

An Islamic Tide

Since Tunisia's first democratic elections 18 months ago, Islamic factions have increased their social and political power in the North African country, raising questions about its future.

by *Giuliana Sgrena*

THE OCTOBER anniversary of Tunisia's first multi-party elections produced little fanfare. Those who did turn out were split along party lines, supporters of the ruling Islamist Ennahda Party, and more egalitarian, secular opponents, who had championed freedom, justice and democracy during the 2011 uprising.

The country's post-revolutionary civil and human rights record has also come under fire from Human Rights Watch, which has noted the arrest of secular journalists and artists. The group also decried persistent press censorship and presence of a "religious police," putting women's rights under siege. Meanwhile, the country's deep-seated economic and labor problems remain unresolved.

On the eve of the first anniversary of the election, Oct. 19, came the first political assassination. Lofti Nagedh, leader of Nidaa Tounes (Appeal to Tunisia), a new party founded by interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, was murdered in Tataouine, in southern Tunisia, by a group of Salafi Islamic extremists.

His death didn't stop the governing troika of Ennahda and two secular parties, the Congress for the Republic Party (CPR) and Ettakatol, from staging a one-year celebration in Constituent Assembly, an event boycotted by the body's more democratic block.

The Constituent Assembly elections were intended as a first step in a democratization process intended to guarantee the drafting of a new constitution within a year. The deadline passed long ago but the country is still without a new constitution.

That may not be a negative, since part of the delay has been caused by protests against Islamists proposals that suggested the new document should include passages

citing women's rights as "complementary" to those of men, demanded anti-blasphemy provisions, and articles that would prevent the press from criticizing "established" religious positions. Tunisian civil society is well organized and includes a powerful labor union, the General Union of Tunisian Workers, as well as a healthy array of women's associations.

No wonder the anniversary of the elections saw part of the country cheer the incumbent government, while another, also vocal, denounce the country's leadership as biased, if not dangerous.

Ennahda won the 2011 vote thanks in part to strong support financial and media support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar (which hosts and funds the Al Jazeera TV network). The Islamist captured 41 percent of the vote (among the 52 percent that cast ballots) and was able to govern thanks to help from the two secular parties, the CPR headed by Moncef Marzouki and the chief of Ettakatol, Constituent Assembly President Mustapha Ben Jaafar. Hamadi Jebali, an Ennahda moderate and an engineer by training, was name prime minister.

The emphasis of Ennahda's moderate side helped the West establish Tunisia as a continued ally. It had long supported the dictatorship of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which lasted from 1987 until he was toppled in January 2011.

The Tunisians, who wanted Ennahda legalized (it was illegal under Ben Ali), citing democratic priorities, nonetheless criticized the party's mixed signals. In public, the party appeared to emphasize its moderate Islamic side, while its militants took a harder line, essentially doing the party's dirty work. The dual character of the party has seen its base become radicalization, with an increasing



Former Tunisian Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi.

presence of so-called “nadhahaoui” (Ennahda militants) as well as subversive support from the Salafists.

This Islamic doubletalk has masked government complicity and indifference toward the often violent policing actions carried out by Salafists, who are now considered by many politicians and the Tunisian press as Ennahda’s armed wing.

Their repression broke out almost immediately after the October 2011 elections. Ennahda’s victory appeared to the Salafists as a mandate to impose their stricter version of Islamic law and governance.

The first attacks targeted women who refused to abide by Islamic dress codes. After that came university teachers, under siege for blasphemous views of social and intellectual life. Finally, stores that sold alcohol were targeted.

But the first targeted effort was aimed at the University of Manouba, on the outskirts of Tunis. Salafist militants demanded that only female students who wore the full-veil niqab (which basically obscures identity) be allowed to enroll in the school. When university rector Habib Kazdaghli and members of the

faculty resisted, the university found itself occupied for weeks by angry militants. Neither the government nor the police ever took action against the occupation, not even when the Tunisian flag flying from the university roof was removed in favor of a black, holy war flag.

But it was the Sept. 14 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis that threw an instant wrench into ties between the United States and Tunisia. Police intervened, but only after militants had stormed the compound and set fire to vehicles in its parking lot.

The incident suggested more than mere government laxity. A video released a month after the attack showed a meeting between the leader and founder of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, and Salafist group. Though the 71-year-old Ghannouchi has no official role in the government, he remains a key figure in ties with Arab-Islamic countries and also tasked by the party to meet visiting heads of state. Some see him as the country’s shadow prime minister.

In the clandestine video, which Tunisian media said was filmed in February 2011, Ghannouchi advises his Salafist visitors to exercise “patience” and “wisdom.” He says: “Lay groups, though they are a minority, still control the media and the economy. The government, even though in the hands of Ennahda, is

controlled by them.” The army and the police, he adds, “are still uncertain,” and then he adds: “I say to our young Salafists, be patient ... why rush? Take the time necessary to consolidate the results we’ve obtained” in the aftermath of the revolution. “Today we no longer control just a mosque, but we also have the ministry of religious affairs. We don’t have a window but the state. Islamists must use cultural associations to establish Islamic schools everywhere and launch appeals for prayer because people still do not know Islam.”

In an effort to better explain his “small steps” strategy, Ghannouchi cites Algeria: “Do you think there’s no going back? Think again. This is what we believed in Algeria of the 1990s, but our assessment was wrong. The mosques fell back in the hands of the laity and Islamists were again persecuted.” At the time of the Algerian military’s repression of Islamic groups, Ghannouchi was in exile in London and considered a leading ideologue of the so-called Islamic Salvation Front.

The spread of the video had the effect of a bomb blast, which Ghannouchi tried defusing through media interviews, some of them with Western organization.

He insisted the Salafists had been “demonized,” and suggested they would eventually come to power, probably within “10-to-15 years.” On a number of occasions, he compared Salafist energy with the ardor he felt as young political activist and was resolute in insisting they should be treated as Tunisian “citizens.” The call was met a petition drafted by 75 MPs calling for the dissolution of Ennahda.

Though not all government administration is in the hands of Islamists, they have made significant and visible headway in penetrating the country’s customs and habits. Giving Ghannouchi’s approach a helping hand is Religious Affairs Minister Nourredine Khadmi, a great admirer of Saudi Arabia where he once studied. He’s eager for the “reorganization of Islam in Tunisia” modeled the Saudi “Wahhabi” movement (the ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia school of Islam).

He seeks the opening of Islamic schools in which men and women are segregated (with the niqab required for some classes). He also wants a restructuring of Tunis’ renowned Zaytuna University with courses that introduce the concept of “fatwas,” or Koranic rulings). He also seeks to recruit volunteers who will ensure the population follows “good practices” and that reports “bad practices,” flanking religious police in an effort to promote virtue and prevent vice. Volunteers would be responsible for organizing birth rituals, circumcision, engagement, marriage, Mecca pilgrimages, and funerals.

The spread of Wahhabism is part of Saudi foreign policy, a kind of religious colonialism backed by petrodollar donations. Saudi money was directly responsible for helping Ennahda organize weddings and banquets during its election campaign. But the Saudi-oriented reach has grown. So-called “orfi” marriage, banned by law and once practiced only in the Tunisian countryside, is now being promoted and practiced by Salafists. Such weddings require only two witnesses, a prayer, after which the marriage is official, often without documentation. But there’s a catch: Women believe who believe they’re married confer sexual availability only to be quickly abandoned by “husbands” who feel



F. Belaid/AFP/Getty Images

Niqab-clad university students.



F. Beaid/ANP/Getty Images

A woman protestor decrying the trial of a woman raped by police officers.

no obligation stay with them. It's basically a god-blessed sex marriage, often labeled a "temporary" marriage or a "pleasure" marriage. It has long been a Shiite practice, but Sunnis have embraced it willingly.

Many women trapped into "orfi" relationships find themselves pregnant. Thankfully, Tunis' Rabta Hospital offers abortions, since many of the pregnant women wouldn't have either the means or the wherewithal to raise a child alone. "Orfi" partners are often poor, but some are also university students (in a recent six-month period, 520 "orfi" women were found to be students). Tunisian law calls for a three-month jail term for anyone convicted of the practice.

The justice ministry recently since fired 70 judges, who haven't been replaced, some seen as complicit in letting the practice flourish.

If you're a woman, denouncing rape can land you in prison (like Afghanistan), but not if the rape charge serves a political agenda.

Two cases help illustrate the situation.

Salafist officials have accused Manouba University

Rector Kazdaghli, who resisted the militant takeover, of rape. They say he attacked a niqab-clad woman who helped ransack his office. Despite support from the Tunisian and international academic world, Kazdaghli is expected to stand trial. It's not yet clear whether the woman involved in the alleged rape will testify or whether relatives will illustrate her version of events.

Another story has its own share of paradoxes. On Sept. 3, 2011, a young woman chatting with her boyfriend outside her home was stopped by a police patrol. One the officers froze the young man by allegedly extorting him, while the other two officers abducted the woman, raped her, then took her back to the original scene and raped her again, this time in front of her boyfriend. The couple reported the incident, but quickly faced the same officers who had carried out the crime. To win a temporary release, they were compelled to sign a confession that they'd engaged in lewd public acts. Notwithstanding an apology for their behavior issued by Tunisian President Mocef Marzouki, a longtime human rights activist, the couple endured the humiliation of a trial.

So goes Tunisia a year after its first democratic elections. Islamist ambitions are now clear, but so is secular opposition to their goals. That opposition is busy reorganizing. It has already formed a Popular Front to ahead of next June's elections.

Polls suggest the next vote may shake up the country. Though Ennahda still leads, it is now closely followed by Essebsi's secular Nida Tounes. These shifts have also changed allegiances within the existing Constituent Assembly, which is now facing any number of delicate decisions.

For example, the preamble to the new Constitution must define the nature of the state. The divide is obvious, with secularists demanding a clear, non-religious definition and Islamists insisting the state be clearly designated as religious. For now, domestic Islamists stopped short of insisting the country follow sharia law, but there's no telling what will happen if Tunisia, under its new constitution, is labeled a Muslim state.