

Ennahda's Tight Rope Act on Religion

By Aaron Y. Zelin, November 18, 2011

On November 13, 2011, the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda — fresh off its win in the October elections — came under fire following a rally in Sousse, Tunisia with Houda Naim, a member of Hamas. Ennahda's general secretary, Hammadi Jebali, who became the new Prime Minister, made some controversial remarks about the return of the Caliphate. Jebali stated: "My brothers, you are at a historic moment...in a new cycle of civilization, God willing...we are in sixth caliphate, God willing." This quickly raised alarm bells with Tunisia's secular and liberal elements who had been warning prior to the elections about Ennahda's purported double speak: saying one thing publicly while saying something more nefarious privately to its followers.

In response to Jebali's pronouncement Ettakatol, a party that won the fourth largest bloc of seats in the October 2011 election, said the party was suspending its participation in talks on a governing coalition in the Tunisian Constituent Assembly. Khemais Ksila, a member of the executive committee of Ettakatol, stated: "We do not accept this statement. We thought we were going to build a second republic with our partner, not a sixth caliphate." While Lobna Jeribi, an Ettakatol constituent assembly member, proclaimed that Jebali's statements raised major concerns that needed to be clarified before any coalition talks resumed.



This is not the first controversy that Ennahda has been embroiled in since they won a little more than 40 percent of seats to draft the constitution in the constituent assembly. Talking to Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya, Souad Abderrahim, a prominent female member of Ennahda, stated that single mothers are a disgrace to Tunisia, "do not have the right to exist," there are limits on "full and

absolute freedom,” and that one should not “make excuses for people who have sinned.” In both cases, Ennahda had to walk back the statements of both Jebali and Abderrahim, downplaying their significance.

Are these two reexamples a sign of double speak finally seeing the light of day in the aftermath of its election victory — or is it a sign of Ennahda’s political immaturity and lack of experience? The latter is more likely. Prior to and following the election there have were no signs of some type of hostile Islamist takeover by Ennahda that would then try and institute a radical interpretation of the sharia.

A few days before the election, the president of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi, emphasized the importance of reconciliation even if Ennahda did not win a plurality, stating: “We will congratulate the winner and will collaborate with them just as other parties should do the same if we end up winning; Tunisia is in need of everyone. The keyword is reconciliation, our foremost concern is reconciliation in composing the upcoming government without regard to ideological differences.” After the elections, Ghannouchi stressed that Ennahda did not plan to instrumentalize the new constitution as a blunt tool to force a certain interpretation of Islam on Tunisian citizens, arguing, “Egypt says sharia is the main source of its law, but that didn’t prevent [deposed President Hosni] Mubarak from being a dictator.” Ghannouchi in the past has also pointed to Turkey as an example where one can balance both democratic and religious values without compromising either.

Further, Ennahda participated in talks over with two secular parties, Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol, to form a coalition government for the constituent assembly. As one can see from the above comments by Ettakatol, the two secular parties will no doubt play a productive role and provide a check on any potential Ennahda overreach.

One should be cognizant, though, that the transition will not be perfect. Moreover, with every potential accommodation Ennahda makes now that they are in power, it could erode potential grassroots support. More radical youth elements may believe that after years of suffering under the yoke of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali it is time to finally implement the oft-quoted phrase “al-Islam huwa al-Hal”; or “Islam is the Solution.” By not living up to these words one could foresee a scenario in which some support is shifted to the less mainstream Salafi movement, fomenting a potential culture war in Tunisia in the medium future.

Ennahda’s pledge to respect women’s rights and not regulate social issues, such as wearing a bikini at the beach or the sale of alcohol, could become contentious issues in future elections that could pull Ennahda further to the right. Even if they do not, as more time passes since the fall of the Ben Ali regime and there are more freedoms and openness in Tunisian society, the contestation of the role of religion, its meaning, and interpretation will become a heated debate. In the near-term, though, with Ghannouchi stewarding Ennahda through the transition, such potential drift or confrontation is less likely.

Ennahda’s transition from banned opposition party to a leading voice of reform for civic Islamism is still playing out. There will be ups and downs, but its political discipline and maturity will rise over time. If there is one political party in the Middle East and North Africa that can navigate the tough challenge ahead on debating the contentious issue of the role of religion in society, Tunisia’s Ennahda Party is best situated for the task. Although talk of the Caliphate is a head-turning event for many in Tunisia and in the West, since January 2011, Ennahda’s actual actions should be speaking louder than some of their ill-conceived words.

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