win an Ennahda seat in the election does not wear *hijab*. For the

time being, at least, Ennahda's approach seems to favor adding religious options (e.g., Islamic banks) for those who want them without dismantling existing institutions or changing longstanding practices such as a ban on polygamy.

Implications for Washington

As election season kicks off in Egypt and war-torn Libya begins to piece together a governing coalition, many are looking to Tunisia for a more hopeful vision of the region. It is still too early to tell what Ennahda's victory means for the country. Even less clear is what it will mean for U.S.-Tunisian relations. Despite widespread optimism about the party's moderate nature, a healthy dose of U.S. skepticism regarding its long-term goals is warranted given the long, curvy ideological road traveled by Ghannouchi and his recent disturbing comments. Some clarity may emerge during his upcoming U.S. visit, when he will likely meet with administration officials.

Moving forward, Washington should build relationships with both Ennahda and Tunisia's liberal democratic parties. At the same time, though, Washington should be vigilant, watching closely for signs that Ennahda is moving away from democracy. It should also be prepared to call the ruling party out if it decides to renege on its commitments. After all, 60 percent of Tunisians did not vote for the Islamists.

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