Country Profile

Tunisia

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:
Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 11.7 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Muslim	99
Other *	1

* Includes Christian, Jewish, Shia Muslim, and Baha'i

Role of religion in state and government (since independence)

Tunisia achieved its independence from France in March 1956. In July 1957, the Tunisian republic was declared. At that same time one of the most prominent figures of the struggle for independence, Habib Bourghiba, became Tunisia's first president and stayed in power for 30 years. Bourghiba led a process of modernization in all sectors, including religion-state relations. He understood secularism not as separation between religion and the state, but rather as placing religion under the strict control of state institutions. Hence, he adopted a number of measures in order to ensure all religious institutions in the country were dependent on and subordinate to the institutions of the new republic. He abolished the religious *Sharia* courts in favor of one unified secular judicial system. He abolished also the religious endowments, both private and public, considered the main sources of funding for religious organizations. By abolishing them, these religious organizations have become dependent solely on the state as the only source for their funding. He also issued a number of laws promoting women's rights including one abolishing polygamy. He dismantled also the great Ez-Zitouna University, founded in 737 CE. He closed down its primary and secondary educational systems and moved its higher education faculty to a faculty of theology at the University of Tunis. Bourghiba also established a Department of Religious Affairs, which was responsible for the coordination of government's action in religious affairs, appointment and training of Imams, as well as the regulation of religious rituals and education programs.

These measures were welcomed by a part of the Tunisian society as required steps to modernize the then new republic. However, other Tunisians, including the Islamists, viewed Bourghiba's policies as a wide and deep change intended to destroy Tunisia's Arab-Muslim Identity and to impose the French model on the Tunisian society.

Freedom of religion: The debate over the place of religion after 2011

During the process of drafting the new Tunisian Constitution, which started in February 2012, there was considerable debate between Islamic political groups (represented by Ennahda) and secular movements (represented by the Congress Party for the Republic and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, known as Ettakatol). Three main issues constituted the main points of tension between the two camps: Sharia, women's rights, and blasphemy.

After winning 41% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly, representatives of Ennahdha proposed a constitutional provision declaring Islamic **Sharia** to be the main source of legislation. One of the prominent members of Ennahdha, Sahbi Atiq, declared that Islam should be incorporated into state institutions and not be just a slogan. The debate over this issue has increased the level of tension not only within the constituent assembly but also within the society between secularists and Islamists. After months of debate and negotiations, and as polarization reached worrying levels, Rached Ghannouchi interfered and convinced members of his party that there was no need to explicitly refer to Islamic Sharia in the constitution. He convinced them that it would be enough to keep the pre-existing first clause of the old constitution, stating that "Tunisia is a free, sovereign and independent state, whose religion is Islam".

The second area of debate concerned whether or not to include the crime of **blasphemy** in both the Constitution and the Penal Code. Ennahdha issued a statement calling upon the Constituent Assembly to add a provision to the Penal Code criminalizing blasphemy in order to protect Tunisia's Islamic identity. According to Ennahdha, freedom of expression should be respected; however, it must respect Islamic values. On the other side, secular parties opposed this proposal and considered it an attempt by Ennahdha to restrict freedom of expression. They refused to add any article criminalizing blasphemy in the constitution or in the penal code. Ultimately, the secular forces within the Constituent Assembly prevailed and the proposed anti-blasphemy provisions in both the Penal Code and the new Constitution were dropped.

Women's rights. A number of women activists also objected to article 28 of the draft constitution as they accused it of compromising gender equality as the article defined women as "complementary" to men. From the Ennahdha side, some women defended the article. Among them was Farida Labidi, an Ennahdha Executive Council member and leader of the constitutional committee in charge of Article 28. A lawyer and human rights activist herself, Labidi fiercely defended Article 28. However, in the end the clause of Article 28 that included the term "complementary" and catalysed popular protest across the country was omitted from the final draft.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

While Tunisia is the only Arab country undergoing a successful democratic transition so far, it has also been home to a growing Salafi-jihadi movement since the fall of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. The most organized group within the Tunisian Salafi jihadism scene is Ansar Al-Sharia.

The movement was established in April 2011 as a group following the Salafi-jihadi ideology, but with a specific focus on the strict implementation of the Islamic *Sharia* law. However, unlike other cases, most Ansar al-Sharia leaders rejected the use of violence inside Tunisia, calling Tunisia a land for preaching, not combat. Ansar al-Sharia founder Abu Ayadh is a prime example of this trend. He insisted that violence is a trap and that the focus should be on preparing society for the rule of Islam through religious and social activities, not fighting. While some of the Salafi jihadists who formed Ansar al-Sharia previously believed in the need for armed struggle to establish an Islamic state, including Abu Ayadh himself, the Arab Spring led them to change their tactics and to focus instead on preaching religious ideology to prepare the ground for the establishment of the Islamic state.

The movement took advantage of the security vacuum the country witnessed after the fall of Ben Ali's regime to take control over a number of mosques in order to preach for its ideas and recruit new members. Their preaching and charitable activities allowed them to expand their influence in the public sphere and to recruit militants in the suburbs of Tunis and the inland regions - especially Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine. According to the movement spokesperson Bilel Chaouachi, this enabled them to reach more than 50.000 supporters.

However, some members of Ansar al-Sharia have indeed engaged in violence, either outside Tunisia by joining the jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq or inside Tunisia by targeting security forces and secular political figures. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights declared in July 2015 that there are more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting in jihadi groups in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Mali. Inside Tunisia, the decision of some members to take up arms resulted in a series of attacks against the Tunisian police and the assassination of two political figures from the secular opposition, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively.

In May 2013, the Ennahda-led government refused to allow Ansar al-Sharia to hold its third annual meeting. In August 2013, then Prime Minister Ali Larayedh declared Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization. According to Larayedh's official declaration, Ansar al-Sharia was involved in the killings of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi and other security officers. The declaration led to the arrest of more than 6,500 young people who were members of or sympathized with Ansar al-Sharia, and also prompted many other Jihadi Salafists to leave the country for Libya or Syria.

Religious diversity governance assessment

The policies adopted by both former presidents of Tunisia, Habib Bourghiba and Ben Ali, have put the religious sphere under the strict control of the security services. As the security regime of Ben Ali fell, the religious sphere looked more like a chaotic space with no rules to organize it. During the transitional period, secular and religious actors tried to answer this challenge on how to govern religion in the post-2011 republic.

Tunisian secular and religious actors have made important compromises in order to protect Tunisia's transition to democracy; however, they still need to face questions related the institutional rules to govern the presence of religion on the levels within both the state and civil society.

The different governments during the transitional period have been trying to regain control over the religious sphere. However, some of the imams, including Ennahdha's famous preacher Habib Ellouz, have expressed their fear that these measures might put the religious sphere under the strict control of the state, as it was under Ben Ali, and thereby risk reinforcing violent radicalisation rather than stopping it.

The Tunisian state needs to find its way between these two extremes: chaos and strict control of the religious sphere. The Ministry of Religious Affairs needs to manage, but not control, the religious sphere. Strikingly, the religious sphere has delegitimized Imams who are accused of speaking for the regime, not for Islam. Instead of allocating state religious institutions a monopoly over the religious sphere, the regime needs to strengthen the ability of state religious institutions to compete within a competitive religious market, where any religious actor that does not practice or call for political violence or adopt a hatred discourse should be allowed to operate.

As it is required by state institutions to recognize the right of all non-violent religious movements to operate within the religious market, these religious movements need to recognize state institutions. The case of Ansar Al-Sharia offers a case in point. Ansar Al-Sharia's rejection of the authority of state institutions and its refusal to follow the formal processes in registering and getting permissions for its meetings and activities has increased the voices of hardliners within state institutions calling for banning it. These hardline voices have in turn increased the power of the hardliners within the Salafi movement itself. However, other religious associations who recognize state institutions should be allowed to operate in either offering social or religious services.

Religious actors play an essential role in de-radicalisation, but they need to coordinate their efforts with other actors in what might be called a "de-radicalisation coalition." The Tunisian government and other political and religious actors need to work together on a de-radicalisation strategy that brings reform to both the political and the religious spheres.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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