

**Secularism Manipulating Islam:**  
**Politics and Religion in Tunisia**

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Seminar: God's Rule and Cesar's Rule: Exploring the Spaces between  
Theocracy and Secularism

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# Secularism Manipulating Islam: Politics and Religion in Tunisia

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## **Introduction:**

Tunisia has been characterized as the most aggressive Arab country in pursuing secularism. It has the most secularized Personal Status Code; and, in its drive toward modernization has limited the autonomy of the religious institutions and the space of religion in society. This paper aims through analysis and the choice of a case study to explore the nature of secularism in the Arab world, in general and briefly, and the relationship between politics and religion in post-independence Tunisia, in particular. Secularism in Arab world has been seen as an alien phenomenon associated with westernization, imperialism, domination or in extreme cases, with atheism. Some of these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Furthermore, no one can miss the strong drive in the Muslim societies to go back to authenticity and traditions after the failure of the current regimes to meet their people's expectations of reasonable levels of development.

It is difficult to attribute the adoption of secularism in the Arab world to a single reason. Could the adoption of the ruling elite of secularism simply be attributed to their fascination by western progress and their perception of the physical and technological superiority of the west? Qasim Amin, the Egyptian intellectual who is widely known as the emancipator of women, once stated:

Perfection is not to be found in the past, even the Islamic past; it can only be found, if at all, in the distant future. The path to perfection is science, and in the present age it is Europe which is most advanced in the sciences and therefore also on the path to social perfection. Europe is ahead of us in every way, and it is not true that while they are materially better than us we are morally better. The Europeans are morally more advanced; their upper and lower classes, it is true, are rather lacking in sexual virtue, but the middle class has high morals in every sense, and all classes alike have the social virtue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, pp.164 -9.

Similarly, did the Arab elites adopt secular orientations, sometimes anti-religion, because of their educational background and western intellectual formation?

Was it simply a matter of a lack of vision and ideological bankruptcy that forced them to embrace and impose secular models of development for their newly fragile political systems, rather than searching for an indigenous model that could provide a workable cultural synthesis? The existing literature lacks consensus over the answers to these critical questions.

This chapter suggests that secularism, which promoted democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, in the west (save its negative aspects) is different from the secularism that has been imported by the Arab ruling elite. Secularism in the Arab world was associated with state domination over religion, authoritarianism, and cultural dislocation. It served the ruling elites and their parochial interests in manipulating religion and functioned as a convenient tool to suppress their opposition, most notably those that rejected the whole-sale adoption of western-inspired models. In this regard, Tunisia presents a revealing case study. Two consecutive post-independence regimes prove the main argument of this paper. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali moved in the same secular direction but used different approaches and pretexts to achieve the same goals: to maintain the autonomy and full control of the state and its institutions, manipulate religion for secular ends, and suppress any opposition to their modernization plans and models of developments.

### **Part 1: Secularism in the Arab World**

*No secularization has taken place in the world of Islam .....* Ernest Gellner

*Secularism is declining in acceptability and is unlikely to serve as an ideological basis for political liberalism in the Middle East..... ..*

Leonard Binder

*Secularism destroys the sanctity and universality of all moral values.... Secularism is necessarily atheistic.....*

Fazlur Rahman

Secularism in the Arab culture constitutes yet another problematic concept to be accurately defined. Secularism is a concept that came to the Muslim world in the company of other related terms--such as progress, modernity, westernization and democracy--within the context of colonialism. Charles Smith writes, "In contrast [to the western experience] the Islamic experience has been one of secularism as an ideology imposed from outside by invaders, a product of European imperialism and its extension of foreign culture initiated at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>2</sup> Secularism has managed to spread in the Arab world at the hands of nationalist elites, influenced by secular models of developments. John Esposito noted that the post- independence era witnessed vehement wave of secularism in the Arab world, though with varying degrees.

The post-independence period witnessed the emergence of modern Muslim states whose pattern of development was heavily influenced by and indebted to western secular paradigms or models. Saudi Arabia and Turkey reflected the two polar positions. Saudi Arabia was established as a self-proclaimed Islamic state based upon the *Shari`ah* (Islamic law). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ataturk (Mustafa Kamal) created a secular Turkish Republic. The vestiges of the Ottoman Empire-- the Caliph/Sultan, the *Shari`ah*, Islamic institutions and schools- were replaced by European-inspired political, legal and educational systems.<sup>3</sup>

Secularization in the Arab world has had profound implications. It has changed the basis of identity and the structures of the state and society. Secularism was thus blamed by its adversaries for its serious counterproductive repercussions, which created deep crises in the Muslim societies, most notably, the identity crisis. Secular intellectuals were viewed as attempting to uproot the cultural heritage of the Muslim

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, Charles D., "Secularism," in Esposito, John, ed., The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, Vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Esposito, Islam and Secularism in the Middle East, p.2.

societies and to transcend their past. Accordingly, Muslims found themselves caught up in the critical duality of the desire to attach to their values, culture, and identity and the need to achieve progress, development, and prosperity.<sup>4</sup> Secularism, as ideology and institutions, was viewed as a direct threat to the traditional belief system, Islamic jurisprudence, and indigenous values.

To contain opposition factions and appeal to the religious sentiments of their people, most of the Arab secular regimes insist on highlighting the ceremonial aspects of religion. Some have assumed religious titles or made sure to maintain a high visibility during religious festivities. This has also been achieved by incorporating some reference to Islam in the constitutions such as Islam is the religion of the state, the ruler must be a Muslim, or in rare cases, the principles of the *Shari`a* are the source of law. Though such statements are ambiguous and open to different interpretations, these were calculated and necessary measures to boost the legitimacy of the ruling elites, affirm the monopoly of the state over religion, and to suppress any lay Islamic opposition outside state-controlled religious institutions.

Secularism in the Arab world took a variety of forms, ranging from latent or benign secularism to aggressive and draconian secularism. However, not a single secular Arab regime has publicly declared its commitment to secularism or has declared secularism as a state ideology. According to Bernard Lewis, on the level of mass consciousness, most Muslims continued to believe in the "Integralist ideal" of religious hegemony over everyday life and politics, which made the government avoid the term "secularism," even though the position is manifestly secularist.

Abdullah Nu`man classifies Arab and Muslim regimes with respect to the place of the *shari`a* in their constitutions into three categories: First, extremely secular

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<sup>4</sup> Najjar, "The Debate on Islam and Secularism in Egypt," p. 3.

governments that implement entirely civil codes (Turkey and Albania); Second, regimes that implement the Islamic *Shari`a* completely in their personal and public codes (Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Mauritania); Third, systems that are neither totally secular nor religious; they stand in between. This category encompasses Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Syria, and Iraq).<sup>5</sup>

The adoption of secularism has generated a deep controversial polarization between reformist secularists and traditionalists. Debates between these two protagonists have concentrated on the critical issues of identity, the nature of the state, the model and process for nation building, and the pace of social change.<sup>6</sup> The struggle between the two parties has intensified recently more than ever before. Mehrzad Boroujerdi noted that "observers of Middle Eastern politics can hardly remember a time during which the ideational gap between the secularists and the Islamists was wider than it is now."<sup>7</sup>

## **Part 2: Arab and Western Secularism: Same concept, different connotations**

Secularism in the Arab world in general is different from its western counterpart. Secularism in the West is "neither intrinsically atheistic nor even anti-religious. It is a political form in which institutionalized religion remains outside the political structure in order to maintain its autonomy."<sup>8</sup> In the modern Arab world, this separation has not taken place. The state has appropriated the religious institutions and used religion to advance secular models of development. It has extended its monopoly over religion and the production of religious symbolism in society. Meantime, it succeeded in dragging

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<sup>5</sup> N`uman, Abdullah, Al-Itijahat al-Ilmaniya fi al-Alam al-Arabi (Lebanon: Dar N`man Li al-Thaqafa, 1990): 45; see also, Hanfi, Al-Din, wa al- Thaqafa, wa al-Siyasa, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Monshipouri, Islamism, Secularism, and Human Rights in the Middle East, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Boroujerdi, "Can Islam be Secularized?," p. 55.

the new generations into an elusive dichotomy that presented the secular model as synonymous with progress, prosperity, and freedom, while religion or “tradition” was often associated with obscurantism, repression, and underdevelopment. According to Hurd, “whereas secularism in the West led to the spread of democratic values, in the Muslim world it has been associated with dictatorship, the violation of human rights, the abrogation of civil liberties, and the attenuation of civil society.”<sup>9</sup>

Fred Halliday sees secular regimes in the Middle East as very contradictory. He makes two important observations in this regard. The first is that despite the secular appearance, there was much that resisted change and was not altered, such as religious beliefs, pre-nationalist loyalties, and family and clan ties. The second observation is that success of these regimes turned against them. Paradoxically, the stronger the modernizing changes were, the stronger became the opposition to these changes. The success in education and urbanization provides a good example:

In Tunisia as much as in Iran, support for the Islamist movements draws on educated young people, often ones with a degree of scientific education. Another was urbanization, where large numbers of people moved into cities, an environment where they are more easily organized and mobilized by opposition forces and where the tensions and problems of social change, including corruption and government inefficiency, are more evident.<sup>10</sup>

As stated above, secularism in the western context was not only “justified” but was necessary for the emancipation of reason and the respect of individual freedoms. Secularism in the Arab world has not taken the same course. It was superimposed from above, either by a modernizing state or a westernized elite and therefore was met with resistance. This has also been noticed by John Esposito, who asserted that secularization in the Middle East has produced mixed concerns.

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<sup>8</sup> Sonn, Tamara, “Secularism and National Stability in Islam,” p.285.

<sup>9</sup> Hurd, “Toward a Comparative Analysis of Two Theopolitical Orders,” p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Halliday, “Tunisia’s Uncertain Future,” p.27.

The secularization of processes and institutions did not easily translate into the secularization of minds and culture. While a minority accepted and implemented a Western secular worldview, the majority of most Muslim populations did not internalize a secular outlook and values.<sup>11</sup>

### **Part 3: Tunisia: Why a Unique Case?**

*Of all the Arab countries, Tunisia was unique in the public manner in which its modernist elites attacked institutional Islam and dismantled its basic institutions in the name of systematic social and cultural reform- the result was to dismantle the whole old cultural order.*

**Muhammad Abd al Baqi al-Hermassi**

In comparison, Tunisia is considered the most “radically secularist” in the region of the Arab Maghreb and may be in the whole Arab region. This is attributed to the orientation and policies of Habib Bourguiba, the Great Combatant who ruled Tunisia for over three decades, and who maintained a particular vision for post-independence Tunisia and for the role of religion in the new state. Before the 1920s, secularism did not exist in Tunisia. Upon coming to power in 1956, Bourguiba’s ultimate goal was to build a modern state free from any constraints and radically transform the Tunisian society. For him, this entailed the establishment of a strong state, the development of the country, the spread of universal education, and the establishment of industrialization. He often referred to the adaptation of western ways and to making a rupture of all ties to the past.<sup>12</sup> For Bourguiba Arabism and Islam symbolized the past, whereas the West represented the future. He once stated, “what links us to the Arabs is not more than historical memories. Tunisia’s interests are tied to the West and to France, in particular. Marseille is closer to us than Baghdad, Damascus or Cairo...crossing the Mediterranean is easier than crossing the Libyan desert.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cited by Monshipouri, *Islamism, Secularism and Human rights in the Middle East*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Boulares, *Islam, the Fear, and the Hope*, P. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Kardi, Ali, “Ta’mulat fi al-Irth al-Bourguibi,” *Aqlam*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (December 2001).

Educated in law and political science at the Sorbonne in the 1920s, Bourguiba's values were shaped by other sources than religion. He was more influenced by the French ideals of the enlightenment, positivism, and progress, and by political thinkers such as Rousseau, Lamartine, and Hugo. According to Boulares, a former culture and information minister in Tunisia, Bourguiba's "religious sensitivities were extremely limited, to say the least..."<sup>14</sup> That to consider Bourguiba as an Arab version of Mustafa Kemal is controversial. Bourguiba fully understood the impact of Islam on a largely conservative population. "Unlike Kemal Ataturk, whom Bourguiba greatly admired... Bourguiba was careful not to endorse a strictly secularist program. This was partly out of pragmatism to avoid the resentment of the Tunisian Muslim population and to generate legitimacy for his programs."<sup>15</sup> In his discussion of Turkey's secular politics, *Bromley* highlights the "draconian" character of "Kemalism opposition to religious intrusion into public life," and asserts that "Kemalism was the exemplary instance of modernization against Islam," and concludes, "In Fact, the militant secularization of the state amounted to rigid state control over religious life, and a strict laicism in public affairs, rather than institutional separation of church and state, or the decline of personal belief."<sup>16</sup> In Tunisia, Bourguiba tried to manipulate Islam to push for change and comprehensive reform that was secular in essence and to consolidate the domination of the state over society.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Bourguiba's regime had considerable success in generating popular support through its nationalist policies, its social interventions and its organizations of much of the population into the *Neo-Destour* party and its mass affiliates. In the first decades after independence, parties and regimes that espoused a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Shahin, *Political Ascent*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey*, p.135.

*modernizing program* held the initiative. The reforms of Bourguiba, like those of Ataturk in Turkey, the shahs in Iran, and Nasser in Egypt, strengthened the state, promoted modern and secular values, and sought to transform their countries in order to bring them closer to some model or ideal of what a modern society should be."<sup>17</sup> Any Islamic opposition outside the official religious institutions was harshly suppressed. Bourguiba viewed religious traditions, practices, and institutions as obstacles to his plan of reform and struggle against underdevelopment. As soon as he came to power, he presented his vision of Islam and the role religion would play in the post-independence era.

Bourguiba equated social change with the reform, and even dismantling, of the traditional religious institutions by bringing them under the direct control of the state. He also used the laws as a vehicle for undermining the influence of religion in society. In one of his early speeches in 1957 at al-Qayrawan mosque, he pledged to carry on the plan of religious reform on the basis of a more general program of reforming the structure of the state. Presenting himself to the Tunisian people as a religious reformer inspired by the precedents of the Prophets, Bourguiba explained in one of his speeches:

The secret behind the decline of Muslims in their dark ages lay in their rejection of reason, their conservative imitation, and submission to dubious leaders, fake religious characters, conservative scholars, and Sufi orders that restricted reasoning and stagnated religion.<sup>18</sup>

Bourguiba would thus emphasize reason over commitment to religious principles and practices whenever he perceived them as an obstacle to his program of change. As he put it, "The gates of *ijtihad* (individual reasoning) should be re-opened." In one of his speeches, he declared to his people that "I issue a *fatwa* to you in my capacity as the

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<sup>17</sup> Halliday, p.27.

<sup>18</sup> Shahin, Political Ascent, pp. 35-36.

imam (leader and/or religious leader) of the Muslims in this country."<sup>19</sup> Ironically Boulares explains that Bourguiba "did not have a theologian's or a faqih's education either. He was first and foremost a statesmen and a political thinker."<sup>20</sup> Despite this, Bourguiba insisted on presenting himself as both temporal and spiritual leader of his country and thought that he was qualified enough to reinterpret the Qur'an and question well-established religious practices. A man of "limited religious sensitiveness," Bourguiba ridiculed in public the belief in the existence of paradise and hell in the life after death. He denied the miracles of the prophets and criticized the Qur'an for being contradictory in some parts. Bourguiba also ridiculed the *hijab* which he described as a "sinister shroud that hides the face."<sup>21</sup> He also insisted on monopolizing the interpretation of Islam. This became evident when in 1962 the state's attorney general demanded the death penalty for Shaykh Rahmouni on the ground that, "The defendant has permitted himself to have an understanding of the Qur'an contrary to the understanding of his excellency the president."<sup>22</sup>

### **Islam in State Institutions: The State Religion Not the Religion of the State**

The Tunisian constitution, promulgated in 1959, contains reference to Islam in four places. The Preamble affirms the Tunisian people's determination "to remain faithful to the teachings of Islam." It is worth noting however that this is superceded by a similar pledge to "remain faithful to human values which constitute the common heritage of peoples attached to human dignity, justice, and liberty..."

The first article in the constitution states that "Tunisia is a Free State, independent and sovereign; its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its form is the Republic." Art. 38 specify the Head of State (the president) be a

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<sup>19</sup> Shahin, Political Ascent, pp. 36 and 37.

<sup>20</sup> Boulares, Islam, the Fear, and the Hope, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Hamdi, The Politicization of Islam, p. 13.

Muslim: "His religion is Islam." Hence, eligibility of the office is restricted to Tunisians who are of "Moslem religion" (Art.40). The Constitution does not make any reference to the *shari'a*.<sup>23</sup>

When discussing the implications of this reference, it is important to point out to the order of values for the post-independence state. The universal values of human dignity, justice, and liberty came before the Islamic teachings. This could be interpreted as reflecting Bourguiba's concern to associate Tunisia early on with the modern world and its values, or as a result of his persuasion that Islam does not contain, or cannot be a source of, these universal values. The article that refers to Tunisia and "its religion is Islam," could be interpreted as meaningless, or at best as symbolic. According to Arab constitutional experts who discuss such references, the state is a non-material entity and only material entities, individuals, have a religion. Such references are ambiguous and too general. In addition, this article is offset by others in the constitution that stipulate the freedom of religion and religious practices and the equality of all citizens regardless of their religion, creed, origin, gender, and language. The principle that emphasizes the neutrality of the state and its protection of the freedom of religious affiliation and practices is in essence a secular one. Practically speaking, the reference to Islam and religion in most, if not all, Arab constitutions has never prevented the state from issuing positive and modern laws that in many cases represented a clear violation of Islamic principles.

In the first five years after independence the state undertook a series of measures that had a drastic impact on the legal, institutional, and social structures of religion in society and the relationship between religion and politics. In the field of

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<sup>22</sup> Shahin, Political Ascent, 37.

jurisprudence, a unified system was established in 1956 to replace the Islamic *shari`a* courts and the French tribunals established during the protectorate. In doing this, certain fundamental changes were introduced that affected the status of Islamic law in society. For example, in less than five months after independence, a new Personal Status Code, the most secularized in the Arab world, regulating marriage, divorce, and inheritance, was introduced and became applicable to all Tunisians—Muslims and Jews. Aiming to improve the status of women in society, the Code stipulated the equality of men and women, set minimum ages for marriage, and required the consent of women to marriage.

Despite attempts to portray the Code as being consistent with the principles of the *Shari`a*, several of the articles of the Code were clearly in opposition to the explicit provisions of the Qur`anic text. The law prohibited polygamy and denied men the right of repudiation of marriage by oral declaration; it also restricted divorce by placing it under the jurisdiction of civil courts. The Code does not stipulate that laws are to be interpreted by reference to the Islamic *Shari`a*. The passage of the civil and commercial legislations in 1959 and the criminal law in 1968, which were influenced by Western legislative concepts, undermined further the *shari`a* law. The process of establishing a modern legal system was a gradual one by which the government made steadfast gains in attempting to establish a Western-inspired *qanun* (law) that would overshadow the traditional model of Islamic jurisprudence. The Personal Status Code as been viewed as a “sacred” achievement of the post-independence state and as an instrument that greatly undermined the *Shari`a* in society.

With regard to the independent religious institutions, since 1956, the public and religious *habous* (endowments) were dismantled and integrated into the state domain.

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<sup>23</sup> For the text of the Constitution, see [http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ts00000\\_.html](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ts00000_.html)

Historically, the *habous* were controlled by the *`ulama'* (scholars) and provided them with a measure of financial independence and the means to oversee the religious, legal, and educational institutions in society. The public *habous* that were confiscated amounted to one hundred and fifty thousand acres of land.<sup>24</sup> In 1957, the state abolished the private *habous* land as well, thereby reducing the power of the *`ulama'* even further.

Another important step which had decisive consequences in curbing the influence of the *`ulama'* was the nationalization and unification of the school system on the secular French model. Upon independence, Tunisia suffered from the lack of trained and educated native cadres that could shoulder the task of developing the country. The government, therefore, placed great emphasis on reforming and expanding the educational system for the purpose of creating the required qualified elite. During the 1960s, more than one-third of the national budget was allocated to improving education, building new schools throughout the country—primary and secondary as well as universities—sending students abroad, and initiating new teaching programs. Despite independence, however, French remained the primary language of instruction in Tunisian schools, and within the administration, and Western culture dominated the educational curriculum. With the spread of schools in rural areas, the French language was finally introduced into the remote parts of the country; ironically, it was introduced by a “national” elite, an “achievement” which even the foreign colonizer had failed to accomplish due to the violent resistance of the indigenous population.

The traditional education system of the country—the Qur’anic schools, the *madrasas*, and the Zaytouna college—were gradually taken over by the Ministry of National Education. This meant the nationalization of 208 Qur’anic schools (kutab or

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<sup>24</sup> Marion Boulby, “The Islamic Challenge: Tunisia since Independence,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.

madrassas) previously administered by the scholars of the Zaytouna.<sup>25</sup> The Zaytouna college which traditionally had emphasized formal Arabic and Islamic education, was closed down in 1957, and in 1961 was transformed into a part of the University of Tunis as the Faculty of Theology and Religious Science. In addition to religious studies, modern subjects were introduced into the curriculum of the new faculty. The load of religious education in schools was reduced to two hours per week. The state controlled the mosque imams and the content of the sermons they delivered during the Friday prayers. The Tunisian sociologist, Abdel Qader Zghal observed, "Prayer in the mosques was reduced to routine practice devoid of the sense of collective participation in the Islamic *umma* (community). The imams of the mosques which are paid for and controlled by the state have enclosed themselves within the framework of the official discourse."<sup>26</sup>

The mosque, its scholars, and graduates rapidly began to lose their prestige as they entered into a process of marginalization. The graduates of the Zaytouna religious schools, educated in the Arabic language, had little chance of joining the state university, which used French as the main language of instruction. At the same time, many Zaytouna graduates who had been serving as teachers were gradually eliminated from the national system of education on the pretext that they lacked the appropriate educational standard. To address this problem, the government enlisted some of the unemployed Zaytouna graduates into retraining programs emphasizing manual skills, but for the Zaytounis this was regarded as adding insult to injury.<sup>27</sup>

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10, No. 2, April 1988, p. 592.

<sup>25</sup> Hafedh Ben Salah, "Système Politique et Système Religieux en Tunisie," (Memoire pour le Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures de Sciences Politiques, Université de Tunis, Faculté des Droit et des Sciences Politiques et Economiques, Tunis, 1973-4), pp. 27-8. See also Yadh Ben Achour, "Islam Perdu, Islam Retrouvé," in Christiane Souriau et al., *Le Maghreb Musulman En 1979*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Boulby, "The Islamic Challenge," p. 595.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, "The Role of Islam," p. 109. See also Al-Monji al-Ka`bi, "al-Zaytouna fi Mir'at al-Damir al-Tunsi" [al-Zaytouna in the Tunisian Conscience], *al-Marji`*, Vol. 1, No. 2, October 1982, pp. 43-50.

The religious personnel throughout Tunisia were gradually bureaucratized under the control of the Administration of Religious Affairs, which was established in the early years of the 1960s and placed under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister. (In 1986, this office was returned to the control of the Ministry of Interior in order to ensure security and state control over the mosques). Kamal al-Tarzi, the former Director of the Administration, summarized the functions of the Administration as: building and supervising mosques, training preachers and renewing the methods of preaching. On the limited and subservient role of the *imams*, al-Tarzi asserted that the scholars had no political role in the implementation of the *shari`a*. He explained that “the function of the *imam* is to teach people religion, before he enjoins the good or forbids the evil. He should say that alcohol and gambling are *haram* (forbidden), but it is not his responsibility to stand in front of a bar and demand it to be closed.”<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to argue that Bourguiba’s measures regarding Islam received popular support or went without opposition. Notwithstanding his popularity as a national hero, he was perceived by most Tunisians as a secular reformer. The Personal Status Code, for example, was opposed by several scholars as a clear contradiction of the Qur’anic provisions. It was not surprising that fourteen of the *‘ulama’* took the bold step of overriding the legislation by issuing a *fatwa* to denounce it.<sup>29</sup> It was the sanctioning of the breaking of the fast of Ramadan, however, which actually aroused most popular opposition. As one observer noted, “...Bourguiba miscalculated the depth of popular attachment to tradition. Almost all Tunisians observed the fast. ...Even in the upper echelons of the Neo-Destour, Bourguiba’s public breaking of the fast and his

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<sup>28</sup> “Idarat al-Sha`ai`r al-Diniyya: Limadha Taba` t Wazart al-Dakhiliyya” [Why Was the Directorate of Religious Affairs Placed under the Supervision of the Ministry of Interior], *al-Anwar*, May 11, 1986. “Innana Nad`u ila Islam al-I`tidal” [We Call for a Moderate Islam], interview with Shaykh Kamal al-Tarzi, the Director of the Administration of Religious Affairs in *Haqa`iq*, No. 31, June 1, 1984.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, “The Role of Islam,” p. 111.

urging others to do likewise had limited support.”<sup>30</sup> The majority of the *‘ulama’* rejected Bourguiba’s reasoning, and the grand *imam* of the Zaytouna mosque issued a *fatwa* in which he insisted that the fast of Ramadan remained a religious duty that must be carried out, except in time of illness or war. Public demonstrations broke out a few days before Ramadan in 1961 in Qayrawan after the regime tried to transfer the *imam* of the mosque for criticizing its religious policies in an open sermon. Although the protesters were crushed by the police and the army, these incidents indicated that, despite Bourguiba’s secularizing measures, Tunisians remained faithful to the basic values of their religion and the religious scholars still enjoyed some influence among the masses.<sup>31</sup>

Later developments in the Tunisian political process reveal that while Islam was more commonly invoked, it remained a tool for the regime to generate legitimacy for its policies. When Tunisia was undergoing grave economic difficulties in the mid-sixties, for example, President Bourguiba began to urge the need to return to stringent conformity with Islamic teachings. This was the same person who had strongly pushed for the gradual replacement of the *shari`a* by European legal codes. Then, when he lashed out at the moral decadence of Tunisian youth and their slavish imitation of Western cultural trends, he sounded more like a conservative religious scholar than a Westernized social reformer.<sup>32</sup> In the beginning of the 1970s, moreover, the government-controlled press began to make a show of the official observance of Ramadan.<sup>33</sup> To demonstrate increasing piety, the government established the National Association for the Preservation of the Qur’an to promote the teachings of Islam and encourage the presence of mosques in schools and factories.

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<sup>30</sup> Perkins, *Tunisia*, p. 119.

<sup>31</sup> Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia since Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall, “Islamic Revival,” p. 105.

To sum up, as the government moved to assert its control over the religious domain to facilitate the wheels of modernization, religious officials were discredited and stripped of their authority and their right to interfere with the administration of the government. The undermining of institutional Islam was undertaken to dismantle the traditional establishment and eliminate a rival power center in society, yet this was to set the stage for the unleashing of those forces of opposition that felt the need to defend the Islamic values of the Tunisian people.

### **Ben Ali's Tunisia: A Limited Religious Space**

*We say to those who mix religion with politics that there is no way allowing them to form a political party.*

***Ben Ali***

*I left not a single schoolbook untouched, in conducting the most thorough separation of state and religion in the Muslim world.*

***Mohamed Charfi, Ben Ali's education minister***

Although there are some clear differences between the approaches and policies adopted by Bourguiba and those pursued by Ben Ali, in the end, both have reasserted a secular orientation of the state, which insisted on controlling and manipulating religion. Bourguiba's secularism was undertaken under the pretext of his struggle against underdevelopment and fundamentally modernizing the Tunisian society, whereas Ben Ali's was undertaken against the threat of Islamism. It might be argued that Bourguiba's secularism was a pragmatic one, inspired by some of the ideals of the enlightenment, whereas Ben Ali's is an un-cultured one, inspired by the ideals of fascism and authoritarianism.

The first months after Habib Bourguiba's overthrow in November 1987 witnessed an ambiguous honeymoon between the new regime and the Islamists. Ben

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<sup>33</sup> "Quelle Politique de Ramadan pour les Tunisiens?," *Democratie*, August 28, 1979.

Ali, the coup-maker who had worked as minister of interior and prime minister under Bourguiba, presented himself as a man of "renewal" and reconciliation and called for political pluralism and respect for human rights. He opened a dialogue with the opposition forces, socialist and Islamist. An amnesty released hundreds of political prisoners and allowed thousands to return home. The media reflected the more open atmosphere.<sup>34</sup>

Ben Ali too manipulated religion to mobilize public support for his new regime. At the very beginning of his tenure, the new president flirted with the religious sentiments of the Tunisian people. He began his speeches with "invoking the name of Allah" and ended with verses from the Qur'an. He allowed the broadcasting of the call to prayers five times a day on the national radio and television; restored in December 1987 the Zaytouna University as a center for religious learning; performed the *umra* (voluntary visit to the Holy Mosque in Mecca) in March 1988, an event which was repeatedly aired on television; and formed a Supreme Islamic Council to oversee the religious affairs of the country.

Soon Ben Ali's orientations towards of the role of religion in state and society became more clear. In an interview with the *Le Figaro*, he stated that "Religion is a personal matter and not an extreme closed ideology." His early gestures towards Islam and the religious establishment alarmed the secular forces in society with respect to the direction the state was heading. A group of secular opposition leaders and university professors representing a wide political spectrum issued a declaration on March 18, 1988, in which they called for the separation between religion and politics at the state level and demanded the State to assert its commitment to the Personal Status Code and clarify its position regarding the role of religion. The following day, the eve of the new

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<sup>34</sup> Halliday, "Tunisia's Uncertain Future," p.27.

national day, Ben Ali allayed the concerns of the secularists forces and confirmed on the national television his commitment to the country's secular achievements. He asserted, "There will be no calling into question, no abandoning of that which Tunisia has been able to achieve to the profit of women and the family. The Personal Status Code is an attainment to which we are attached and by which we feel attached. We are proud of it, and we draw our pride from it."<sup>35</sup>

In May 1988, a new law that further enhanced the state control over the mosques was passed. The law prohibited anyone to deliver religious lectures in a mosque without the prior permission of the prime minister. This measure deprived the Islamists from an important forum through which they disseminated their ideas. In the same year, the state adopted a new party formation. The new law denied recognition to any party that bases its program on race, language, religion, or gender. It required the party to acknowledge the republican system of the state, the people's sovereignty, the Personal Status Code, human rights, and the Arab-Islamic identity of the country.

Following the Islamists participation, as independents, in the national election in April, 1989, in which they won 15% of the votes, Ben Ali refused to legalize the Islamist Renaissance Movement (Harakat al-Nahda). By June 1989, the state began to adopt a different policy towards the Islamists. The President accused the Islamists of "concealing their real views, and said there was no place in Tunisian life for parties that based themselves on religion." The Islamists, in turn, accused the government of authoritarianism, reneging on its promises to democratize the system, and of being influenced by the "secular left".

Ben Ali engaged in a brutal struggle against the Islamists and any independent Islamic influences in society for the purpose of uprooting the threat of political Islam to

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Hamdi, p. 66.

his new regime. Thousands of al-Nahda's followers and sympathizers were arrested, scores of mosque leaders were detained or prevented from delivering religious lectures, religious lessons at the Zaytouna mosques were again prohibited, family members of al-Nahada were denied work or financial support, the Islamic dress in schools and government offices was banned, and mosques were closed immediately after the prayers. According to a Tunisian veteran leader of the democratic opposition:

The government is lumping together all Muslim believers, be they Islamic fundamentalists activists or pious, nonpolitical worshippers. It also refuses to ease up and allow democratic forces to express themselves... Tunisia needs to strengthen democratic forces to create barriers between religious extremists and totalitarian politicians because otherwise there is no democratic alternative to the street mob.<sup>36</sup>

A report published in 1993 by the New York-based Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights described the extent of the state's draconian measures and how they spread to other associations in society:

It is in the context of this single-minded determination to liquidate the Islamists threat to the government's monopoly on power that respect of human rights in Tunisia has declined in the past three years. Supporters and sympathizers of An-Nahda have not been the only victims of officially sanctioned lawlessness. Tunisia's legal profession has been intimidated; its press freedom has been restricted; and the country's only independent human rights organizations has been silenced as political debate has degenerated into a witch-hunt against An-Nahda.<sup>37</sup>

Ben Ali became more determined to uproot the influence of political Islam and the Islamists in society, especially in their strongholds, the schools. He stated to *Le Figaro*, "To combat those who use religion in order to gain power by force, those who reject democracy and community violence, we have adopted a policy of various dimensions. It starts in school and continues with wide ranging policies in the economic and social sectors." The strife over the secular character of the state escalated in the 1989 when Ben Ali appointed the Marxist Mohammed Charfi (jailed under Bourguiba's regime for

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<sup>36</sup> Randal, "Tunisia's Security comes at a Cost," p.2.

left-wing political activity) as education minister. With Ben Ali's support, Charfi dismantled the fundamentalists' "accumulated power" in the Tunisian educational system." Charfi stated once that "I left not a single schoolbook untouched, in conducting the most thorough separation of state and religion in the Muslim world."<sup>38</sup> Charfi uprooted all religious aspects from school syllabi like political aspects, *jihad*, women issues, etc.. He also replaced all Qur'anic studies by the writings of "Spinoza, Voltaire, Freud, Darwin and other non-Muslim thinkers." In a tone not lacking in sarcasm, Charfi maintained, "Non one could be a fundamentalist if they read Spinoza, Freud and Voltaire."<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Charfi corroborated courses in civics, geography and history depicting Tunisia's rich pre-Islamic history and highlighted the achievements of the Saint Augustine. He mentioned confidently that the "School is the best place to fight fundamentalism, school is where it is born and dies." He was totally convinced that young Tunisians (especially the illiterate and those brought up in rural areas) who were fascinated by Islamism, pursue scientific modern studies because they were captivated by simple answers to complicated problems. Taking this logic a step further, repressive police measures and super-imposed educational policies will not be able to address the difficult issue of the relation between religion and politics in a society that is predominantly Muslim. This is an issue that must be resolved by consensus and national accord. Affiliating religion to state institutions may reduce the vitality of Islam in society for a short-term, but in the end this will give rise to individuals, groups, and

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<sup>37</sup> Promise Unfulfilled: Human Rights in Tunisia since 1987 (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, October 1993), p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Randal, Jonathan, p.1

<sup>39</sup> Randal, Ibid.

movements outside the official religious institutions that will challenge the state's secular orientations and attempt to restore to religion its vitality.

**Conclusion:**

I tried to argue that secularism as adopted in post-independence Tunisia was different from its western counterpart. It has been evident that the separation of religion and politics in Tunisia has not been total or clear. The country's leaders, Bourguiba or Ben Ali, have not declared in public their commitment to secularism, a separation between the state and religion, or religion and society. However, they have always insisted on the separation between political Islam and the state. The secularism that was adopted was not a humanist or democratic one that respected the long-held beliefs of the people, their religious practices, and freedoms. In many cases it went against religion and used repression and force to impose its vision. In line with Bourguiba's political orientations, his was a pragmatic secularism. He used the laws as a vehicle for undermining the influence of religion in society. At the same time, he used religion to gain mass support for his secular reforms. He was reluctant to appear as anti-religion or as fighting Islam. However, in the process, he succeeded in dismantling the traditional religious institutions and their basis of financial independence, thus, reducing the influence of non-state religion and increasing the dependence of the religious scholars on the state. This type of secularism insists on maintaining and respecting the ceremonial aspects of religion (for example, the celebrations of the 27<sup>th</sup> night of Ramadan, the anniversary of the Prophet's birthday, the Islamic feasts, etc.), while relentlessly excluding religion from the legal, political, and economic arenas of the state. Religion was confined to personal matters and to ceremonies. This was sanctioned under the pretext of fighting underdevelopment and the need to rapidly

modernize the country. Bourguiba's early successes in education, urbanization, and increasing the standards of living of a large number of Tunisians may have reduced resistance to his plan of reform. Whenever necessary, he used force to quell opposition in the religious circles. As his plan began to face crisis, he began to face an Islamist opposition, from outside the state-controlled religious institutions, that stressed the need to reassert the Arab and Islamic identity of the country and to restore to the mosque its relevance.

Generally speaking, similar to Bourguiba, Ben Ali has maintained a secular orientation that views religion as a personal matter and separates between Islam (particularly political Islam) and politics. Ben Ali's secularism has been undertaken to fight the threat of political Islam. It is an aggressive type of secularism that while insisting on controlling religion and monitoring religious practices, does not seek religious reinterpretations to sanction its programs. Rather, it easily resorts to violence and repression. This is in part could be attributed to the difference in intellectual formation and political experience of the two leaders. Unlike Bourguiba, Ben Ali was a police general whose political experience was gained over the years in the process of his systematic suppression of Bourguiba's opposition. This has led to a severe polarization in society, first between the state and its secular cronies, on the one hand, and the Islamic opposition, on the other. Later, the polarization took place between the state and the secular opposition, in a typical Machiavellian saga. In its fight against political Islam, the state in Tunisia appeared to be dismantling the religious structures of the country and limiting the space of religion in society. This was evident in its drive to restructure the educational curricula and in consolidating its grip over the mosques and religious observance. The state has stripped the classroom and the mosque, among other things, of any autonomy. In the process, the entire society had to be affected. As a

prominent member of the Tunisian League of Human Rights lamented, "Unhappily, almost nothing remains of Tunisia's civil society."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Randal, Jonathan, "Tunisia's Serenity Comes at a Cost: Restricted Rights," Washington Post, July 6, 1995.

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