



Tunisia's Renaissance

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“We are in the sixth caliphate, God Willing.”¹ These are the words of Hamadi Jbeli, the Ennahda (Renaissance) Party secretary general and nominee for Prime Minister of Tunisia. This sentiment may be interpreted as advocating the imposition of Shari’a law, the legal code that characterized the historic Islamic empires. These types of statements concern the progressive and secular segments of society that would like to see the emergence of a freer and more liberal Tunisia. It is too early to predict what direction the new country will take. Will Tunisia eventually realize a more Islamist or democratic character? Are these concepts necessarily mutually exclusive? What is certain is that the country that witnessed the first mass demonstrations to ignite the ‘Arab Awakening’ is experiencing a relatively smooth transition process as major regional states are undergoing regime change. Ennahda’s success illustrates that political Islam is a powerful ideology that will influence the composition of the region’s future governance.

The election process in Tunisia serves as an example to the rest of the Arab world. Ninety percent of registered voters came out to cast their ballots, often waiting in long lines in the intense heat. This demonstrated the people’s hope and perception of free and fair elections, a crucial factor that will determine the success of elections elsewhere in the region. Tunisia also instituted the Arab

world's first truly independent body to monitor an election from beginning to end; a role traditionally taken by the ministry of interior who inherently possesses a bias and skews election results.² This practice helped consolidate the trust of the population and the candidates, serving as a vital model for the region to emulate. Most importantly, the military remained neutral throughout the process and restricted their involvement to solely protecting the polling stations. Its ambition to avoid interfering was exemplified by the fact that the military did not even vote in the elections.³ This sharply contrasts recent developments in Egypt, for instance, which illustrates the military's insistence on maintaining its political and economic power.

Ennahda's success can be attributed to its organizational capabilities and strategic voter outreach campaign, in addition to its popular support and legitimacy. Ennahda engaged in a campaign that promoted a deliberately vague religious message in an effort to appeal to a wide variety of voters. Its emphasis on a more Islamic role in society appealed to conservative voters, as many citizens were attracted to the party's focus on "traditional" values and "honesty". Their moderate position regarding alcohol and the Islamic headscarf (hijab) also gained support from voters who became disillusioned with ousted dictator Ben Ali's emphasis on secularization.⁴ Other political parties ran on very similar platforms; however, it was Ennahda's name recognition as Tunisia's most well known opposition party that helped it achieve victory. The Islamists exploited their political machine and effectively engaged in personal interaction with the Tunisian people, as opposed to the emphasis the other political parties placed on radio and television advertising. While the other parties tended to neglect the countryside, Ennahda insisted on placing posters in the designated public spaces and actively distributed campaign information in every town.⁵ By engaging the rural villages, and not only the regional capitals, Ennahda further reinforced its position as the most legitimate party in the nation. This type of grassroots effort, prominence, and organizational capacity can be emulated by other parties in the region that seek political power. Islamist organizations in particular are adopting notable democratic campaigning techniques and tactics. Preliminary results in Egypt's elections, for example, have proved how the Muslim Brotherhood's historic reputation and electoral campaign have translated into unprecedented success. Islamist parties that had been banned and suppressed for decades are now emerging victorious by popular consensus.

Ennahda's triumph proves that political Islam is a legitimate force in the new Middle East. This ideology is becoming increasingly more powerful throughout the region, manifesting itself in electoral victories throughout the Arab World. With significant gains in Morocco and Egypt, and potentially Libya, Islamist parties are working within their own countries' respective democratic frameworks to attain power and influence. Ennahda professes a commitment to ensuring personal freedom and pluralism; however, the extent of their intentions will only be realized throughout the process of drafting the nation's constitution and the subsequent policies the future government embraces.

The struggle between Islamism and democratic reform characterizes the underlying theme of the entire region's future. Will the countries in the area have a greater respect for human rights? Ethnic & religious minorities? The status of women? Or will they revert to even harsher autocratic rule based on a stricter interpretation of Islamic law? Each country will be compared and contrasted as separate case studies, yet Tunisia may be the ultimate example which proves that these competing forces may in fact be reconciled to coexist. What does 'Moderate Islamism' really

entail? Relying on Islamic sources as the foundation for legal proceedings is not necessarily paradoxical to upholding basic human rights and freedoms of the population. These concepts will all depend on to what degree Shari'a law is imposed in public life and how strict these interpretations will be enforced on society. This struggle continues to manifest itself throughout regional discourse and the continued demonstrations amongst the various sectors of Tunisian society. This, in essence, is the test facing Ennahda and the future of 'Moderate Islamism.'

As a small country with a relatively strong middle class, higher status of women, and solid ethnic and religious homogeneity, Tunisia is in a unique position to become the Arab Spring's success story. This is exemplified by the fact that it has suffered far less violence throughout the uprising than the other countries in the region and is undergoing a comparatively smooth transition process with a freely elected party that appears committed to instituting a power sharing arrangement. Furthermore, the country's high level of human capital and an increasingly active civil society are two crucial preconditions for successful democratization. What is clear, however, is that if Ennahda is the most moderate of Islamist parties and Tunisia is the most secular of Arab countries – then the extent of the Tunisian liberalization process, or lack thereof, will serve as a vital indicator for the future composition of the new Middle East.

Endnotes:

¹Amara, Tarek. "Tunisia Islamist Causes Outcry with "Caliphate" Talk." 15 Nov. 2011. Reuters Canada. <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE7AE1ZD20111115?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>

² Muasher, Marwan. "Tunisia's Lessons for the Arab World." 1 Nov. 2011. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/11/01/tunisia-s-lessons-for-arab-world/6h6u>

³ Schemm, Paul. "Tunisia's Election Sets High Bar for Arab Spring." 26 Oct. 2011. The Guardian. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9914884>

⁴Churchill, Erik. "Tunisia's Electoral Lesson: The Importance of Campaign Strategy." 27 Oct. 2011. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/27/tunisia-s-electoral-lesson-importance-of-campaign-strategy/6b7g>

⁵ Ibid.