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Beyond the 'Islamists vs. Secularists' Cleavage: The Rise of New Challengers after the 2019 Tunisian Elections

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Introduction

The unexpected results of Tunisian legislative elections held in September and October 2019 reshuffled a highly contested political system and renewed a political elite accused of forgetting the claims and grievances raised by the 2011 revolution. Notably, popular discontent against Tunisian political elite grew in the wake of the inedited compromise between the Islamist party Ennahdha and the neo-bourghibist party Nidaa Tounès, which had faced each other in a crescent polarized landscape between 2012 and 2014.

While the success of the Tunisian democratic transition seemed to hinge on this "twin toleration" compromise between Islamists and Secularists (Stepan 2012; 2018) some scholars warned about the detrimental effects of a "rotten compromise" on Tunisian democracy (Marzouqi 2015; Boubekeur, 2016). Indeed, on the one hand, this compromise led to a fragmentation of secularist forces (Nidaa Tounès, Machrou' Tounès, Tahya Tounès), on the other hand, Islamists, traditionally considered as a monolithic bloc, have suffered electoral losses and faced new challengers questioning Ennahdha's alliance with the actors of the old regime.

These dynamics have paved the way towards the 2019 electoral results, which have weakened the incumbent political parties. We argue that this transformation cannot be understood through the mainstream Islamists vs. Secularists cleavage, due to the emergence of new political entrepreneurs who do not fit with this binary interpretation of political processes.

Ennahdha's Transformation and the Political Landscape Between 2011 and 2019

After the fall of the authoritarian regime and the victory of Ennahda at the first free elections in October 2011, the priority for the Islamist party Ennahdha was to integrate itself in the democratic game. This became evident when Ennahdha, in search for a common ground with secular forces in the name of national cohesion, entered in a coalition government with the secular parties CPR (Congrès pour la République) and Ettakatol (November 2011-November 2014).

This coalition government triggered high discontent amongst other secularist forces which organized themselves around the neo-bourghibist party Nidaa Tounès (Call for Tunisia) with the objective of blocking the rising power of the Islamist party. Founded in 2012 by Beji Qaid Essebsi and including veterans of the old regime, Nidaa Tounès emerged as a platform for secular forces to fight the "Islamization of the country". This prompted a period of high polarization (2012-2014).

In the aftermath of the political assassinations of two leftist activists and the military coup in Egypt in July 2013, Tunisia experienced a deep political crisis which further delegitimized the Islamist party in power. In order to survive in the political arena, Ennahda undertook a series of actions aiming at seeking legitimacy from secular forces (and the international community as well). Firstly, it drastically cut its ties with Salafi organizations and agreed to relinquish power in favor of a technocratic government in January 2014. The fracture with Salafi actors became evident when the Salafi-jihadist organization Ansar al-Sharia was declared a terrorist group in August 2013. From this moment, Ennahda's discourse revolved around its detachment from radical Islam and a reference to democratic values.

The outcome of the 2014 elections, establishing the victory of the party Nidaa Tounès, paved the way for an unexpected coalition government between two confrontational forces. Ennahda's willingness to compromise with actors of the old regime was not only demonstrated by its agreement to join a national unity government led by Nidaa Tounès, but also by approving a controversial law granting amnesty to officials accused of corruption during the Ben Ali's regime (the so-called "Reconciliation law"). The political agreement between the two political forces was perceived by the majority of Tunisian electorate as a betrayal of the principles of the revolution. This led the main challengers of this "rotten compromise" to denounce an uneven democratization process (Marzouqi 2015) overly focused on seeking consensus at the expense of translating revolutionary grievances into concrete socioeconomic policies.

For several analysts, discontent grew further after Ennahdha's self-proclaimed transformation from an Islamist party to a Muslim Democrat party in 2016, in an attempt to move toward the center of the political spectrum. This "raises the question of whether a new Islamist party will emerge to challenge Ennahdha from the right." (Grewal 2018), given that disappointed Islamist voters "may seek an alternative party that provides a clearer articulation of pro-Islamist—albeit far more extreme—positions, such as Jebhat Islah and Hizb al-Tahrir" (Yerkes 2018). "Exiting political Islam could well create a vacuum that would benefit other, more fundamentalist groups or Salafist movements" (Meddeb 2019) who could provide political representation for conservative voters that currently feel abandoned by Ennahdha. The emerging political force Itilaf al-Karama has been depicted as embodying the new radical Islamist challenger.[1]

The Rise of Itilaf al-Karama After the 2019 Elections

At the legislative elections last October, the new political group Itilaf al-Karama (Coalition of Dignity) surprisingly emerged as the 4th largest force (21 seats) in Parliament behind Ennahdha (52 seats), Qalb Tounès (38) and the Democratic Current (22). The coalition has been depicted by the media as "integrists with a Salafi tendency",[2] mostly on the basis that its designated leader is Seif Eddine Makhlouf, known as the "Jihadis' lawyer",[3]

1. Mathieu Galtier, « Tunisie : la coalition al-Karama, un mistigri islamiste au Parlement », *Middle East Eye*, 29/10/2019, online: https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/tunisie-la-coalition-al-karama-un-mistigri-islamiste-au-parlement

2. Marie Verdier, « En Tunisie, les islamistes d'Ennahdha croient en une possible majorité », *La Croix*, 09/10/2019, online: https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/En-Tunisie-islamistes-dEnnahdha-croient-possible-majorite-2019-10-09-1201053050

3. "Surnommé "l'avocat des terroristes", Me Seifeddine Makhlouf candidat à la présidentielle", *Kapitalis*, 02/08/2019, online:http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2019/08/02/surnomme-lavocat-des-terroristes-me-seifeddine-makhlouf-candidat-a-la-presentielle/

and supported by the dissolved "Salafi" Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR).[4]

Interviews with Itilaf al-Karama members, however, reveal the heterogeneous nature of the coalition, which brings together (1) ex-members of the LPR, both from Islamic or Leftist backgrounds,[5] (2) the Tunisian Organization for Work (*al-Munazhamah al-Tunisiyyah li-l-Shughl*) led by Muhammad al-As'ad 'Abid,[6] (3) human rights defenders (lawyers, journalists, bloggers, etc) and former members of the constituent assembly such as Najib Murad and Ahmad al-Sami'i, (4) ex-nahdhawi Islamists, (5) the Islamist Justice and Development Party led by 'Abd al-Razzab bin 'Arabi, (6) the Salafi party Jabhat al-Islah and (7) some independent 'scientific' Salafi sheikhs. The Congress for the Republic Party (CPR), formerly led by the ex-president Moncef Marzouqi, also episodically joined the coalition in May-June.[7]

This heterogeneity indicates that the main goal of the coalition is to gather those political forces excluded or dissatisfied from precedent choices of the political elite in power, rather than mobilizing radical forces upon religious or sectarian premises. Even Ennahdha's members who left the party have acknowledged that the reason they joined the new coalition was beyond religious motivations. Indeed, they agreed with the leadership's decision to separate religion from politics, but they did not forgive the pragmatic compromise with old-regime political forces. As a former Ennahdha's member stated, "I can't make compromise with those people that tortured me and my family during the authoritarian regime. Ennahdha made alliances with them. So, I joined Itilaf al-Karama because I want to recover my dignity".[8] The coalition thus displays a strong hostility to the "Administrative Reconciliation Law", which allowed for the return of ex-former regime supporters late 2017.

According to its secretary-general Seif Eddine Makhlouf, the coalition's purpose is "the unification of the revolutionary camp".[9] In a Facebook-spread communication, the coalition clearly states that its "relation with the rest of the elements of the current [socio-political] scene is based on a very strict and clear separation between the national forces that have an interest in the continuation of the revolution and the success of its project, and the forces of reaction, backwardness and lackeys of dictatorship and external domination" and that it intends to "form a complete national network of actors known for their loyalty to the revolution and their deep affiliation with the concerns of its people and the defence of its identity, its values and its aspirations".[10] It also relies on a sovereigntist rhetoric denouncing the interference of Western powers in Tunisian politics, the imposition of a Western model of governance, and the spoliation of the natural wealth of the country. According to coalition's voters at the last elections: " Itilaf al-Karma is the new political force bringing back dignity to Tunisian people, it will implement all the revolutionary changes that Ennahdha was not able to do, because it was too submissive vis-à-vis the old regime's people and the diktat of the international community, France in particular".[11]

Itilaf al-Karama's revolutionary project also relies on the recuperation of traditional values and institutions neglected by the old regime in the framework of national reforms inspired to a Western model of modern state. However, far from providing a radical Islamist alternative to Ennahda, as some analysts warned, Itilaf al-Karama voices conservative demands that emphasize identity and values rather than the implementation of sharia norms.

4. « La LTPC, matrice islamo-révolutionnaire de Kaïs Saïed », *Maghreb Confidentiel* n°1355, 26/10/2019

5. In a communiqué, the LPR declares joining Itilaf al-Karama because it is "the closest initiative to what we believe in" i.e. "Sovereignty, independence, emancipation, dignity and the defense of the Arab Islamic identity, considered sacred red lines that should not be crossed" (translated from Arabic). https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/385733288727208/?type=3&theater

6. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/379989782634892/?type=3&theater

7. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/392422641391606/?type=3&theater

8. Interview by Ester Sigillò with a former Ennahdha's member, Tunis, October 2019.

9. https://www.facebook.com/matar.page/videos/364092864516252/

10. Translated from Arabic

https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/358887024745168/?type=3&theater

11. Interview by Ester Sigillò with a person who voted for Ennahdha in 2011 and 2014 elections and for Itilaf al-Karama in 2019 elections, Tunis, October 2019.

Conservative demands include passing a new law of *awqaf* (state religious endowments), the creation of a centralized zakat fund,[12] as well as – albeit more marginally – old tropes such as the unity of Maghreb countries[13] and the liberation of Palestine, with Jerusalem as its capital.[14] The coalition platform generally takes a favourable position toward conservative constituencies, for example by criticizing the "S-17" security procedure forbidding 14.500 Tunisian people suspected of sympathy with Jihadi groups to leave the country[15] as well as the recent ban of niqab in public administrations as an inefficient way of combatting terrorism.[16]

It is not clear whether Itilaf al-Karama positions itself as a possible ally or a challenger of Ennahdha. On the one hand, the coalition declares that "Ennahdha is not our enemy to fight" and agreed to forge an alliance with the Islamist party, on the condition that Ennahdha does not unite with Qalb Tounès to form the government – in which case Itilaf al-Karama will remain in the opposition.[17] On the other hand, the coalition strongly criticizes the Islamist party for having 'failed to prevent the return of the old regime', materialized by the dissolution of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution, the Reconciliation law, the party's alliance with Nidaa Tounès and its favoured liberal economic policy – all taken under foreign pressure. In contrast, Itilaf al-Karama positions itself as "a revolutionary force totally freed from those constraints"[18] and intends to offer a political alternative enacting a clear rupture with officials of the former regime.

Conclusion

The Tunisian 2019 legislative elections posed new challenges to a political system based on a compromise between Islamist and Secular forces, with widespread discontent simmering among the population. Electoral results, in particular, showed the emergence of new political forces challenging Ennahdha, which was considered as incapable of achieving the revolutionary benchmarks after 2011.

Analysts mainly focused on Ennahda's ideological transformation as the main cause of a generalized discontent, warning about the possible rise of a radical Islamist alternative. Itilafal-Karama has been considered so far as the embodiment of this challenge. However, as demonstrated in our analysis, the new political coalition is made up of a heterogeneous public which goes beyond an Islamist political agenda. Indeed, the main reference of Itilaf al-Karama's members relies on the rupture with the old regime socio-economic and cultural system, rather than an exacerbation of religious ideology.

Therefore, the binary analytical grid "Islamists vs. Secularists" and the exclusive focus on Ennahda's ideological transformation, appear heuristically limited in order to interpret the Tunisian political landscape after the 2019 elections. The latter, indeed, is characterized by the emergence of new political actors putting forward 'secular' political demands and mobilizing according to trans-ideological logics. As observed, Itilaf al-Karama represents an exemplary case, as it positions itself at the crossroad of sovereigntist claims and cultural conservatism.

Consequently, policy-makers should not perceive the rise of new political challengers as the result of Ennahdha's ideological transformation but rather as the consequence of a highly contested 'elite consensus' trumping revolutionary grievances. The increasing poverty and the youth unemployment crisis, which ignited the revolution in 2011, continues to cyclically spread tensions erupting into mass protests in most marginalized areas of the country and overflowing to the peripheries of the capital. The stability of the country will depend primarily on the government's ability to address the pressing socio-economic issues in a context of FMI-imposed austerity measures and high public deficit.

12. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/videos/472218003622036/

13. https://www.facebook.com/262483571252948/photos/a.265205217647450/488604935307476/?type=3&theater

14. Seif Eddine Makhlouf, presidential debate, https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/videos/2584175268269977/

15. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/367986023835268/?type=3&theater

16. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/397532017547335/?type=3&theater

17. https://www.facebook.com/hannibaltv.com.tn/videos/587218675364689/

18. https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.324896724810865/377529419547595/?type=3&theater

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