Political Mistrust and the Islamist Impasse
Rory McCarthy

What does the political crisis in Tunisia tell us about our explanations of Islamism in the decade since the 2011 uprisings? Tunisia's Islamist movement Ennahda was often considered exceptional compared to other Islamist organizations, moving earlier to prioritise inclusion in the political process and running a comparatively underdeveloped social welfare structure.[1] Ennahda made an unusually clear break between movement and party, declaring in 2016 that it would no longer conduct religious, cultural, and social outreach but instead specialize as a self-described party of 'Muslim democrats'. As Rached Ghannouchi, the organization's founder-leader, said at the time: 'We seek to create solutions to the day-to-day problems that Tunisians face rather than preach about the hereafter.'[2] Yet, the paradox of politicization is that this project of technocratic reinvention has failed on its own terms. Although restructuring itself as a programmatic, socially conservative, economically liberal political party, Ennahda has not delivered effective policy solutions to Tunisia's pressing socio-economic crisis and has suffered a dramatic slide in vote share. The Islamists are now widely perceived as most responsible for the failure of successive governments to meet the revolutionary demands of the uprising a decade ago.

The trajectory of Ennahda shows the diverse conditions under which Islamists can moderate their ideas and behaviour. The organization gave up its original ambition to install an Islamic state based on a totalizing conception of religion and politics and moved to an explicit adherence to participation in a pluralist, democratic system in a civil, not religious, state. At first, this moderation was the result not of political inclusion, but instead the 'double exclusion' of state repression and social rejection in the decades before the uprising.[3] Later, the effect of political inclusion after 2011 also pushed Ennahda into ideological and behavioural change, as anticipated by the literature.[4] The organization withdrew an early proposal to introduce the shariʿa as a fundamental source of legislation, cancelled attempts to criminalize blasphemy, and reversed a policy to ban senior figures from the old regime from contesting elections. This last decision reflected the intense pressure Ennahda experienced after the repression of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood following the coup of July 2013, but it also prefigured the current political crisis.

However, identifying the causes of moderation is not sufficient to explain how Ennahda reached its current impasse. More significant now are the effects of the particular path of moderation that the Islamist leadership has chosen. Over the past decade, Ennahda presented a political programme that was risk averse, thin on substance, and often indistinguishable from those of its rivals. Instead, under the leadership of Ghannouchi, the organization prioritised pragmatic, cross-ideological cooperation in order to remain in government. But political institutions became increasingly paralysed, unable to realize the essential elements of the new democracy, including the Constitutional Court, which remains unestablished, and redistributive reforms, which have been often promised but not delivered. Ghannouchi

[1] Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome Autoritaire: Politique En Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).
[2] Rached Ghannouchi, 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia', *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 5 (2016): 58–67.
[3] Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Moderation Through Exclusion? The Journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from Fundamentalist to Conservative Party', *Democratization* 20, no. 5 (2013): 857–75.
[4] Jillian Schwedler, 'Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis', *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 347–76.

insisted this 'politics of consensus', as he called it, offered Ennahda the best protection against a return to marginalization and exclusion. Electorally this has not been a success. Ennahda has lost significant vote share during a period of electoral volatility, suggesting that though the Islamist advantage may apply in founding elections, it has a diminishing effect over time.[5] After winning 89 out of 217 seats in the assembly with 1.5m votes in the first elections in 2011, the party dropped to 52 seats and just over 500,000 votes in the most recent elections in 2019. Of course, Ennahda is not alone. Many other Tunisian parties have lost electoral support or disappeared from the political scene, and in Morocco, after several years of electoral success, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development has just suffered an even worse collapse in its share of the vote. However, Ghannouchi's consensual approach is significant for the deeper effect it had on the transition. Consensus politics may have avoided the dangers of political polarization, but it introduced a conservative bias, blocking progress toward further political, social, and economic reform. It promoted an impression of stability, widely lauded abroad, which obscured what was often a highly contested transition. Public trust in political parties and institutions fell significantly, and much recent work connects this popular disillusionment to a remarkable rise in new forms of protest.[6] Political mistrust also created an opportunity for the emergence of populist challengers, among them the architect of the July 2021 power grab, President Kais Saied.

Moderation has also had a significant consequence for Ennahda internally. We know that Islamist organizations are not monolithic, but there is more to explain about their internal differences. Recent work on Jordanian Islamists demonstrates how internal ideological disagreements can develop over many years.[7] Strategic differences can also emerge, particularly after severe repression, as in the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.[8] For Ennahda, internal differences in strategy and identity have developed over how this new 'Muslim democratic' party should function and what policies it should pursue. The corollary of adhering to democratic norms in public is that Ennahda members are insisting that democratic processes must also be followed inside the organization. But just like secular parties, which have also been riven by factional splits, Ennahda has struggled to create accountability in its hierarchical decision-making structures. Some within the organization opposed the decision to align with rival parties that had ties to former regime elites, arguing it would have been better to work towards socio-economic reform and more equal regional development from the opposition benches. Many were also frustrated with the leadership's decision to rewrite the party's candidate lists for the 2019 legislative elections, which sidelined some well-known Ennahda activists. Last year, dozens of Ennahda members signed a petition calling on Ghannouchi to stand down at the next party congress to make way for a new generation of leaders. They argued his monopoly of power was damaging Ennahda's credibility, provoking internal splits, and spreading public mistrust of parties. Several

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[5] Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong, 'Is There an Islamist Political Advantage?', *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 187–206; Charles Kurzman and Didem Türkoğlu, 'Do Muslims Vote Islamic Now?', *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015): 100–109.

[6] For example: Prisca Jöst, 'Mobilization Without Organization: Grievances and Group Solidarity of the Unemployed in Tunisia', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2020): 265–83; Irene Weipert-Fenner, 'Unemployed Mobilisation in Times of Democratisation: The Union of Unemployed Graduates in Post-Ben Ali Tunisia', *The Journal of North African Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 53–75; Saerom Han, 'Transitional Justice for Whom? Contention over Human Rights and Justice in Tunisia', *Social Movement Studies*, 2021; Rory McCarthy, 'Transgressive Protest after a Democratic Transition: The Kamour Campaign in Tunisia', *Social Movement Studies*, 2021.

[7] Joas Wagemakers, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[8] Khalil Al-Anani, 'Rethinking the Repression-Dissent Nexus: Assessing Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's Response to Repression since the Coup of 2013', *Democratization* 26, no. 8 (2019): 1329–41.

prominent figures have resigned in recent months and this September, 113 Ennahda members, including seven deputies in the current suspended parliament, quit in a high-profile open letter, accusing Ghannouchi of centralizing power and isolating the party on the political stage.

Under mounting pressure both externally and internally, Ennahda's leadership has promised a period of revision and self-critical 'evaluation' (*taqyīm*), a concept it has deployed in the past when facing internal dissent.[9] Ghannouchi continues to argue for dialogue and consensus as a priority, and in doing so, has reversed the organization's historic attitude towards the state. Islamists, including the Tunisians, once saw the state as a means through which to impose their moral order, not as an independent field of conflict resolution in itself.[10] But the implication of Ennahda's new practice as a party of government is that this orientation towards the state has entirely changed. Now it defends the state in its own right, issuing public statements calling for 'respect for the prestige of state institutions'.[11] Not only does this echo the 'state prestige' (*haybat al-dawla*) logic often employed by Ennahda's nationalist rivals and by authoritarians in the region, but here, as elsewhere, it also inadvertently reveals the fragility of the state at this time of crisis.[12] Tunisia's Ennahda has moved further than most other Islamist organizations through a process of moderation and politicization and it remains a key political actor today. But accounting for moderation can only be part of an explanatory analysis. What matters are the decisions and constraints that shape how this process is conducted and with what contingent effects. The particular path of moderation chosen by the Ennahda leadership has had a significant impact on the wider transitional process. Now the organization faces not just an internal dispute over accountable leadership, but the twin challenges of profound public mistrust and a new democratic regression.

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[9] Rory McCarthy, *Inside Tunisia's al-Nahda: Between Politics and Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[10] Roel Meijer, 'Islamism from Piety Politics to Party Politics', in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), 106–20.

[11] Harakat al-Nahda, 'Balāgh Iʿlāmī [Press Statement]', Facebook, 22 August 2021, https://www.facebook.com/Nahda.Tunisia/posts/4679954165362006; Salaheddine Jourchi, 'Ḥarakat al-Nahḍa fī qalb al-ʿāṣifa [The Nahda Movement in the Heart of the Storm]', *arabi21.com*, 24 August 2021, https://arabi21.com/story/1380499/حركة-النهضة-في-قلب-العاصفة.

[12] Rabab El-Mahdi, 'The Failure of the Regime or the Demise of the State?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 2 (May 2018): 328–32.