The success of ‘Renaissance’ in Tunisia and the complexity of Tunisian Islamism

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Paper prepared for the International Political Science Association Conference, 8-12 July 2012, Madrid, Spain. Please do not cite without author’s permission. A shorter version of this paper co-authored with Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle appears in Middle East Report, issue 262, Spring 2012.
Abstract
Despite their absence in the uprising, the elections of October 2011 confirmed the significant strength of the Islamist party Ennahda. Set in the context of the democratic credibility of Islamist parties and building on Asef Bayat’s work, this paper examines the long-term social trends that characterised Islamism in Tunisia from the 1990s onwards and argues that they have been decisive in determining not only the success of the party but, crucially, its transformation from what it was in the 1980s. More specifically, the argument is that the radical economic and social changes Tunisai went through in the 1990s and 2000s created new social classes, including a very well educated and globalised upper middle class. The dramatic economic, social and demographic transformations that Tunisia experienced coupled with international events of enormous significance for the Arab world have given rise to expressions of ‘Islamism’ that cannot be easily reconciled with the practices of an organised party like the old Ennahda. Social groups and individuals have to a large extent appropriated Islam as a core part of their identity and as a basis for their values despite the regime’s repression during the Ben Ali’s era. This ‘new’ Islam(ism) understood better in terms of ‘social movement’ or ‘social network’ has been in many ways opposed to Ennahda which represents political, institutionalized Islam. The meeting of the two in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution has resulted in the transformation of the party and the access of social Islam to institutional politics.
Introduction

The Arab Spring has certainly been a surprise for scholars and policy-makers (Gause, 2011) and challenged a number of widely held assumptions about state-society relations in the Arab world. In particular, far from being comfortable with authoritarian rule, citizens across the region have demonstrated their belief in new forms of political arrangements that would supplant the institutions in place since independence from colonial rule, contradicting orientalist assumptions about the absence of appeal of democracy and political pluralism in the region (Kedourie, 1997). A further surprise is that when one examines more closely the actors that led the Arab Spring, the absence of Islamist movements at the helm of the protests is notable. For a number of decades it was assumed that any significant political change in the region, including regime change, would be driven by the most popular and organised force: the Islamists. However, this has not been the case during the Arab Spring and one of the most momentous changes in the history of the region over the last few decades did not have Islamism at its centre. Protesters in Egypt and Tunisia were clearly not organised by Islamist movements, religious slogans were absent during the demonstrations and Islamist activists joined the marches late on in the game and, in the case of Egypt, only because the youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood pushed the reluctant leadership of the organisation to support the protesters. In Yemen, Islamism is not the driver of the street protests against president Saleh and even in Syria where marches originate from mosques and protesters chant ‘Allah is great’, Islamist groups are not central to the anti-Assad demonstrations (Khatib, 2012). This has led to argue that the Arab Spring confirms the failure of Islamism, as ordinary citizens can no longer be mobilised through simplistic religious slogans. This view has to be tempered however in light of subsequent developments. As the business of building new political institutions, finding new economic arrangements and replacing the old social order gets on the way, Islamist movements have emerged to play a significant role. In both Tunisia and Egypt, the Islamist Renaissance Party and the Muslim Brotherhood respectively performed very well in the first free and fair elections and a number of other smaller Islamist formations obtained significant support. In Tunisia they have become the leading party in a three-party government coalition. In Syria, the Brotherhood is one of the leading opposition actors and although not coordinating the demonstrations, it is central to unifying the opposition outside the country and will play a considerable role in shaping post-Assad Syria. The Brotherhood is also poised to be a central actor in Libyan politics after the fall of Qaddafi. Thus, while Islamists did not trigger the Arab Spring, they are arriving to power on the back of it. This has reignited the debate about Islamism and its commitment to democracy and
individual freedoms. The same questions that were asked about Islamism two decades previously have come to prominence again, but once again they are rather misleading and poorly informed. First, it is impossible to gauge exactly the nature of a political movement when analysed in isolation (Brumberg, 2002a). Asking whether Islamists will turn out to be pro or anti-democracy leads to sterile debates that are influenced only by normative stances. Their current commitment to democratic politics may or may not be purely instrumental a priori, but it is irrelevant in so far as this commitment is the product of Islamists’ interactions with other political forces and with their own supporters as well. This daily engagement in institutional politics will determine a democratic outcome where Islamists run in free and fair elections rather than any declaration in favour or against democracy. Second, the transformations that Islamism has gone through over time cannot be overlooked. With this in mind, this article explores the way in which Ennahda in Tunisia has come to be the leading party in the country despite enduring three decades of relentless repression and what the repercussions of its transformation over time are on the Tunisian political system and Islamism as a whole. While it might be difficult to generalise from one case-study the Tunisian developments will echo across the region and the family of Islamism will be influenced by the behaviour of Ennahda in power.

The transformation of Islamism
The phenomenon of Islamism ‘refers to the rise of movements and ideologies drawing on Islamic referents – terms, symbols and events taken from the Islamic tradition – in order to articulate a distinctly political agenda’ (Denoeux, 2002:61). However, the family of Islamism is a broad one, with movements and associations across the region displaying significant differences in terms of ideological references, methods of action and goals. At the general level some scholars (Cavatorta, 2007a; Cofman Wittes, 2008) categorised three distinct types of Islamist groups: a) groups that combine elements of political participation, national liberation struggle and social activism; b) groups of violent salafi orientation that operate nationally and internationally; and c) Muslim-Brotherhood-inspired groups that on the whole reject violence to achieve political ends and subscribe instead to a mix of political participation whenever permitted and social activism. At a more concrete level, other scholars preferred to concentrate their attention on outlining the ideological, organisational and policy changes of individual Islamist movements (Mishal and Sela, 2000; Palemr Harik, 2004; El-Ghobashy, 2005; Cavatorta, 2007b). Following from these studies, there have been numerous works analysing the political strategies of these movements with a
particular focus on the ones that attempted to play an institutional role in their respective countries. From Yemen (Schwedler, 2006) to Jordan (Clark, 2010) and from Syria (Lawson, 2010) to Algeria (Boubekeur, 2008) and Egypt, the way in which Islamist parties participated in politics and interacted with the ruling regimes and other opposition movements was the main preoccupation. All of these studies are useful in so far as they point to the complexity of Islamism and to the changing nature of their engagement over time. However, given their very narrow focus, they fail to capture the significance of a much broader shift in Islamism that has occurred over the last two decades and that Asef Bayat has correctly identified as ‘post-Islamism.’

The focus of Islamist movements and parties until the mid-1990s was on the state and how to capture power in order to rebuild it and create an Islamic state and run it according to sharia law (Bayat, 2007:9). Whatever differences existed among Islamist movements regarding the institutions of the Islamic state, the interpretation of sharia law and how to get to power, there was the shared objective of radically transforming the state inherited at independence.

In many ways, 1980s and 1990s Islamism was a reaction to the ideological and practical failures of the post-independent Arab state and its authoritarian nature that marginalised large sectors of the educated middle-class, who found refuge in a state-centric Islamist project. From the mid-1990s Islamism began its transformation away from the obsession with state power and towards operating increasingly in the social sphere. This was not necessarily done to gather and mobilise sympathisers with a view to take political power, but to fulfil a genuine ethical mission that religious and practising believers had to feel (Clark, 2004). The shift towards the social sphere and social activism was certainly a response to the failure of the state-centric ideology promoted in earlier decades, but - more importantly - was also the result of wider socio-economic and generational changes in Arab societies.

The progressive inclusion of the Arab world in the global economy changed patterns of social interactions, created new social classes and brought new ideas and modes of behaviour to the region. The authoritarian Arab state, through its upgrading strategies (Heydemann, 2007) managed these changes by increasingly isolating itself from the wider population and withdrawing from many socio-economic activities it had performed in the past which left society to its own devices. Islamism, while remaining opposed to the state, found new expressions outside formal political movements and parties. In fact, as Bayat’s recent work (2007; 2009) explains, countless social movements and ordinary citizens have progressively become agents of change through their daily life. They do not need any sort of legitimization from above to carry out specific practices of
behaviour, making social processes extremely complex and detached from authoritarian control and from institutionalised organisations such as political parties, including Islamists. It is in this ‘daily practices’ that forms of religiosity as personal piety and moral behaviour have re-emerged. This does not mean that they are completely detached from political processes and institutions, at least when they become open and ‘democratic’ as is the case of Tunisia since January 2011. It means however that when one attempts to explain the success of Ennahda at the October 2011 elections, the focus should not only be on the party structures, the programme, the candidates, and the campaign, but should also be on the groups and individuals who chose daily practices of Islam that were meant to counter the distance felt towards authoritarian regimes and values of mindless consumerism, which changes not only social relations but also the physical aspects of cities in the region (Bayat, 2007: 56). The private and individual adoption of those practices before the uprising influenced the way in which Ennahda was re-established, behaved and, to an extent, changed at its come-back in Tunisia after January 2011 highlights. The contention here is that Ennahda, despite its ‘Islamist’ character and history, has incorporated significant attitudinal shifts in its discourse and practices to such an extent that it has moved a considerable distance away from what it used to be in the late 1970s and 1980s. Part of the reason for this is to be found in the inclusion of ‘post-Islamists’ among its cadres, candidates and voters. In some ways, the non-Arab country of Turkey provides an interesting example of how the failure of Islamism in government in the mid 1990s led to a rethinking of it in society eventually giving rise of the victories of the AKP.

**Ennahda and the Arab Spring: the October 2011 elections**

The October 2011 elections for the Constitutional Assembly marked the genuine beginning of the end of the Ben Ali’s regime. The first free and fair elections in the country’s history were a success and ‘domestic and international election observers were unanimous in commending the transparent, peaceable and generally well-organized conduct of the election’ (El-Amrani and Lindsey, 2011:2). Opinion polls taken before the election had already indicated that Ennahda was poised to do well and the actual election results confirmed the veracity of the opinion polls with the party winning 90 seats out of 217 and 37 per cent of the popular vote.¹ The size of Ennahda’s victory is particular impressive if one takes into account the fact that the party had virtually disappeared from the country for over two decades and was only licensed on March 1, 2011. How was such a success possible in such a short period of time? There are a number of answers that have been given. First, ¹ For a detailed breakdown of the elections results see the website of the Tunisian Electoral Commission at www.isie.tn
it is argued that Ennahda cadres and leaders were very quick and skilled in re-organising the structures of the movement across the country. Lynch (2011) points out that ‘the core leadership immediately reached out to tens of thousands of former activists now out of prison…They established offices in every Tunisian province, quickly setting up sections for youth, women, social services, and politics and holding internal elections to select a new leadership.’ As also Abdelhamid Jelassi, member of Ennahda Executive Committee, put it: ‘given that we are an old party we have been able to revive our structures immediately after the revolution in January 2011. Some militants who have been for a long time in prison started working again for the party together with those who operated underground’ (Interview with author, 2011). The importance of this organisational effort should not be underestimated in so far as presence on the ground in all areas of the country demonstrated to voters that the party intended to be present everywhere to represent the interests of all Tunisian regions. This is a considerable change in Tunisian politics because during the Ben Ali dictatorship numerous regions were ‘abandoned’ and left behind by the regime. An efficient organisation active on the ground across the country is certainly an important factor that led the party to success. Second, it is argued that the ability to attract numerous new members and appeal so strongly to voters is the product of the party’s credibility as an opposition movement during the Ben Ali era. While some parties played the role of ‘loyal opposition’ during the dictatorship and derived benefits from it, Ennahda was a more genuine opposition or at least it was considered so because it refused to play within the rules of the game that Ben Ali had set out and looked instead for a complete overhaul of the political system (Haugbølle and Cavatorta, 2011b). For this, its leaders and cadres paid the price of prison and exile. When the regime fell and Ennahda began to re-organise, its members enjoyed great credibility among the general public because of their uncompromising stance and their personal suffering. It is not coincidence that many of the Ennahda candidates had spent years behind bars; they were the living proof that the party had suffered for its political positions, letting voters know that they were real opponents of the regime from the very start. The credibility of the party was further enhanced when its leader’s name was not on the ballot paper as he had promised upon his return to Tunisia. Rachid Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia from a two-decade long exile and immediately declared that he would not seek an elected position (Usher, 2011). Some doubted that this was going to be the case, but unlike leaders of parties of his generation he did in fact decide not to be a candidate. This decision has not gone unnoticed among voters who have very little trust in politicians. Name recognition certainly had an impact on the party’s final score. A third element that some see as having contributed to Ennahda’s appeal and
success is the absence of unity among the other parties even when they share a similar ideological platform and their inability to reach out to constituencies outside Tunis and the other main urban centres. For instance Churchill (2011) argues that ‘the large secular parties’ reliance on advertising and reluctance to meet voters outside of the major cities made it difficult for undecided, rural voters, to put their confidence in them. The majority of Tunisians showed…that Ennahda not only understood their preferences, but also that Tunisian voters cannot be taken for granted and should be reached out to directly.’ In this view, it is therefore these campaign management mistakes on the part of secular parties that helped Ennahda. Finally, part of the appeal of Ennahda is said to be the product of its policy positions and in particular in the constant quest for national ‘consensus’ over the most important institutional matters (Lynch, 2011) and the attention it paid to job creation as the most significant economic issue affecting the country (Tessler, 2012). The emphasis of the party on democratic principles and the practice of them internally proved to be reassuring to large swaths of the population who might have been doubtful about the democratic commitment of Ennahda. From an internal point of view Ali Laaridh (Interview with author, 2011), member of the Executive Committee, states ‘in terms of organisation, the party’s philosophy is about democratic principles, which are enshrined in our statute and the way in which the party is structured. A party congress takes place every 4 years and the delegates at this congress elect both a national assembly and a party president. The national assembly appoints an executive bureau and a secretary general. At the regional level the same thing takes place. The whole structure of the party is very much the product of the wishes of the fee-paying members.’ The emphasis on internal democracy has been crucial to demonstrate that the party is committed to democratic principles in institutional life and a key message of the party during the campaign was one of ‘reassurance’ (El-Amrani and Lindsey, 2011) towards the other political formations. Allani (2009) had already argued convincingly that the party had condemned the use of violence to take political power since the 1980s, had already committed to maintaining the progressive family code and had declared its support for political pluralism. Since its legalisation, the party has re-emphasised the commitment to building a democratic Tunisia in cooperation with other political forces. Hajez Ben Aoun Hajjem (Interview with authors, 2011), member of Ennahdha’s bureau culturel, argued the following: ‘I think ordinary Tunisians want a degree of consensus and apaisement in this transitional moment and we have to be clear and, I think we are, that October 23rd will not be the end of the world [if Ennahda wins] and after the vote all of our doors have to remain open because we believe in consensus.’ For their part concrete policies dealing with the economic crisis were central to the campaign that the party ran because the
economy is the most sensitive issue for the majority of Tunisians who were affected by economic mismanagement during the Ben Ali era and had suffered following the revolution when economic activity slumped considerably. Ennahda offered reassurance in this respect for their supposed ability to manage the economy and crucially stamp down on corruption.

All these explanations carry a degree of validity. The organisational skills and the capacity to mobilise put on display by Ennahda since its legalisation are very obvious and were even more so during the electoral campaign. The credibility of its candidates and activists is also in little doubt, as ordinary Tunisians all know too well the sufferings that party members endured in jail and or exile for decades. The weakness of secular parties is also quite obvious in the sense that they are divided and seemingly unable to mount a challenge outside the main cities. Finally, the Ennahda discourse based on political pluralism and the recognition of the necessity for the new Tunisia to protect individual freedoms has been crucial to attract voters that might have been otherwise suspicious of the parties as have the promises the party made on economic issues. In particular, the references made to the Turkish model seemed to play well with the electorate given that such a model is based on sustained economic growth and development. As Ali Laaridh (Interview with author, 2011), member of the Executive Committee declared: ‘we certainly have similarities with the Turkish AKP in what we would like to do and achieve.’

That said, these explanations also have shortcomings in explaining the wide popularity of Ennahda and they are contingent to the elections without taking into account longer term trends. In terms of the organisational skills there is no doubt that reviving old networks and structures has been important, but it does not take into account the fact that a significant number of younger people with no connections to the historical Ennahda joined the party and helped it create new structures across the entire country. Tassinari and Boserup (2011) focus their attention on three sociological groups that are in Ennahda: the returnees from exile, the former political prisoners and the ones who remained silent during the repressive era. However, they fail to take into account a whole new generation of Tunisians under the age of 35 who have swelled the ranks of the party since legalisation and helped it succeed. As outlined in the previous section, it is precisely this generation who sought out a life based on personal piety and social engagement within a religious framework.

The credibility factor in terms of the personalities involved in the party is also not a sufficient explanation because all genuine opposition parties and politicians can make the same claim of having stood up to the regime and suffered from it quite legitimately. It is for instance no coincidence that the second and third-placed parties in the elections were Congress for the Republic
and *Ettakatol*, both harshly repressed by Ben Ali. In addition, the years of prison and exile that *Ennahda* members suffered find a parallel in some leftist parties. *Ennahda* members themselves recognise for instance the credibility of figures such as Hamma Hammami, leader of the Tunisian Workers Communist Party. As Abdelhamid Jelassi (Interview with authors, 2011) put it: ‘I have a lot of respect for instance for Hamma Hammami.’ The weakness of secular parties and their unwillingness or inability to run a better campaign does not necessarily stand up to closer scrutiny. After all, when one considers the overall results, secular parties did just as well as *Ennahda* in seats and percentage points when counted together. The problem might therefore be their inability to create coalitions rather than running a good campaign and even this is doubtful in the sense that all the main political parties needed to measure their individual support at a time when electoral volatility is at its peak due to the uncertain nature of the transition. Finally, *Ennahda*’s message, as outlined, was not that different from the one they had been promoting for at least two decades and their collaborative efforts with other parties in exile from 2005 indicate that they had already fully subscribed to political pluralism and individual freedoms. In addition most parties claimed that they would be in a position to improve the economic situation. In short the reassuring message *Ennahda* had was not very innovative or surprising.

Interestingly, the most significant evidence that today’s *Ennahda* differs quite considerably to the old one despite the presence in the party of many original members is the paradox that its political programme does not ring very Islamic. When one analyses the political programme of *Ennahda* there is very little that is Islamic about it. There are no calls to create an Islamic state in any shape or form. In fact the point of departure of *Ennahda* on the matter is that article 1 of the Tunisian constitution should remain as it is with the simple mention that Tunisia is a Muslim country. In this respect ‘Muslim’ does not have to be necessarily equated with practising believer and gives no indication that the institutions of the state should be Islamic. As Riadh Chaibi (interview with author, 2011), member of *Ennahda* national assembly, argued: ‘we are not a dogmatic party, we are a pragmatic party. We realise that Tunisia is a plural country and Europe is very close to us not only geographically. Tunisian society is similar in many ways to European societies and this is a given and we do not want to change that.’ There are no calls either to implement *sharia* law in so far as the term is indicative of very specific and strict legal dispositions. Abdelhamid Jelassi (interview with author, 2011) stated that ‘on the issue of *sharia* law, one can put anything he wants in there, I think we have to stay away from words and terminology that is divisive.’ By this he suggested that the legislation to be adopted with respect to certain policy areas will be the product of negotiation.
with other political and social actors rather than by rigorously sticking to controversial religious precepts. In terms of women’s rights for instance, there is the recognition that ‘it is not Islam that placed women in the home at a certain point in time, but historical circumstances’ and that therefore the legislation in place will not be changed. There are no calls to repel or adopt policies and legislation that has to do with individual choices and behaviour: Ennahda ‘cannot impose the will of one party over others. ‘We are not the spokespeople of Islam’ (interview with author, Hajez Ben Aoun Hajjem, 2011). While these certainly stems in part from a political elaboration at the level of the leadership and are also meant to assure the fears of other parties about Ennahda, they could also be interpreted as a response to the behaviour and beliefs of those who joined the party in recent times and who had no previous experience of Ennahda or any connection to it. It is to the discussion of these new Ennahda constituencies we now turn to.

The Transformation of Ennahda in Tunisia

Ennahda was created in 1981 under the name of Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami (the Islamic Tendency Movement) by Rachid Ghannouchi and Abdelfattah Mourou, changing its name to Ennahda in 1991. Its creation followed the same logic that had driven other mainstream movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood to become active in politics. Thus, the story of the party has been examined in detailed elsewhere (Tamimi, 2001; Allani, 2009) with a particular focus on the way in which the party swung between confrontation with the regime. The arrival of Ennahda on the Tunisian political scene coincides with many of the reasons that had led to the emergence of Islamist parties across the region, namely the desire to challenge the authoritarianism of the ruling elites, giver a voice and power to a generation of educated middle-class professionals that the system was unable and unwilling to accommodate and a widespread resentment towards the importation of values and behaviours that were perceived to be detrimental to the cohesion of society and its indigenous values. This last factor was particularly significant in the Tunisian case in so far as the very essence of the state since independence was its forced commitment to the concept of laïcité.

The Tunisian independence movement, Neo-Destour, was split internally between the Bourguiba faction that aspired to replicate the French governance model in Tunisia and the Salah Ben Youssef faction that wanted Arab-Muslim values to be much more central. In the final negotiations with France, France offered Tunisia partial independence. Ultimately Bourguiba emerged as the winner of this internal power struggle and in order to secure his position within the party he sentenced
Salah Ben Youssef to death in 1957 and 1958. Ben Youssef fled to Tripoli and then to Zürich where he was assassinated in 1961 (Khlifi, 2005). This part of history has been officially neglected and there is very little written on Ben Youssef, but his physical elimination coincided with the attempt by Bourguiba to shape the country and the role that Islam would, or would not to be more accurate, play. Bourguiba held the view that Islam was a core reason for the backwardness of Tunisia and if the country was to become modern and developed like France, it would have to become secular. In order to make the laïcité of the country a reality, Bourguiba promoted a number of crucial reforms aimed at undermining the role and status of Islam and of its official interpreters. For instance, with the reform of the education system the Zitouna Mosque in Tunis, one of the most traditional and prestigious institutions for Islamic studies in the Arab world, was closed down and Islamic studies was moved to a new secular university in the department of theology. Also, sharia courts were abolished and the judicial system became based on secular legislation with the consequence that the ulama lost much of their importance and prestige. Even the festivity of Ramadan itself came under attack from Bourguiba because, he argued, it lowered the productivity and therefore working hours in the public administration remained unchanged through Ramadan (Salem, 1984). Finally and equally important Bourguiba utilised the Tunisian woman in his to transform Tunisia into a secular country and one nation. In particular, women’s dressing was used by Bourguiba as a symbol of the struggle against Islamic backwardness and in favour of modernisation. In his speeches Bourguiba called the veil an ‘odious rag’ (Moore, 1965:55) which had nothing to do with Tunisian culture, tradition or history. The modern woman should not wear the Islamic veil or the traditional Bedouin veil. Rather, the Tunisian woman was an important part of the working force and should participate in the jihad for development on equal foot with the Tunisian man. Thus, a number of changes of The Code of Personal Status concerning women’s status in the society were carried through in the first year of independence. In 1981, Bourguiba further announced a decree which prohibited the use of the veil in public buildings. This meant that the modern, educated women employed in the public administration and in the schools as teachers could no longer wear the veil at work, and girls in schools and at universities had to take off the veil before entering the school. As a consequence the veil as well as other public markers of Islam slowly disappeared from the Tunisian public from 1956 onwards (Charrad, 2001). While similar reforms took place in other Arab countries as well and did not seem at first to find particular resistance among citizens who were indeed focused on social and economic development, the Tunisian attempt to enforce the concept and practice of laïcité went very far and by the mid 1970s it triggered the reaction of educated middle-class
professionals who began to argue that aping the West was not going to deliver the development that Bourguiba referred to. The economic difficulties of the early 1980s seemed to confirm their views. Rachid Ghannouci, *Ennahda*’s leader, became a popular opposition figure in the late 1970s when he travelled through the country to speak in mosques about the necessity to return to the way of Islam. More specifically, he condemned the manner in which Tunisia was assimilating an identity that was not truly Muslim and Arab. ‘I remember we used to feel like strangers in our own country. We had been educated as Muslims and Arabs, while we could see that the country had been totally moulded in the French cultural identity (Esposito, 1987:155).’ In 1978, when a general strike was called to protest at the worsening economic and political situation Ghannouchi declared that *Ennahda* believed that Islam was in danger and that leftist forces would seize power and really do away with Islam all together. Thus, in the 1970s Tunisia saw the emergence of Islamism as an opposition movement to both the regime and left-wing forces. Throughout the 1980s *Ennahda* grew in popularity as it was confronting the regime with the widespread dissatisfaction with the socio-economic crisis the country faced.

When Ben Ali took power in 1987, it seemed that *Ennahda* might be finally allowed to enter the political game, but the party was never legalised and by 1991 its leaders were either imprisoned or exiled. Ben Ali then embarked on a zero-tolerance toward Islamists and practicing Muslims with stability and security becoming the priorities of the regime and a legitimization tool. The war on terror further allowed the regime to stamp down on all activities that were deemed to be ‘Islamist’ and the crackdown soon extended to all opposition groups (Durac and Cavatorta, 2009). Thus, Islam in Tunisia became synonymous with violent Islamism well into the beginning of the 2000s. The repression of *Ennahda* had two important consequences for the movement’s development. First, it led to a rethink of the strategies used in the past to challenge the regime with a much firmer willingness emerging in the mid 2000s to collaborate with other opposition movements to challenge the regime (Haugbølle and Cavatorta, 2011b). This change of strategy towards cross-ideological cooperation reaffirmed in a much more definite manner the commitment of the party to democratic politics, respect for individual rights and respect for the *acquis* of Tunisia in terms of women’s rights. While the party had already subscribed to all of that in the late 1980s, the commitment taken in conjunction with other opposition movements after years of negotiations was a genuinely significant step in terms of political credibility. Suspicions in fact remained and to a large extent still do about the credibility of *Ennahda*’s claims, although they have been tempered by the fact that
many of the party’s voters, sympathisers and members have a tradition of pluralism demonstrated through their associational work during the Ben Ali era.

The second consequence of the repressive decades that Islamism had to endure at the political level was to move it to the private and individual sphere. The impossibility to be an Islamist political militant in public led to expressing attachment to the religion through individual pious behaviour. This does not mean that the choice to wear the veil or attend Friday prayers was a conscious political action on the part of all of those who made that choice. It simply indicates that large sectors of society, through their daily practices, were embracing forms of behaviour that distanced them from the ones that were dominant in society and related to the way in which the regime arbitrarily behaved. The values of morality in the public sphere represented by ‘religious behaviour’ contrasted sharply with the flaunting and amoral behaviour of the ruling elites, as described by Beau and Graciet (2009). The morality of charitable work was at odds with the lack of interest on the part of state’s institutions for the disenfranchised and the poor. The attempt to shape an individual’s life through religious education went against the values of rampant consumerism. The possibility to express ‘Islam’ in through this privatised showings of faith and renewed social engagement based on them profoundly challenged the regime. Ben Ali reacted by alternating a degree of tolerance with attempts recuperation of such forms of religious expression such as the opening of Radio Zitouna, a private religious radio, setting the stage for the success that Ennahda would encounter once legalised in March 2011.

**From state-centric Islamism to personal piety; the road of Ennahda**

Following Bayat’s intuition, it can be claimed that the disappearance of Ennahda from both the public and institutional scene for over two decades created the conditions for questioning the validity of a state-centric Islamist ideology whose principal aim was to capture political power. The years when Ennahda was silenced were years of profound economic and social changes in Tunisia and while development was indeed very uneven, the country did progress economically and was further integrated into the global economy (Sfeir, 2006). Increasing exposition to cultural and social models imported from the outside world had two effects in Tunisia. First, they undermined the idea that the whole of the country and its population could be treated as a unitary whole when in fact in Tunisia coexist numerous identities that at times overlap and at times are in conflict. The Ben Ali regime attempted to create and propagate an image where the nation was united behind him in the quest for modernity (Sadiki, 2002), while in fact this was a self-serving exercise in order to stave
off democratic demands in recognition of the pluralism of Tunisian society. One of the identities that re-emerged in the social sphere was the Arab-Muslim one. This is not to be confused with a specific political project, although a minority of young Tunisians have been attracted by militant and violent Salafism, but it was mostly expressed with the desire to personally reaffirm a Muslim identity and behaviour in order to deal with the practical challenges that socio-economic changes brought to Tunisia, which was experiencing a rapid process of economic globalisation (Sfeir, 2006).

Second, and in particular since September 2001, Islamism was being depicted both nationally and internationally as ‘evil’ and as a security threat that needed to be dealt with through harsh repression. The repressive turn against what was perceived as organised Islamism led a number of Tunisians to reaffirm their Muslim identity through personal piety and engagement in the social sphere. Again this was done a-politically. Wearing the veil became the most visible outlet of this new found personal choice of piety, but the new appropriation of Islam in Tunisia is more profound than that and contains other important aspects, including charitable work and, crucially, behaving as a good Muslim in everyday life.

In this respect Quranic associations set up well before the revolution are a powerful example of how personal piety and social engagement had transformed the perception and practice of Islamism by those who were actually engaged in it. This social Islamism disconnected from the state-centric ideology that characterised Islamist parties and movements in the past then informed the way in which Ennahda, once revived after the revolution, has been restructured, how it campaigned and what kind of political discourse it holds. One of the most interesting cases of the way in which Islam invested the social sphere and shed its political undertones during the Ben Ali presidency is the creation of some charitable and cultural associations that were set up by religious people. They have emerged in Tunisia over the last few years and despite being closely watched by Ben Ali’s repressive apparatus, their a-political activities allowed them to operate somewhat freely. One specific instance is worth describing in more detail. In Cité An-Nasr, a new middle-class suburb north of Tunis, the Quran association Riadh Ennasr has existed since 2007. It was founded originally by a group of six under-40 pious middle-class men who lived in the new upper-class suburb but were alienated by the hollow, consumer atmosphere in the area. One of the six founders of the association explained that the initial spur to create it came from the realisation that the neighbourhood ‘lacked values and warmth in the new area’ (Interview with author, 2010). These pious men also felt that Tunisians in general lacked an identity of their own which could combine the best from the West, which they see as a crucial part of their identity, and from Islam.
On the one hand, the integration into the global market, as mentioned earlier, created economic opportunities for a range of middle-class and upper-middle class Tunisians who benefited from exposure to some Western values and ways of doing business, possibly because many of them were employed by multinational firms or conducted business in the West. In doing so, they began to appreciate how a degree of liberalism and social pluralism could benefit Tunisian society where both were absent due to the authoritarianism and corrupt practices of the Ben Ali regime (quote, ex Hibou?). On the other hand, the integration into the global market place created very quickly a hyper-consumerist culture and the perception of a deterioration of moral values, which was also exposed in the morally suspect behaviour of members of the ruling elites. This dual influence led to the understanding that society needed pluralism and openness, but, at the same time, it also needed new moral codes that Islam, as a truly indigenous guide to morality, would provide. Thus, the founders of the association developed the idea that a Quranic association could help elevate the ‘morality’ of the society and provide ‘stability for the soul’ (Interview with authors, 2010). It is with this in mind that they created a Quran Association: the basic practical aim was to teach the reading of the Quran properly in private classes and over time the number of ‘students’ increased exponentially (1800 in April 2010, 1200 of these were women).

Initially the association established contacts with the religious Radio Zitouna or rather the main anchor of the radio, Sheikh Mohamed Machfar. He was invited to give classes in the reading of the Quran at the association and in time, as it grew in popularity, other sheikhs and female Islamic theologians, whom were also presenting programs at Radio Zitouna, have been employed as teachers at the association. The classes for women in particular have experienced a remarkable attendance. The women explain reading the Quran properly gives them satisfaction and a sense of peace (Interview with authors, 2010). At the association in Cité An-Nasr a majority of the women are young to middle age women, generally between 30-45 years. Many of them are well educated and work as university professors, lawyers and business managers. The majority of them indicate that the turning point in their lives when they began to look for more meaning regarding their existence and role in society is the years between 2003 and 2005. It is at this moment when they became significantly aware of Islam and chose to wear the veil for the first time in their life. Their choices were not politically motivated, but reveal a personal development and a quest for life meaning and balance. Their activism within the association, together with the activism of the founders, has meant a constant development of social activities, which now include a very popular nursery and the creation of official cooperative links with private school where the children can
continue studying and where other children are exposed to the teaching methods that the association sponsors and can provide. The combination of personal commitment to improve society according to the tenets of Islam with the realisation that individual behaviour cannot be legislated for and that therefore social engagement is meant to bear witness to the validity of leading a religious life rather than dictating to others what is proper and what is not. In the words of one of the founders of the association, Tirad Labbane (Interview with authors, 2011), ‘our commitment to Islam does not mean that we want to impose what we do on others. In that sense you could say that we are anti-Salafist because we do not approve of imposing behaviour. If you want to wear a mini-skirt it is not my problem, if you do not want to wear the veil it is also not my problem. Choices have to be left to individuals; the state cannot impose behaviour either. From the state authorities we only ask that they let us do our work in peace.’ This stance is very important because it is one that is taken after the departure of Ben Ali. During the dictatorship this kind of comment might have meant to appease the regime and stave off any accusations of extremism. After the revolution one might not be inclined to be so restrained, but what emerges is that this social Islam that has developed in Tunisia is quite genuinely attached to the belief that one can lead a spiritual religious and modern life without falling into the trap of forcing values and behaviours on other Muslims who might be making different choices.

The January 2011 uprising liberated this new religious energy further and the case of Jerba Association for Solidarity and Development is a case in point. It was established after the revolution by a group of people round the 40s with no experience of associational life, but who were moved to set up an organisation that would promote solidarity with the less fortunate and economic development of the area. A number of professionals were involved in its creation and with a small initial budget of 24.000 Tunisian dinars (13.000 euro) they decided that one third would be used to help Libyans in distress because of the war against the Ghadafi regime in 2011, one third would go to the poor during Ramadan and one third would be used to support entrepreneurial projects in Jerba. The founders explain that they had always talked about the idea of helping others as a duty. This duty is for them a core part of their faith: it is the proper moral and religious thing to do but it was only after the changes by January 2011 that they felt sufficiently ready to create an association to be the frame for this social engagement (Interview with author, 2011).

This type of activism has been on the rise for a decade in Tunisia and while the numbers of active associations has probably increased after the revolution, it is important to emphasise that it did exist before the fall of the regime and that it is an indication of the transformation of Islamism from a
state-centric political project to a practice of Islam that is deeply personal, centred on social activism rather than politics and dependent on local social networks for support and expansion. The glue holding together these networks is a specific understanding and practice of Islam where the religious precepts apply to those who choose them rather than being imposed on the whole of the community.

Connecting this new pious, ethical and deeply personal Islamism to the success of the party does not mean the existence of a single mechanism of causality, but it simply indicates that new social forces significantly contributed to make Ennahda what it is today and partially determined its electoral victory. The religious ethos of Ennahda and its leaders is first and foremost a guarantee of probity and ethical behaviour, which is what many are looking for in their political representatives because such an ethical behaviour is what they try to display in their personal private life. It might be naïve to equate religious ethos with moral probity, but many Tunisians have a very negative experience of moral probity and its association with laïcité because this was the slogan and main value of a corrupt and deeply authoritarian regime that failed the country and its citizens in the long-term. The bottom-up influence of ordinary citizens on Ennahda is recognised by prominent party members who argue that Ennahda is not a classic party run from the top down that takes advantage of a sudden opening in a political system that previously was tightly controlled. It was the activism of ordinary citizens, much of it near spontaneous, that carried the party so far, so fast.

Party leader Rafik Abdessalim, now minister of foreign affairs, recognizes this reality: ‘In 1989, many of the leaders and members went into exile, while 4,000 were in prison…. Before January 2011, there were no offices, no public activities, no visible signs of Ennahda…so the structure of the party today is a product of people’s engagement. You cannot explain everything based on the organization itself and on the idea that what should be done is dictated from the top. Local people are opening local offices of Ennahda. It is not the top of the party opening these offices. It is based on people on the ground.’ From this premise, it follows that Ennahda is best understood as a broad movement with multiple constituencies that broadly subscribe to an Islamic ideal, as it developed during Ben Ali’s rule but under the radar of the regime.

**Conclusion**

In his 1994 book Roy suggested that that state-centric Islamism and its ideology had failed because they proved to be unable take state power anywhere in the Arab world. In other words, the ideological propulsive force of Islamism had run out of steam. However, this has not meant the end
of Islamism *per se*, rather it has led to a profound transformation. This has occurred first and foremost at the popular and, crucially, individual level. Faced with challenges and opportunities that increased integration into the world economy and world culture, however loosely interpreted they might be, radically changed the Arab world over the last two decades and led to a rethink of what social engagement and personal piety meant. On the one hand there has been a significant rise in popular appreciation for the political and social pluralism that liberal-democracies had to offer (Fattah, 2006). On the other, as in many Western societies, there have been deep preoccupations about the extreme consumerism, individualism and moral corruption that integration with the wider world brought about. As a reaction to this, Islam has come to the rescue, particularly as glue for social activism motivated by individual piety and the desire to be a good Muslim. The combination of both effects has brought about a new ways of thinking about Islamism and once the authoritarian constraints disappeared, this new Islamism found a link with a political party, *Ennahda*, which could be influenced and was receptive to this innovative manner of talking about and practising Islamism. In many ways, *Ennahda* attracted a lot of ‘young blood’ because its leaders had already moved on through their personal experiences from the way in which they thought about the state and political power in the 1980s, but also because such young blood found in the party a vehicle for the type of social values and order they wish to see in the future Tunisia. Supporting, joining and/or voting for *Ennahda* in today’s Tunisia does not simply mean blindly following a set of political and religious precepts on how to gain and exercise state power, but it means linking the values and understanding of Islam that are prevalent at the social level and making them present in politics. *Ennahda* is the demonstration that for many in Tunisia trust in Islamists to run state affairs is first and foremost based on the sharing of the practice of a non-intrusive Islam and on the idea of morality. Thus, the fall of the authoritarian constraints have permitted previously a-political actors to join a political party and influence its stances not by proposing again a state-centric ideology but by bringing at the political level the practices and values that were successful in social activism. Post-Islamism is truly alive in *Ennahda*, a political party with virtually no Islamic agenda. It is very difficult to find ‘Islamism’ in *Ennahda* because the coherent state-centric ideology that it had is now in the past. The Islamism one should be looking for and one that *Ennahda* does indeed espouse is a social and deeply personal one that equates largely with morality and moral behaviour in managing public affairs, which is an attitude that the previous ruling elites did not demonstrate. It is not an Islamism that has a preconceived set of policies that cannot be deviated from. What is Islamic about the party in Jelassi’s words is the following: ‘what is Islamic about us is that we use
the points of reference of the religion to arrive at certain preferred policies that however should not be imposed.’ It is almost word by word what members of the Quranic associations have to say about how they envisage their role in wider society. Thus, Ennahda’s pronouncements are very much in line with the way in which religious associations active in the social sphere operated and saw themselves. It is these young middle class religious activists across the country who swell the ranks of Ennahda and contributed to its success by activating the same networks and proposing the same beliefs that they had previously employed solely in the social sphere through their associations. Their rallying to Ennahda is not necessarily based on policies or past record or previous connections to the party, but on the assumption that it is the closest political actor to their beliefs and one that they can influence by joining because they perceive that there is a coincidence of ideas when it comes to the role of Islam in society and politics. One Ennahda activist in Jerba said: ‘our slogan in the elections is our three principles: freedom, justice and development. These three are closely related. If there is not liberty the country cannot develop. Liberty is also economic liberty because if there is not economic liberty then there cannot be development with an element of social justice’. Thus, ‘[Ennahda] is not a religious party which is preoccupied with the practice of Islam…[it is] a political party which is engaged in economic and social issues, but whose values come from Islam.’ (interview with authors, 2011). This is very much echoed in the way in which activists in the social sphere mentioned above, as demonstrated above believe Islam can play a role in building a modern Muslim society where the state refrains from imposing whatever behaviour on its citizens and simply guarantees the individual rights to live as a practising Muslim or a non-practising one.

What is also interesting to note and worth mentioning is that post-Islamism has not only been beneficial to Ennahda, but has found an institutional and political linkage with other candidates and formations that have a supposed Islamic character. These expressions of post-Islamism range from supporting former Ben Ali supporters who have some sort of religious legitimacy and have maintained ties with local communities through their social networks to supporting more militant and openly anti-democratic parties such as Hizb ut Tahrir which did not obtain a license to run in the Constitutional elections in 2011. This indicates the complexity of the way in which Islam is individually practised and what sense it gives to individual lives. All of this then has repercussions on the choices individuals make when it comes to electoral and political support.
References


