



Political transition and the rise of Islamist politics in post-revolution Tunisia

By Naim Ameur,
Senior Manager, Prime Ministry of Tunisia
EGF Affiliated Expert on Maghreb politics

Key Points:

- *The January 2011 revolution in Tunisia has paved the way for the emergence of a pluralistic political architecture*
- *The Islamist Al Nahdha party has re-emerged from exile and now seems to be the most popular party in the country*
- *Al Nahdha's prospects of success in national elections which are currently planned for the autumn appear real, yet the party still must overcome several vexing obstacles*
- *As a moderate Islamist party, Al Nahdha's leadership needs to restructure its image in order to balance democratic transition with Islamic values if it is to satisfy both its supporters and critics.*

Tunisia embarks upon the process of transition to democracy

It is now a well-established fact amongst both the general public as well as the specialist of Middle Eastern politics that Tunisia under the almost-quarter century long rule of former President, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, was managed by a highly restrictive and rather authoritarian political system. The system empowered key pro-regime political instruments such as the Constitutional Democratic Rally simultaneously to ensuring that opposition political parties remained largely powerless or even being loyal to the regime. Other regime opponents, such as Tunisia's Islamists, found themselves in exile and for the most part expelled from the country. While this is not surprising, given the dearth of democratic political culture in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this likewise ensured that the country remained a "political wasteland" under its former president, who created what some local scholars now refer to as "political desertification".

An unintentional result of these policies was that the revolution which overpowered Ben Ali in January 2011 was spontaneous and popular, led not by opposition politicians or parties, but rather by the people. The absence of

leadership in the movement which ousted Ben Ali prompted civil society, newly established opposition parties, and scholars to join together to create a totally new social-political body, known as the "Higher Authority," which would work together with the interim Tunisian government (the group of political-technocrats and military officials who remained in office following the president's ousting) to oversee the country's political transition. One of the Higher Authority's initial primary tasks was to negotiate the re-writing of the Tunisian constitution with interim government, followed by what would be still in essence the key challenge facing the country at present – the organization of bona fide national elections. Thus far the interim Tunisian government has created a commission whose members were elected by the Higher Authority to organize free and fair elections, currently set for October 23, 2011. While Tunisia had elections during Ben Ali's presidency, their undertaking was organized by the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, which largely resulted in low voter confidence and failure to meet internationally accepted norms. Thus all eyes are currently on the combined work of the Higher Authority and the interim government – a wide diversity of stakeholders are currently asking whether genuine elections can take place in the

country without violence, heralding the beginning of a genuine transition to democracy.

Much depends on a successful national elections process

In preparation for the autumn poll, the interim government has legalized a number of previously prohibited political movements and authorized many new parties to participate in political life. This has resulted in the emergence of more than 90 parties, compared to 10 parties operating before the January revolution. While the floodgates have seemingly opened in the development of new political architecture in Tunisia, the country's voters are now faced with new problems such as (literally) too much (political) choice and the dilemma of not knowing which party to vote for. Yet there is much at stake on a successful electoral process taking place in the country, which clearly needs to move forward given that people cannot live on euphoria (of ousting a long standing dictator) alone.

The interim government still needs to balance out the country's stability and security with a development agenda, given that high unemployment and poverty rates remain persistent. Tunisia's youth remain in a continuous state of protest and are demanding for more immediate solutions to their predicament. Neither is the ongoing civil conflict in neighboring Libya aiding Tunisia's fragile sense of stability, given the overbearing presence of military-security personnel in the border areas (of Libya-Tunisia) and the refugee camps which have sprung up in the southern part of the country. Despite the fact that the Tunisian people have shown remarkable resilience in ousting one of MENA's notorious strong men from the seat of national power, the atmosphere both inside and immediately beyond the borders of the country remains politically charged, raising the risk that any unsavory incident that were to happen during elections could lead to violence and halt the process towards democratization and national accord.

Tunisia's Islamists re-emerge out of the shadows

Who will contest the new Tunisia's first bona fide national elections this autumn? While it can be expected that a number of the Tunisia's 90 or so political parties will field candidates in either presidential or legislative elections, it appears that secularists, Islamists and even communists will be vying for power. Out of Tunisia's "re-emerging" political

parties, most analysts seem to be following the movements of the country's well-known Al Nahdha (Renaissance) Party, which appears to be influencing the political landscape in Tunisia most actively. Al Nahdha was founded in 1981 as an Islamic movement by Sheikh Rashid Ghannouchi and a circle of Islamist intellectuals. It was inspired by the doctrines of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and was subsequently accused of extremism and terrorism, especially after an incident involving an attack on a Constitutional Democratic Rally office in Tunis. This led to the banning of Al Nahdha and about 30,000 activists and Islamists were arrested while many others went into exile. Rashid Ghannouchi, the movement's leader, chose voluntary exile in London in 1989. In 1992, a Tunisian court sentenced him in absentia to life imprisonment. Thanks to the popular revolution that overthrew Ben Ali's regime, however, Rachid Ghannouchi returned from exile on January 30, 2011, taking advantage of the national reconciliation and general amnesty. One month later, Al Nahdha was officially legalized and became an authorized party after over 20 years of suspension. After 22 years in exile, the crowds welcoming Rachid Ghannouchi's return were overwhelming. The party has rapidly recuperated its networks, activists and mechanisms, and has worked closely with the High Authority participating in the initial steps furthering political reforms in the country.

However, Al Nahda has not enjoyed a total "honeymoon" upon its return to the Tunisian political landscape, since many Tunisians still associate the movement with reactionary Islam rejecting the values of modernity, gender equality, and secularism which have become so dear to many despite the abuses of Ben Ali's system. The shock of old incidents associated with Al Nahdha still resonates amongst many in the country and Rachid Ghannouchi has recently admitted that some of his party members have committed mistakes in the past. Despite the attention the party has drawn in the information systems, there is still much uncertainty about Al Nahdha prospects of political success in Tunisia's forthcoming elections.

Islamists adjust discourse to widen political appeal

Nevertheless, it would be difficult to suggest that Al Nahdha is unlikely to do well in any genuinely open national elections in Tunisia. Islam forms the underlying fabric of Tunisia's social structure, in a country where 98 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims. Despite Tunisia's strong

association with secularism, Al Nahdha's members often use mosques to conduct meetings, mobilize social and political support and communicate a highly resonant message of social justice. Al Nahdha is also seizing opportunities to gain newfound influence offered by Islamic TV channels which have had the effect of "liberalizing" the imposed secularism of the Ben Ali regime. The party has remained well known and popular amongst Islamists outside of Tunisia, which has aided it in securing much needed sources of funding.

Although a new electoral law has forbidden foreign financing of political parties in Tunisia, it appears that Al Nahdha continues to benefit from substantial foreign transfers, despite its leadership denying such claims. Al Nahdha has delegated the task of preparing a new electoral program to specialized committees and has substantially adopted party discourse to include core values based on democracy, openness and tolerance with moderate Islam as its reference. Some analysts refer to Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a model which has influenced Rachid Ghannouchi and the Al Nahdha faithful. In the meantime, whilst Al-Nahdha has stated that it would participate in the autumn elections, its leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, has appeared to rule himself out as a candidate for any presidential poll, alluding to lessened hunger for power than the MENA region is traditionally accustomed to.

Yet Tunisia's Islamists still need to overcome some vexing obstacles

While Tunisia's Islamists are adjusting their discourse to widen political appeal, the need to improve its image remains one of Al Nahdha's key challenges, looking ahead. Many Tunisians continue to associate the party with terrorism, a problem which has been compounded further by the emergence of more radical, Salafist Islamic movements in Tunisia, particularly Hizb al-Tahrir. The fear of fundamentalist Salafism puts Al Nahdha in a situation where it must distinguish itself from its past in order to avoid the risk of confusion between Al Nahdha and Salafism.

Another challenge the party will need to strongly consider is related to women's rights. Since the country's independence in 1956, Tunisian women have been proud of the gains in their rights which have become enshrined by

the country's laws. Tunisia strives to be a model for other Arab countries with respect to gender equality. For example, it is thus far the only country that prohibits polygamy. Tunisian women will not accept for their rights to be diminished and although Al Nahdha has announced its respect for women's achievements, it has not, for example, condemned polygamy. This paradox does not seem to bother the party, which has expressed willingness to sacrifice some ideological principles to promote modernity and widen its political appeal.

A further challenge for Al Nahdha is in the area of foreign policy, particularly the matter of convincing the West that it does not pose a threat to "Western interests" neither in Tunisia nor in MENA. France, for example, has been one of Tunisia's most important economic partners and Paris is presently leading European Union (EU) efforts to assist and influence political reform in its southern neighbour. Containing the power of any nascent yet politically dominant Islamist movement remains an overriding political priority for Western powers. In this context, Rachid Ghannouchi visited France and urged the crowds which gathered to listen to his speech at the annual meeting of the Union Des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF) to "reject extremism and restore the true nature of Islam." In late April 2011, Alain Juppé, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, advocated France's commitment to Tunisia whilst on a visit to the country, in stating that: "We need to talk, share our ideas with those who respect the rules of democracy and of course the fundamental principle of refusing violence." These developments have all tended to work in Al Nahdha favour and are likely to strengthen its position politically.

Islamists will have little choice but to reconcile religion with secular processes

With only several months to go before Tunisia is set to stage its autumn elections, Al Nahdha appears to be amongst the best organized of the country's political groups and its chances of obtaining a leading position in the country's newly emerging political landscape must be deemed as quite real. The key question arising out of such a political prospect would be to the effect of what sort of policies would a ruling Al Nahdha party put into practice, and how Islamism would reconcile itself with democracy in practice, if at all? The fact that Rached Ghannouchi has recently declared that the Tunisian political system will move



towards democracy and that agreements with other countries will be respected is an optimistic sign, but how would this pan out in practice? Al Nahdha's leader has also stated that he likewise endorses a liberal economic agenda as a driver for furthering Tunisia's economic growth models.

street at any moment if necessary and Al Nahdha will have no choice but to reconcile between its Islamist principles and the traditionally secular processes which are vying for political space in Tunisia's new pluralist socio-political architecture.

End of the EGF document

Yet Ghannouchi has yet to silence all of his critics and detractors of even moderate Islamism who argue that there is an inherent rigidity within Islamist movements which is bound to harm Tunisia's aspirations of attracting foreign investments, furthering tourism revenues and reforming the banking sector. There is also concern that while a Tunisia governed by moderate Islamists – al Nahdha or other – would seek to maintain a good relationship with the West, it would look to strengthen ties with other Muslim countries, which (in a similar situation to Turkey under the AKP) would create some doubts about the fidelity of the country's foreign policy direction. Furthermore, Al Nahdha's choice of modernity and tolerance is surprising people and competitor parties alike and many analysts doubt that Al Nahdha will abandon some Islamic principles for short-term political gains. While the jury is still out about how a Tunisia possibly ruled by Al Nahdha would manage its domestic and foreign politics, one thing does seem certain: after the recent revolution that ousted President Ben Ali, Al Nahdha should realize the potential of street protests and should harness that power to their cause. Tunisians will not yield to any more manipulation. They are ready to return to the

Disclaimer

The information presented in this report is believed to be correct at the time of publication. Please note that the contents of the report are based on materials gathered in good faith from both primary and secondary sources, the accuracy of which we are not always in a position to guarantee. EGF does not accept any liability for subsequent actions taken by third parties based on any of the information provided in our reports, if such information may subsequently be proven to be inaccurate.

EGF Expert View

Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Copyright European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov
Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Suite 1/Level 3, Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 34
Brussels 1150 Belgium
Tel/Fax: +322 770 1001
info@gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.ru