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Islamist Echoes in the context of the Tunisian Islamist  
Party's 10<sup>th</sup> Congress

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## **Abstract**

Since the uprising in 2011, Tunisia is seen as a political lab whose experiences impact the entire region. The return to the political scene of the Islamists of the Ennahdha Party, and their democratic ascension to power, came as a surprise, if not a shock, to many international and local observers. The party became a key actor beyond national borders and took a step further by marking its 10th Congress with the announcement of the separation of its political and religious activities. The Tunisian experience is represented as an example for other Islamist parties so should we see the secularization of Ennahdha's discourse as being at the forefront of the Islamist movement? Or has the party already gone beyond Islamism, and in fact created a rupture with other Islamist parties? Re-branding does not imply a change in ideology but a change of perception, inside and outside the party. This analysis looks at the perception of the reform intended by Ennahdha from the point of view of foreign Islamist parties in the context of the 10th Party Congress in May 2016

## **Keywords**

Tunisia, Ennahdha, Islamist Parties, Malaysia, Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Amanah, Malaysia, Muslim Democrats

*This analysis is based on interviews conducted prior, during and after the Congress with leaders of the foreign Islamist parties.*

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## **Muslim Democrats Beyond Islamism**

The 10th Congress of the Tunisian Islamist Party Ennahdha was held in May 2016 in Hammamet and Tunis. The Congress occurred in a challenging security, political and economic context on both local and international levels. Tunisia is under scrutiny internationally and locally, thus the Islamist party Congress attracted a very large number of foreign guests, among which were key leaders of other Muslim-based political parties.

Ennahdha's<sup>1</sup> communication strategy has turned towards the rebranding of party members as "Muslim Democrats". The strategy of the Party was clearly announced in the program: "(...) the Ennahdha movement aims at renewing its party in order to increase its popularity, as a democratic political party, open and entrenched in Islamic references as defined in the 2014 Constitution (...)".

Re-branding does not imply a change in ideology but a change in perception, inside and outside the party. This new label is in fact the crystallization of a long process that started in the early days of the party. The moment of rebranding has been seen by much of the media and other observers as a fracture or "a profound transformation of the party's identity". In fact, the party's inclination towards reform and adaptation has been shaped by its experience of alternating sequences of power and oppression since its creation in the late 1980s<sup>2</sup>. The party's leadership has developed a pragmatic approach to politics and become a fine player of the democratic game.

Ennahdha's "Islamism" is not, and almost never was, the expression of an anti-modern objection to the West or to non-Muslims. In the current context, which allows the perilous, simplistic and quasi-exclusive association of the terms "Islamism" and "terrorism", the party decided to finally drop its "Islamist self" to become "Muslim democrat". The secularization of the party is a pragmatic move: a rubber stamp of the transition from oppositional repressed party to a leading democratic actor with the prospect of future victory.

## **Secularization of the Party**

The secularization of the party is observed through the lens of the approval of the separation between religious and political activities by the 1,200 party delegates present at the Congress. The motion was accepted with an 80% share of the vote<sup>3</sup>. This vote was the final stage of a process that started a few years ago. In practice, the leadership dragged its constituents, including those on the margins, along with them in a top-down mechanism. In London, in the days preceding its return to Tunisia in January 2011, Rached Ghannouchi (the party's leader and founder) declared that sharia was not for Tunisia. Since then, the leadership of the Party has paved the way for post-Islamist politics (Bayat 2013), encapsulated in the self-defined label of "Muslims Democrats".

In the opening discourse of the Congress, Ghannouchi pushed his logic one step further by asserting that Ennahdha's move was in fact the reclaiming of its true democratic and civil identity: "Despotic regimes disfigured Ennahdha's relationship with the State through repression, defamation and fear-mongering. (...) The Tunisian state is our ship which must carry all Tunisian men and women (...)"<sup>4</sup>. Ennahdha is still seeking recognition, and wants to be seen as a credible democratic force by secular and religious parties. The Congress was organised as a gigantic demonstration of this potential.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ennahdha.tn/> Last access 27th March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *The Islamic Tendency Movement* or *Mouvement de la tendance islamique* was created in 1981, subsequently the party's name changed, in 1989, to Hizb Ennahdha or Renaissance Party.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/23/ennahdha-a-du-mal-a-convaincre-les-tunisiens-de-sa-prise-de-distance-avec-l-islam-politique\\_4924562\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/23/ennahdha-a-du-mal-a-convaincre-les-tunisiens-de-sa-prise-de-distance-avec-l-islam-politique_4924562_3210.html). Consulted on 29th October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Opening discourse of Rached Ghannouchi May 21<sup>st</sup> 2016, published on the Ennahdha International Party (Official) Facebook page.

In the months following the official decision of “political specialisation” as framed by Ferjani Said<sup>5</sup>, a leading member of the party, changes are slowly being made within the party membership, including the opening of party leadership and membership to non-(practicing) Muslims<sup>6</sup> and the resignation of members also active in civil society from leadership positions. “Secularisation is not the way we see this. We are pragmatic; we are a modern political party: Muslim, Tunisian and democrat. (...) We reform ourselves and we make an example”.

### **(Dis-)Credibility**

The French Manichean view of religious parties classified Ennahdha on the side of right-wing extremism. Islamism has often been associated with obscurantism by the media or politicians. During the election that saw the victory of Nidaa Tounes in 2015, the French media were celebrating the victory of the “laic against the secular”<sup>7</sup>. At variance with this is the view that, Ennahdha is a living example of a leading Islamist party empowered by the people’s revolution, riding the wave of political change.

During all the interviews given by party members, the emphasis has been put deliberately on the idea of “mutation”, “reform” or “novelty”. These semantic choices are a clear reflexion of the party’s challenge to obtain a validation of its democratic image by foreign observers. This communication strategy has been greeted with an almost united voice, coming from both religious and non-religious actors, as an opportunist and illusory manoeuvre.

Ennahdha’s message was a surprise to several observers and generated much suspicion. The French media, at the forefront of the criticism of faith based parties, have generally portrayed this move as an historical fracture. For western media, integration to the democratic scene should be conditioned by the renunciation of a religious repertoire. In Europe there is a plethora of religious inspired or faith based parties, existing on both sides of the classical right-left political divide; their religious reference is not perceived to undermine their “democratic” credentials. But the local myths of a “salafi invasion of the French Riviera”<sup>8</sup> and the idea according which “the wave of refugees would increase the terrorist threat”<sup>9</sup> have impacted the global analysis of political Islam, and enhanced the suspicion built around the party.

It is worth recording that if religious activities are essential to Islamist parties they are only one aspect of the project. In fact, religious activities are the main spectre under which Ennahdha has been discredited or celebrated. The re-labelling of the party does not imply a separation from its religious base or constituency, and that relative separation is difficult for both insiders and outsiders to understand. The de facto religious base and inspiration is one that nurtures the suspicion of secular parties and observers, according to whom the re-labelling of Ennahdha would reveal the rhetorical attempt of a hidden agenda. Interestingly, the idea of Ennahdha’s double discourse is also shared by other Islamist parties.

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<sup>5</sup> Said Ferjani, regular discussions in May 2016, interviewed on 19th October 2016

<sup>6</sup> The Party already has, at leadership level, women who do not wear the hijab, and former members of non-religious parties such as Aroua Ben Abbès, elected assembly representative for Tunis 2 and appointed member of the Shura council in July 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See the 2014 election result headlines for *Le Figaro* <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/10/27/01003-20141027ARTFIG00315-en-tunisie-la-victoire-des-seculiers.php>. Another interesting analysis of the perception of Nidaa Tounes by French Media was published by the Al Huffington Post [http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2014/10/29/nidaa-tounes-medias-francais\\_n\\_6067174.html](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2014/10/29/nidaa-tounes-medias-francais_n_6067174.html), and BFMTV <http://www.bfmtv.com/international/tunisie-l-alliance-laique-nida-842703.html>; all sources accessed on 27th March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Laurens, historian at the College de France, explains the conspiracy theories surrounding the Muslim communities in France and the great “Salafi invasion of the beaches of South of France”, CCMO conference, Paris 26th October 2016.

<sup>9</sup> The most illustrative example of this being the recent poster campaign organised by the mayor of Beziers in the south of France, Robert Ménard, featuring the slogan “They are arriving, the State imposes them on us”. [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/beziers-ils-arrivent-la-nouvelle-affiche-anti-migrants-de-robert-menard\\_1839690.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/beziers-ils-arrivent-la-nouvelle-affiche-anti-migrants-de-robert-menard_1839690.html). last accessed 27th March 2017.

## **The( Im)possible Reform: Malaysia, Bangladesh and Sudan**

Islamist parties in Muslim majority countries place Ennahdha at the forefront of the Islamic struggle. The reputation of the party is partially based on the recognition of the intellectual quality of Rached Ghannouchi. Most, including the Malaysian Islamist Party (PAS) and its off-spring *Amanah*, and the *Jamaat Islami of Bangladesh*, or the Popular Congress Party of Sudan (PCP). see the Tunisian revolution as the way forward to implement an Islamic political model. The failure of the Egyptian Muslim brothers has increased the attention devoted to Ennahdha. As explained by Abdur Razzaq<sup>10</sup>, Assistant Secretary General of the Jamaat Islami Bangladesh “Ghannouchi’s position as politician and thinker in the Muslim World is unique. While the Arab Spring has failed across the Arab world, Tunisia is perhaps the only success story, and this has become possible because of Ghannouchi’s farsightedness and deep understanding of Islam and the complexities of the politics of the present-day world. Ennahdha is undoubtedly a leading example in today’s Muslim world, although there is room for different and divergent views”.

Islamists leaders like Abdur Razzaq (Bangladesh), Rached Ghannouchi (Tunisia), Dzulkefly Ahmad<sup>11</sup> or Anwar Ibrahim<sup>12</sup> (Malaysia) entered into contact with the Islamist scene in London in the 1970s-1980s. At that time, the governments of newly decolonized or developing countries were offering scholarships to study in the UK. Thus, London became an Islamist hub, where young Muslims from all over the world came into contact with each other and eventually developed a stronger political awareness<sup>13</sup>. Other encounters occurred in the 1990s, when several Tunisian Islamist leaders left for London to seek political asylum.

### ***Divorcing Religion***

From Bangladesh to Sudan and Malaysia, Islamist parties inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood have made social welfare and religious activities the pillar of their projects. On its website the *Jamaat* explains its objective of “developing and supporting society through the work of social purification, morale reconstruction and social services, on the basis of Islamic values.”<sup>14</sup> The Malaysian Islamist party was created in 1951 and brings together more than a million supporters. PAS has cultivated very strong links to Malaysian civil society and several members are also NGO leaders. Beyond the social work being done by these organisations, civil society groups, whether structurally or informally linked to Islamist parties, are acting as proxies to support the party agenda (Lemière 2014). Thus, the separation announced by Ennahdha is, to other Islamist parties, a renunciation of an ideological pillars but also a key source of support.

### ***Renouncing Sharia***

The perspective taken by Ennahdha on sharia is also another problematic issue to most Islamist parties. During the Congress, Ibrahim El Sanousi explains that Ennahdha’s move is only a strategy and

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<sup>10</sup> Abdur Razzaq, Secretary General of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, was interviewed by email on 19th June 2016 and stressed that his views, expressed in this paper, do not necessarily reflect the views of the Party. See a short profile <http://www.aljazeera.com/profile/abdur-razzaq.html>. Last accessed 27th March 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Former PAS leader and ideologue, Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad is a former member of parliament for the constituency of Kuala Selangor in the State of Selangor (2008-2013). He was one of the founders of the Party Amanah Negara in 2015. Read his blog at <https://drdzul.com/>

<sup>12</sup> Anwar Ibrahim, former leader of the Islamist movement, then coopted by the government of Mahathir (1982-1998), and founder of the multi-ethnic party Keadilan (website <http://www.keadilanrakyat.org/>). He is the charismatic leader of the Malaysian opposition coalition. In 2015, he was sentenced to 5 years imprisonment on charges of sodomy.

<sup>13</sup> See Sophie Lemière, Genesis and development of a non-partisan political actor : the formation of the Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) and its roots in Western Europe, *Al-Jaami’ah*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2009 M/1430 H [https://www.academia.edu/1379084/Genesis\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_a\\_non-Partisan\\_Political\\_Actor\\_the\\_Formation\\_of\\_the\\_Jama\\_ah\\_Islah\\_Malaysia\\_JIM\\_and\\_its\\_Roots\\_in\\_Western\\_Europe](https://www.academia.edu/1379084/Genesis_and_Development_of_a_non-Partisan_Political_Actor_the_Formation_of_the_Jama_ah_Islah_Malaysia_JIM_and_its_Roots_in_Western_Europe) last access 3rd October 2016

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.jamaat-e-islami.org/en/aboutus.php> last access 3rd October 2016. The link could not longer be accessed on 27th March 2017.

that, in time, the party will implement sharia when the opportunity presents itself. Sanousi is the heir of Hassan al-Turabi, who created the party in 1999 after defecting from the party of the current president, Omar al-Bashir.

For the Malaysian Islamist Party, sharia is still a priority. The party is traditionally an opposition party that has maintained an ambiguous relationship to the ruling Malay ethno-nationalist ruling party (Nawab 2016). The party rhetoric is entrenched in an anti-western discourse and in favour of the implementation of pro-sharia and *hudud* laws, attached to social reform, in Malaysia (despite the fact that Muslims are only 60% of the Malaysian population). *Amanah* was created in 2015 by the moderate branch of PAS and has labelled itself as the most progressive version of PAS. Despite its progressive outlook, Khalid Saamad<sup>15</sup>, leader and founder of *Amanah*, on the secularization of Ennahdha's discourse explains "I don't know if this should be seen as a step forward or a step backward. I believe he is trying to bring the establishment of the principle (of sharia) without labelling it as Islamist"<sup>16</sup>. *Amanah* party's ideologue has recently re-discovered and advocated for *the maqasid al-sharia*: the implementation of the higher principles of sharia, rather than its practical translation<sup>17</sup>. Despite a genuine ambition of modernisation of Islamic Law, the party has until now failed in taking distance from a greater implementation of sharia law in Malaysia<sup>18</sup>.

Ennahdha's Congress has pushed forward its most democratic and secular features. This attempt to gain credibility as a competitive democratic player undermines its leadership position of the Islamist movement. This reasserts the heterogeneity and plurality of Islamist movements and the relativity of their ideological identities to the local context. Said Ferjani explains: "We are not living in an ideological cocoon. We do not believe ideology is the main driving force but a component along with our constitution, our identity".

Through its Congress, Ennahdha has sealed a long process and now needs to maintain its credibility towards both Islamist and non-Islamist foreign actors. This hybrid child is a political orphan whose identity and claims are seen as suspicious by both secular and religious parties. The Tunisian revolution resides also in the perception of its Islamist party, which has evolved beyond the frame of Islamism. The striking difference between Ennahdha and other Islamist parties is the influence of the European experience: the return of a new generation of leaders to Tunisia, including young women who have been able to bring together traditional religious values and practices and secular values, echoing Bourguiba's inheritance. Sayida Ounissi, former assembly member and current Secretary of State, is at the forefront of this new generation of female leaders. She has for long been comparing Ennahdha with the Christian Democrat Union of Germany (CDU)<sup>19</sup>. Attention should be given to the younger generation of Islamists as a key influence on the party's evolution: the career trajectories of the younger generation of leaders, and, specifically, female leaders within Islamist parties. The different dynamics existing among the younger generation of Islamists, or Muslims democrats from Tunisia to Malaysia, is also a factor contributing to change or stagnation of the parties' rhetoric and ideology. The direction taken by Ennahdha has a great influence on other Islamist parties and generates important ideological debates that may or may not be translated into the secularisation of their discourse. This evolution is tied to the local context and to the level of internationalisation of party members.

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<sup>15</sup> Khalid Saamad, former central committee member of the Islamist Party of Malaysia (PAS), one of the founders of Amanah.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewed on 2nd June 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Abd al-Malik al-Juwaynī (d. 478 ah/ 1185 ce), one of the earliest contributors to al-maqasid theory as we know it, today uses al-maqasid and public interests interchangeably (Auda 2007). A principle defended by Tunisian scholar Tahar Ben Achour in the 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> Currently, the Malaysian judicial system is hybrid and the constitution allows the existence of an Islamic judicial system (Shafei school of law) dealing solely with family law and offenses related to Islam. PAS has historically pushed for a greater application of Sharia and some aspects of *Hudud* laws, including amputation and whipping.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/ennahda-from-within-islamists-or-muslim-democrats-a-conversation/> Lasted accessed 18th October 2016.

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