

TUNISIA'S RENAISSANCE PARTY

The Rise and Repression of an Islamic Movement

By Emad Eldin Shahin

Compared to neighboring Algeria, Tunisia projects the image of a stable and economically prosperous country. The regime has been trying hard over the past few years to foster an image of what it calls "a new era, based on respect for the rule of law, human rights and democracy." There is, however, a great disparity between the official rhetoric and the actual methods the government uses to maintain stability. A look at the history of the government's treatment of the al-Nahda (Renaissance) movement reveals a legacy of political oppression against this moderate Islamic opposition. In what has since become known as the "Tunisian solution," the regime beginning in 1990 has harshly repressed the movement, arresting its leadership and thousands of its followers, dismantling its organizational structure, and harassing its leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi into a self-imposed exile in Britain.

The toleration of such policies by Western governments could be understood if a movement, Islamist or otherwise, adopted violence and terrorism as a means to achieve its objectives, or did not respect democracy and pluralism in society. This, however, does not apply to the case of al-Nahda, whose leaders have consistently condemned violence and declared their commitment to the democratic process. They attempted to work within the system and obtain legalization as a political party. The regime however, succeeded in neutralizing the Western governments and media by exaggerating the threat of al-Nahda, defaming the

movement, and falsely portraying it as a violent one.

Apolitical Beginnings

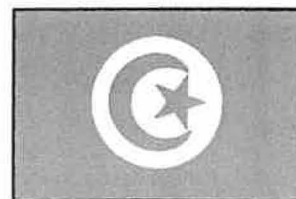
Rashid al-Ghannouchi was born in 1941 to a peasant family in southern Tunisia. He was raised in a religious household and as a child received an Arabic and Islamic education. Unable to gain entrance into the country's largely francophone universities, Ghannouchi obtained a degree in philosophy in 1968 from the University of Damascus, Syria. After a year of graduate studies in France, he returned to Tunisia to become a philosophy teacher. At that time, the country was coming to the end of a five-year, socialist-inspired collectivization policy that devastated the economy and posed a threat to the legitimacy of Habib Bourguiba's regime.

Ghannouchi began to give regular sermons and lectures in the capital's mosques. His style drew large crowds from among the students, youth, and

poor. Along with a number of other young intellectuals, he subsequently organized an apolitical group that focused on cultural, moral, and religious issues.

Ghannouchi and the other founders of this group shared a number of elements in common. To begin with, they all had an early religious education, a factor not unusual in the traditions of most Muslim families of the region, which inculcate in children at an early age the fundamental precepts and practices of religion. With their Arabic-Islamic background, some of these men faced early rejection and felt alienated in Tunisia's French-style educational system. Thus, they had to attend institutions of higher learning in the Arab East. Many returned to Tunisia after having been exposed to the political ideas current in the Mashreq at that time, including Arab Nationalism and reformist Islam.

The nascent movement had little in the way of political consciousness,



Wives of jailed Islamist activists calling for the release of their husbands

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however, and during the 1970s it concentrated on promoting Islamic education and a return to Islamic values and morals—especially in face of what they claimed were the alien value systems imposed by the government. When the regime turned away from its socialist program in the late-1960s, the religious movement received an unexpected boost as the government aided them in efforts to combat leftist elements in the universities and elsewhere in society.

Politicization and Expansion

While the economy improved under Bourguiba's program of economic liberalization, the gap between rich and poor widened and, though some businesses prospered, many sectors of society suffered. The workers and the young were among the elements that fared the worst under the new economic program.

Through their powerful and well-organized union—the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) headed by Habib Ashour—workers pushed for improvements in wage standards and social conditions. After a series of negotiations, strikes, and violent clashes, the government harshly disbanded the Union in January 1978, arresting many of its members and replacing its elected leadership. The crackdown on the Union worked to the Islamists' benefit. Until this point, they had been apolitical, preoccupied only with the moral and religious aspects of reform. One of the founders, Salah Eddin al-Jourshi, recalled in a 1985 interview how "the Islamic movement observed the 1978 incidents with indifference and were surprised by them as everybody else was. We were concerned with other issues. Later, we began to realize the significance of the social dimension and the importance of bread."

The movement began to pay attention both to the workers as an important

social force in society, as well as to the need to work among their ranks in the Union. In response to the government's repressive measures against the workers, the Islamists in the universities issued a statement in which they announced their objection to these measures and declared their support for the workers' struggle and the independence of their union. The blow against the UGTT had deprived the workers of an important channel for articulating their demands and expressing their grievances, and the Islamists took advantage of this vacuum by advancing

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**—Salah al-Jourshi
an MTI Founder**

their message among the workers. They began to address issues of concern to the workers, such as the value of work in Islam and the Islamic economic perspective. When the UGTT was restored, the workers with Islamist sympathies also joined the Union and participated in some of its elections.

One year after the UGTT's major strike and the ensuing repression of the workers, Ghannouchi and his group formed the Islamic Association, of which he was elected president. The main objective of this newly founded organization was to address the political, social, and economic problems of society. The violent conflict between the government and the Union brought

to the attention of the movement the fact that other issues, in addition to matters of belief and lack of belief, existed in society. The politicization of the movement increased its popularity and invited the hostility of the regime.

The disenchantment of another major sector of society, the youth (over 50 percent of the population is under 25), further contributed to the growing popularity of the Islamic movements during this period. Indeed, in recent years, the young have represented a major problem for the Tunisian government and a potential source of instability. The active recruitment of teachers bore fruit as thousands of students enlisted with the movement as well. The fact that many of the movement's leaders were secondary school teachers themselves provided them with direct and continuous contact with the students and assisted them in attracting and mobilizing the young.

Political Crystallization

When Bourguiba decided in 1981 to briefly open up the political system and legalize political parties, the Islamic Association transformed itself into a political party and adopted the name "The Islamic Tendency Movement" (MTI). Its leadership applied to the Ministry of the Interior for legalization. Ghannouchi and the founders of the new party held a press conference in June 1981 in Tunis, during which they issued a communiqué outlining the party's platform.

While not calling for the establishment of an Islamic state or the implementation of the *shari'a* (Islamic laws), the MTI stated five general objectives: the resurrection of the Islamic identity of Tunisia; the renewal of Islamic thought in accordance with its fundamental principles and the requirements of modernity; the restoration of the legitimate right of the people to decide their fate; the restructuring of the econ-

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Habib Bourguiba (left) and Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali: Tunisia's post-independence leaders. While they each pursued different policies towards the country's Islamic movement, both, in the end, repressed it.

omy on a humanitarian basis, including the fair distribution of national resources; and the resurrection of the cultural and political Islamic identity on the national, Maghrebi, Arab, and international level.

Ghannoushi and the MTI rejected violence as a means for changing the authoritarian one-party system. They called for the recognition of the people's rights of free expression and assembly, and political pluralism. The MTI proposed cooperation with all the political forces in the country to achieve these objectives.

Crackdown

Though the regime had gone as far as licensing a communist party, it seemed unwilling to accept the challenge of a party formed on an Islamic basis. The government argued that legalizing the MTI would imply that those who did not join it were not Muslims. The MTI replied by asserting that it did not impose any monopoly on Islam, nor did it claim to be its sole representative. In addition, the Islamic label of the would-be party was not exclusive and did not deny non-members the right of being Muslims any more than the democrat-

ic or socialist labels of other parties denied non-members the right to be democratic or socialist.

This reasoning did little to convince the regime, which in July 1981 responded to the group's press conference by arresting Ghannoushi and 107 other members of the movement and charged them with forming an unauthorized association. The crackdown on the MTI alarmed the other opposition parties and political forces in the country, and they all issued statements condemning these arrests for being undemocratic and repressive, and demanded the immediate release of the detained MTI members. In a trial, described by foreign observers as politically motivated and conducted under abnormal conditions, Ghannoushi was given a sentence of 11 years imprisonment, and other defendants received jail terms ranging from 6 months to 11 years. It is noteworthy that throughout the trial, the regime could not press any charges of subversion or violence against Ghannoushi and the MTI.

For the next three years, the MTI was exposed to harsh press campaigns, and its members were sought out, arrested, and tried. Nevertheless, the movement was still able to keep itself

active by electing a new leadership, maintaining its organizational structure, issuing secret leaflets, and publishing statements in the opposition and independent press. The remaining active members were also able to assist the families of the prisoners financially, and keep up contacts with the other opposition parties, the UGTT, and the Tunisian Human Rights League.

Following the massive food riots of 1984 and pressured by increasing popular discontent, the regime finally released Ghannoushi and the other MTI members. As a prerequisite for their release, Ghannoushi and the MTI leadership reiterated their rejection of violence, commitment to work within the system, and pledged to avoid links with any foreign country. Nonetheless, Ghannoushi was still forbidden to speak in public places, teach, publish his writings, or travel abroad.

The MTI re-entered the political arena and worked on rebuilding its structures and expanding its support base. Still denied any legal recognition despite its repeated requests for legalization, the movement acted for three years as a de facto political party. It coordinated its activities with the other political parties and organizations in

Ghannoushi: In His Own Words

Ghannoushi has produced over 15 books and hundreds of scholarly articles and lectures. In these he addressed the issues of the Islamic movement and modernization, public freedom in the Islamic state, women and their role in society, the rights of minorities and non-Muslims in a Muslim society, Islam and the West, and the principles of democracy and the origins of the Islamic political systems.

Islam and Democracy

If by democracy it is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, in which there is an alternation of power, as well as all freedoms and human rights for the public, then the Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interests to do so anyway.

Islam, which enjoins the recourse to the shura (consultation) as a principal governing relations between the political authority and the people, finds in democracy the appropriate instruments (elections, parliamentary system, separation of powers, etc.) to implement the shura. This is a fundamental principle of the religion [London Observer, Jan 19, 1992]

On Violence and Change

Al-Nahda does not believe in plotting or in violence. . . . A party that has its roots in the masses does not need to take recourse to short-cuts.

It is our duty to try to reform our society, to help solve the endemic social and economic problems that blight the life of the average Tunisian. It is our right to put forward our programme of running our collective affairs in a manner that is just and equitable and that involves rather than

alienates Tunisians. Yes, al-Nahda is a party of change, change through consultation and participation—and, unlike the regime, not coercion. The Islamic movement in Tunisia never raised the question of establishing an Islamic state, not because we do not believe in Islam as an all-inclusive way of life. [Impact International, August 14-September 10, 1992]

The West

It is a grave mistake to simply judge a complex multi-[faceted] civilizational phenomenon such as the Western civilization. The West . . . is not monolithic and neither is Islam. . . . There are numerous models of and living examples of valuable contributions that highlight the richness of the Western civilization. These include the well-known human rights organizations and the large number of thinkers, academicians and men of religion, and last but not least the brave heroes of the media who managed to relay pictures to the Western public of the horrors that result from heedless Western policies. This serves to prove that generalizing about the West is indeed a big mistake. [Al-Dustour (Arabic), July 14, 1993]

The forces of goodliness, of cooperative interaction, and integration are present in the West and the East. What we need is vision penetrating through and through with unflinching rationality. What we need is direct, first hand communication. What we need is continued and sustained opportunities for the meeting of minds, the sincere and honest dialogue, for cooperation in all fields of human achievement and excellence, for sparing no efforts to save humanity from pollution, drug abuse and wars. [The Right to Nationality: Status of Non-Muslim Citizens in a Muslim Nation.]

society and succeeded in attracting new followers from among middle-class professionals, including doctors, engineers, scientists, lawyers, teachers, and university professors.

Bourguiba's Last Stand

Concerned about the MTI's increasing popularity and its insistence on recognition as a political party, the regime once again launched a major crackdown on the movement in March 1987. Ghannoushi was arrested for delivering a speech in one of the capital's mosques without a license, and forty MTI members were detained. Immediately after this incident, France announced the arrest of a group of suspects, six of whom were of Tunisian

origin, for the possession of arms. While the French authorities later announced that the six arrested Tunisians had no connection with the MTI, and in fact were members of the Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah, the Tunisian regime, without any evidence, linked the two incidents together and accused the MTI of terrorism, relations with Iran, and with attempting to topple the government.

Over a two-month period, the authorities arrested three thousand members of the MTI, thus rapidly escalating the confrontation and disabling the movement. The government also unleashed the leftists against the Islamist students in the universities and streets.

The state-controlled media launched a fierce campaign against the MTI in an attempt to set the stage for the possible execution of its leaders. In August 1987, 99 MTI members faced trials and were charged with forming an illegal organization, plotting subversive actions with Iran, and attempting to overthrow the government. In his defense of the movement, Ghannoushi condemned violence, reconfirmed MTI's commitment to the democratic processes in achieving its objectives, denied any links with Iran, and expressed reservations about the "disappointing" Iranian revolution.

Seven MTI members were sentenced to death and 69 received sentences ranging from two years to life

Minorities

Divine human rights in Islam apply to Muslims and non-Muslims living in a Muslim nation. These are considered in Islam inalienable rights to every resident in the Islamic state. The image of Islam has been distorted by those who claim that under its laws non-Muslims are discriminated against or treated as second class citizens. This is a fallacy. Equally fallacious is the baseless allegation that a convert to Islam is exposed to the penalty of death if he opts out of it. Muslims are required to treat non-Muslims with justice but one of the glaring violations of this principle is that Muslims themselves in their inter-Muslim relationships are far away from applying it according to the Divine command.

It is considered in Islam an act of lawlessness to deprive a Christian or Jew of his human rights of divine justice even by a word or a hint or any subtle form of shaming techniques or denigration, or disparaging or abuse in any conceivable manner. [*The Right to Nationality: Status of Non-Muslim citizens in a Muslim Nation.*]

Women

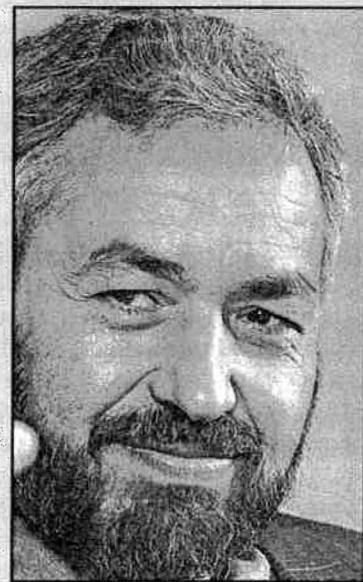
Islam does not prevent women from assuming public offices, including judicial and leadership

positions. Nothing in Islam justifies the exclusion of one half of the society from participation and from being active in public life. As women's participation in society increases, they would be able to expand their awareness of the world and exercise control over it.

We, therefore, support the right of women, that in some instances becomes a duty, to participate in political life on the basis of equality and respect for the Islamic values.

Our society is in a dire need for women-leaders . . . We see no objection in allocating several seats in the Consultative (shura) Council for women members [*Public Freedoms in the Islamic State*].

“There are numerous living examples of valuable contributions that highlight the richness of the Western civilization. These include the well-known human rights organizations and the large number of thinkers, academicians, and men of religion”



imprisonment. Ghannouchi received a life term of forced labor. Commenting on this trial, L.B. Ware wrote in the Autumn 1988 issue Middle East Journal: “The trials that took place in October 1987 failed to produce any evidence that the MTI was revolutionary and subversive, had used violence against the regime, had operated clandestinely, or had, for that matter, bombed hotels in the Tunisian Sahel.

“The October trial,” Ware continued, “was an embarrassment for the government in part because Ghannouchi’s interrogation and subsequent defense presented a very different image of the movement’s activities and political program than that held by the government. . . . Ghannouchi’s

defense convincingly laid the blame for the radicalization of the MTI squarely on Bourguiba in obstinately refusing to acknowledge the indigenous roots of the movement’s grievances, and attempting to portray its activities as Iranian interference in Tunisian internal affairs.”

Ben Ali: More of the Same

Many observers consider the deteriorating relationship between the regime and the MTI as one of the factors which led Defense Minister Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali to remove Bourguiba on November 7, 1987. Bourguiba insisted that the leaders of the movement be retried and executed, particularly its symbol, Rashid al-Ghannouchi—a step

that many Tunisians believed could have had drastic consequences. Following the removal of Bourguiba, the new President took several measures to stabilize the country and increase the democratization of the political process.

In 1988, Ben Ali released Ghannouchi and most of the imprisoned MTI members. The MTI responded by expressing its support for Ben Ali and democratic politics. They also declared a willingness to cooperate with the new regime. On November 5, 1988, Ben Ali met with Ghannouchi and conducted talks which were described as “cordial.” Two days later, on the anniversary of his accession to power, Ben Ali together with the coun-

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try's six legalized political parties, the labor union, and representatives of the still-unauthorized MTI signed a National Pact, promising consensus, political freedoms, and the right to form political parties.

Ghannoushi, seeking official recognition for his party and participation in the coming elections, agreed to change the MTI's name and remove any reference to Islam from its title in order to comply with the conditions of the party formation code. Subsequently, in April 1989, Ghannoushi changed MTI's name and redefined its objectives. He announced the formation of Hizb al-Nahda and applied to the authorities for official recognition. In what came as a surprise to many observers, the application was turned down and al-Nahda was forbidden from participating in the legislative elections of April 1989. Insisting on legal participation within the system, al-Nahda's candidates took part in the elections as independents.

The legislative elections were a turning point in the relations between the Ben Ali regime and al-Nahda party. Having succeeded in obtaining almost 15 percent of the votes, and up to 30 percent in some cities, including Tunis, al-Nahda appeared to be the major opposition force in the country. Combined, the other legal political parties received less than 5 percent of the total votes. Moreover, Algeria's recognition of Islamist political parties, and the stunning victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the municipal and provincial elections made Ben Ali determined to suppress al-Nahda and eliminate it as a potential threat.

Frustrated by the regime's harassment and continued refusal to legalize his party, Ghannoushi left the country in May 1989 and went into voluntary exile

in Britain, where he began to criticize the autocratic nature of Ben Ali's regime.

Soon after Ghannoushi's departure, the government's campaign against al-Nahda began in earnest, and between September 1990 and March 1992 Amnesty International reported the imprisonment of at least 8,000 Islamist sympathizers. Three thousand of these have since been tried and convicted for belonging to an unauthorized association.

The regime used two incidents to justify its harsh measures against al-Nahda. The first occurred in February 1991, when three Islamists, allegedly belonging to al-Nahda, attacked the government party's office in Bab Souika and killed one guard and seriously injured another. The incident was officially condemned by al-Nahda. According to the New York-based Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, the trials of the three defendants in the Bab Souika case were characterized by irregularities and lack of evidence to support the government's case. According to the Lawyers' Committee report released in October 1993: "The prosecution's case relied on confessions allegedly made to police officers, although these were retracted when the accused appeared before an examining magistrate."

The second incident took place in May 1991 when the Interior Minister announced the discovery of a "plot" by al-Nahda to seize power. Commenting on the Interior Minister's description of the plot and the mass trials of the Islamist defendants before military courts, the Lawyers' Committee asserted that "there was no documentary or other tangible evidence to link the suspects to the weapons that had been seized, or to tie the An-Nahda

[Lawyers' Committee spelling] movement to any wide-ranging conspiracy." The Committee recommended that "all defendants convicted in the Bab Sa'adoun and Bouchoucha trials before military courts in August 1992 should be released, or given a fair re-trial in accordance with minimum standards of international law."

Describing the nature of the relations between the Ben Ali regime and al-Nahda and the authorities' flagrant human rights abuse, the Committee wrote: "It is in the context of this single-minded determination to liquidate the Islamist 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 organization has been silenced as political debate has degenerated into a witch-hunt against An-Nahda."

Regime Success?

The Tunisian regime still insists on consensus as the basis for political conduct and admission into the political process. According to Justice Minister Sadok Chaabane, the regime "wants to open the door to recognized parties that share the same model of society and same principles." In the presidential elections of March 1994, Ben Ali received the usual 99.91 percent of the votes. In the parliamentary elections, his party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally, garnered over 95 percent of the vote (144 out of 163 seats), continuing a long history of a single party, centralized state. While 19

seats in the new parliament were reserved for the opposition parties, the actual number of seats were increased by 38 (from 125 to 163) further diluting the opposition's strength in the legislature. The legal opposition parties, themselves, have been weak, divided, and lacking credibility, resulting in poor electoral performance with only 3.4 percent of the total votes. On the other hand, while this is no more than a cosmetic development, the participation of opposition parties in parliament still represents a first for Tunisia's 40 years of post-independence history.

Still, the regime's policy of "drying up the sources and cutting off the limbs" of Islamic extremism has concerned many human rights groups. The government uses the threat of political Islam as a pretext to gain the support of Western countries internationally and justify its preservation of a police state domestically. Intolerant of any dissent, the authorities suppressed the Tunisian League for Human Rights in 1992, and subsequently arrested its former head, Muncif al-Marzuqi, in 1994, when he attempted to challenge Ben Ali's candidacy in the 1994 elections. Amnesty International and other human rights

organizations have condemned the regime for practices such as arbitrary arrests of political opponents, widespread use of torture, sexual abuse of female relatives of imprisoned al-Nahda activists, use of military courts to try political cases, harassment of defense lawyers representing political prisoners, domestic press censorship, and the muzzling of foreign reporters. Two months after the elections, 100 intellectuals, doctors, journalists, and university professors signed a petition entitled "An Appeal for Democracy," requesting the government for a greater degree of freedom and respect for individual rights.

The government's concerted efforts to remove any independent Islamic influences from Tunisian society includes the systematic arrest of al-Nahda's sympathizers, denying family members work, banning Islamic dress in educational and government institutions, appointing a Marxist as an education minister, changing the curriculum of Islamic subjects in schools to conform with the state's interpretation of Islam, closing the mosques immediately after each prayer, and controlling the appointment all mosque imams.

Despite the government's claims of the success of this policy, however, the issue of the al-Nahda movement is far from over.

While these measures are eliminating any immediate threat of an Islamist takeover of power in Tunisia, in the long run they will increase the level of polarization in society. At stake here is the issue of identity and the type of Islam the regime wants to maintain. The choice will remain, as is the case in other Arab countries, between an elite that imposes its secular values on society and an opposition party that associates itself with the identity and dominant belief-system of the majority of the people. While it has now been effectively dismantled, the history of Tunisia's Islamic movement has proven its ability to withstand repression, rebuild its organizational structure, and reemerge as an effective political force. While in exile, Ghannoushi himself is turning for many into a symbol advocating pluralism, freedom, and respect for individual and public rights. Should popular discontent with the increasingly authoritarian policies of the regime grow, he could easily spearhead the inevitable cycle of change. ■



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The fate of Tunisian society relies a great deal on future relations between the regime and the Islamists