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Tunisia: New Model for Progressive Islamism?

By Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Synopsis

The current upheaval in Tunisia has caused some concerns in the West that Islamist groups would fill the political void by proclaiming an Islamic state. A closer scrutiny of its main Islamist party, the An-Nahda, reveals that a new progressive model of Islamism might be taking shape.

Commentary

THE RECENT toppling of Tunisia's longtime dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali has once again brought forth the question of whether another Muslim country will turn into a theocratic Islamic state. Several commentators have already drawn comparison of the Tunisian case with the Iranian Revolution. They have painted a scenario that Islamists in Tunisia will use democracy and coalition politics to consolidate their power before turning against their secular allies and purging them violently. Such views reflect a failure to understand the nuances of both the history and politics of the Tunisian Islamist movement.

The Ousting of Ben Ali's Government

The overthrow of the Ben Ali government was not driven by the Islamists seeking to stage an Islamic Revolution. The Islamist movement in Tunis was not much involved in the unrest that subsequently toppled Ben Ali. The Tunisian drama started when an unemployed man set himself on fire in protest against unemployment and shortage of food. Days of unrest finally forced the country's president to flee the country. Ben Ali had governed Tunisia in an authoritarian way for more than two decades. But until his downfall, he had successfully fended off any political opposition due to strong economic growth, a large middle class that continued to enjoy a comfortable standard of living, and high levels of literacy.

Nevertheless, when economic problems started to grip the country, Tunisians began clamouring for a change in the political system. The Tunisian revolt, now popularly referred to as the Jasmine Revolution, has put to rest the argument by some in the West that the only alternative to authoritarian Arab regimes are the Islamists. It is obvious that the revolution was largely secular with little or no religious motivation. Nevertheless, it will be inaccurate to assume that the Islamists will have no role to play in the future of Tunisia. Already, the main Islamist icon of Tunisian Islamism, Rachid Ghannouchi, has announced his intentions to return to Tunis from London where he lives in exile.

Rachid Ghannouchi and Tunisian Islamism

Rachid Ghannouchi was one of the main opposition figures under Ben Ali's regime. During his student days in Damascus and Paris, Ghannouchi was influenced by the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). On his return to Tunisia, he sought to disseminate MB ideas in the country. He founded the Islamic Tendency Movement in 1979 which was subsequently renamed the An-Nahda (Renaissance Party), an Islam-oriented political party that sought to establish an Islamic state. His party was barred from contesting the 1989 Tunisian general election which saw President Ben Ali's party securing all the seats in parliament in a massively rigged election.

Fred Halliday, a prominent observer of Middle East politics, believed the independent candidates the An-Nahda fielded garnered about 30% of the overall votes while the party itself claimed it won 60% of the seats in parliament. Ben Ali moved quickly to diminish the influence of the party by jailing thousands of its activists. The internal strife between Islamist groups and the government in neighbouring Algeria gave the Tunisian regime a much needed justification for its uncompromising stance against An-Nahda.

Islamism as a political force was eliminated through widespread arrests and many leaders, including Ghannouchi, were driven into exile. Since then, An-Nahda's organisational structure and grassroots network have been largely decimated. In 2005, in an attempt to maintain the party's relevance, Ghannouchi joined other opposition parties and civil society groups in an alliance that called for greater freedom of expression.

“Progressive Islamism” for the Arab World?

Ghannouchi had announced in an interview with Al-Jazeera that he was returning to work towards the construction of a state which functions according to the rule of law. Nevertheless, his political future is far from certain. In an interview with the Financial Times, Ghannouchi expressed no illusions about his party and his place in contemporary Tunisia, noting that younger Tunisians have had little exposure to the ideas of the An-Nahda.

Yet, many in the Muslim world including the current leaders of Turkey have learned much from his ideas. While the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey has been hailed as a model for co-existence between Islam and secularism, it was Ghannouchi's books translated into Turkish that was one of the sources of inspiration for the AKP. The AKP model has been criticised by Islamists in the Arab world for not being sufficiently Islamic due to its close relations to Israel as well as its social policies which are viewed to be completely secular.

In contrast, the An-Nahda has maintained a fine balance between its progressive views on Islam and issues that are seen to be close to the hearts of the Arabs. In an interview with the author, Ghannouchi argued that his model of moderate Islamism was shaped by secularism that permeated Tunisian society. Setting himself against the more conservative Islamist position, Ghannouchi believes that non-Muslim citizens should be allowed to hold any office within an Islamic state and women should be allowed to be involved in every aspect of public life. In this regard, he rejects the more traditional interpretation of Islamism which advocates the establishment of a theocratic Islamic state.

Litmus test

His envisioned Islamic state comprises all the trappings of democracy and pluralism including majority rule, free and fair elections, freedom of expression and the protection of minorities and women. He has also advocated the protection of human rights. At the same time, he reflects the sentiments of the Arab ground when he called for a full-fledged Palestinian state to be established.

Despite his moderation and popularity, it is unlikely that An-Nahda would be in a position to form a government in Tunisia. The party would probably need to work within a coalition to form a government or function as an effective opposition within a democratic framework. Regardless of its ultimate role, An-Nahda serves as an important litmus test of how an Islamist party functions within a democratic setting in the Arab world. Its success could significantly influence other Islamist parties in the Arab world to moderate their own political position and ideology.

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