



THE TUNISIAN EXPERIENCE

Ennahda's Leader Explains Why Islam and Democracy Are Compatible

By Rachid Ghannouchi

Democracy is a dream that can be fulfilled around the globe. Despite significant political regression throughout the Middle East in recent months, the dream can be realized in the Arab world, too. The Tunisian people have bravely defended their revolution and their democratic transition, standing against terrorists and those who plotted to bring about political chaos. Tunisians are enjoying freedom today.

The cost of encouraging coups and giving up on the Arab Spring is much greater than showing patience. Nations must find their own solutions to their internal crises and disputes, which are often caused by a lack of experience on the part of the political elite, and a need for more time to become accustomed to democratic practice after decades of despotism.

Moreover, the Tunisian experience has proved—to those doubting the intentions of Islamists—that Islam and democracy are compatible. The victims of decades of repression, marginalization, and exclusion are not carrying hatred or the desire for revenge in their hearts. Rather, they believe in an enlightened modernist civil project, as embodied in the new Tunisian constitution which achieved the widest possible consensus: on January 26, Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly adopted the constitution by a vote of 200 to 12, with four abstentions.

Despotic regimes deposed by revolution justified their repression of Islamists as a necessity in the war on obscurantists, for the protection of democracy in the face of theocracy, and of global security against terrorism and extremism. Such slogans were long used to justify violations of human rights, the killing of hundreds of people under torture, the imprisonment of tens of thousands, and the banning of all freedoms.

Tunisia has now demonstrated the false nature of those claims, and that the real dangers threatening

◁ Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, Tunis, Feb. 23, 2011. *Volkan Furuocu/AA*

democracy, security, and stability, are dictatorship, corruption, and the monopolization of power.

Today, Tunisia is saying to the world, to freedom-lovers everywhere, that there is no dichotomy between Islam and democracy, and that Islamists stand at the forefront of those defending the right to differences, cultural diversity, political pluralism, freedom of conscience, women's rights, and all values establishing a free, just, prosperous society.

The success of the Tunisian experience did not come as a surprise to those observing the Tunisian process from its early moments and particularly the path our Ennahda Party had chosen before the October 2011 election and afterwards. Once Ennahda won that election and gained a majority in the assembly, it was the first to call for national unity, to avoid the monopolization of power, and for co-existence and cooperation between secularists and Islamists. The troika coalition that included Ennahda and two secular parties was clear proof of our conviction that Tunisia can only be governed through consensus, and that transitions cannot be managed by the logic of majority versus minority.

Reconciliation is in fact inherent in Ennahda's vision since its foundation, as a movement that reconciles modernity with Islam, reconciles post-independence Tunisia with its identity and history, and reconciles Islam and democracy. Believing in the positive power of Islam as an inspiration for the values of freedom and justice, Ennahda aimed at liberating society from political despotism, economic exploitation, social injustice and cultural stagnation or dependence. Over four decades, this vision was faced with brutal repression from successive regimes.

Whether in government or in the assembly, Ennahda committed itself to the same consensual approach, putting the national interest above partisan interests, happily giving concessions in order to accelerate the writing of the constitution and protect social cohesion and national unity. Ultimately we made the greatest sacrifice: Ennahda withdrew from the government in order to end a political crisis. Following the assassination of assembly member Mohamed Brahmi, many opposition deputies withdrew from the assembly and demanded its dissolution. We believed that adopting the new constitution—in a consensual inclusive manner—would lead to a resolution of the crisis and the return of much-needed calm and stability. We had not lost a re-election bid; nor were we faced with a counterrevolution or a coup d'état. But we believed that the crisis threatened the revolution and the country as a whole.

Many had repeatedly insisted that Ennahda would never cede power, even if it were to lose the coming elections, and that democracy—for Islamists—only means reaching power, monopolizing it, and clinging to it. Such claims pained us, but at the same time encouraged us to prove to our partners, to our people, and to the world, that these were unfounded fears in Tunisia. Ennahda Party is a mature political party

that is profoundly committed to democracy, which has learned from the errors of other governing parties, secularist and Islamist, around the world.

Protecting the Revolution

Tunisia's new constitution is a source of immense pride for all Tunisians. It enshrines the demands of the revolution: freedom, dignity and justice. It clearly establishes equality between all citizens without any discrimination, guarantees political, social, economic and cultural rights, and promotes gender equality. It sets the foundation for a civil state, a balanced democratic political system, independent neutral state institutions and an independent judiciary.

Today, no one can doubt Ennahda's democratic conviction, our political realism, or our civil commitments. No one can claim that Ennahda was forced out of power, or withdrew from government as a tactical maneuver.

First, our departure from government was part of a complete process in which we were committed to national consensus, both in governance and the writing of the new constitution. Ennahda's vision was clear, namely that the aim of being in power in the second transitional phase was the adoption of the constitution and leading the country to the second elections, both of which required broad consensus and a climate of national unity. We rejected the notion that the Tunisian constitution be the constitution of a majority imposed on a minority. We appreciated the demands of the opposition that elections be held under an independent government.

We dealt with all political crises with the same logic. Following the assassination of the martyr Chokri Belaïd of the Democratic Patriots' Movement in February 2013, we accepted the "neutralization" of key ministries; Ennahda conceded a number of other ministries to be taken over by technocrats. We insisted on preserving the constituent assembly in order for it to continue its work on the constitution, and we decided not to remain in power for the sake of power.

Second, we rejected ideological polarization and resorting to populist appeals to the street for resolving political differences—even though we believed that our street was bigger. We refused to divide Tunisians, and as leader of Ennahda, I was keen to open communication channels with opposition leaders and prevent a rupture. I signed the Quartet road map because we were fully aware that the logic of conflict and confrontation will not resolve problems. We understood that Ennahda, as the largest party in the country, is required to give the greater concessions to protect the revolution and the democratic transition process.

Third, Ennahda's departure from the government followed the success of the national dialogue, and was not the result of pressure or failure to address the crisis. We agreed to implement the road map in the framework of concurrence of the three

processes of the road map; that is, the resignation of Ali Laarayedh's government following agreement on a new prime minister, the adoption of the constitution, and the election of members of the election commission. The day of the adoption of the constitution was a historic moment and cause for national celebration. Laarayedh's resignation in January 2014 was a lesson in the peaceful alternation of power and confirmation of Islamist respect for democratic rules.

Tunisians went to the polls in October 2011 to elect a constituent assembly whose principal task was writing a new constitution, a historic task for which the people hold us accountable. They would hold us accountable for the completion of the constitution, as well as its content: was it a constitution setting the foundations for a modern democratic state that respects the identity of the Tunisian people, or a constitution imposing the majority's vision on the minority?

To the political right of Ennahda, many pushed to make the constitution more conservative; and to the left of moderate secular forces, radical secularists pushed for a constitution that contradicts the Tunisian people's identity. The result, however, was the victory of the middle, which we consider to be the fruit of an important, but difficult, co-existence between Islamists and secularists in power.

The victory of the middle path is what will make the constitution the link that unites all Tunisians and will protect our country from being pushed to the right or the left, which is what Tunisia needs over the coming decades.

Thus, the Tunisian constitution is based on a vision focused on Tunisia's future, because we do not want a text that establishes monopolization and exclusion, and the culture of revenge and retribution by putting in place a political system tilted in favor of one side at the expense of another. Today's victor is tomorrow's loser, and such is the problem of short-sighted politics. We wanted a constitution for all Tunisians where their fundamental freedoms and rights are protected on the basis of equality and citizenship.

Our constitution represents the dream of the great reformers of the nineteenth century like Khairreddine Al-Tounsi, Muhammad Abduh and Abdelaziz El-Thaalibi, who tried to combine the values of Islam and the values of modernity, who believed that Islam and the universal values and Islam and democracy are compatible.

These are the characteristics of the Tunisian experience, which can be summarized in two words: national consensus. This phrase gave Tunisia the constitution of the revolution, took the country out of a stifling crisis, and is leading it, God willing, towards elections later this year. Consensus means that everyone is a winner; there are no losers.

We have achieved this national consensus with the help of four civil society organizations that presented an initiative for national dialogue when politicians failed to find

agreement. During six long months of the political crisis, twenty-two different parties were involved in the national dialogue where everyone contributed ideas and made concessions to find a way out of the crisis. The businessmen's association united with the labor union, in an unprecedented and unusual way, in order to lead the national consensus. And I met the president of the Nidaa Tounes party, Beji Caid Essebsi, despite the profound differences between our two parties; the Ennahda assembly bloc and other blocs overcame their differences which could have delayed completion of work on the constitution.

All this means that consensus is possible. It is the only solution for overcoming disputes and establishing a stable democracy that benefits from one of Tunisia's most important characteristics: the neutrality of the military institution and its refusal to play any political role that contravenes its national duty.

Hope of the Arab Spring

Consensus has triumphed in Tunisia, and I believe that the political elite is committed, to a great extent, to supporting the transitional government of Mehdi Ben Jemaa, which enjoys the backing of the Tunisian people. However, the path ahead is still long, and forces wishing to undermine the revolution and the democratic transition in our country have not despaired of trying to derail the process.

Our country is united in the face of terrorism, and the political elite is conscious, to a great extent, that there is no justification for a return to the state of tension and confrontation. All sides are aware of the importance of contributing to support the atmosphere of cooperation and calm in order to facilitate holding elections in the best possible conditions.

Of course, the economic situation is very important for ensuring stability in the country, and we hope that the national consensus achieved in Tunisia will encourage Tunisia's friends around the world to support the government economically and financially, and encourage international institutions and businesspeople to support our new democracy—perhaps, at the moment, the only bright flame of the Arab Spring.

Tunisia has turned a difficult page in its political history, praise be to God. It has been placed on the path of democracy, and has given the world the gift of the first constitution of the Arab Spring revolutions, marking the end of the era of “the Arab exception” in the field of democracy. Arabs and Muslims are able to build free democratic systems, practice peaceful alternation of power, and write constitutions that guarantee freedom of conscience and freedom of difference, women's rights, the rights of minorities, protection of the environment, sustainable development, and justice.

We believe that this spirit of national consensus is still needed after the next elections. We believe that the main trends and parties in the country should contribute

to the shaping of the Tunisia of tomorrow. Tunisia's ship should set sail with all its people aboard.

We believe that Ennahda has a very good chance in the next elections. However, we also believe that the country cannot be ruled by one party or one trend only. During transitional periods, a 51 percent majority is not enough to have a stable government and a stable democracy. We believe that the country will need a coalition government that brings together the main parties in the country in order to achieve stability and strengthen democracy and its institutions.

That is the Tunisian model, a lesson from a country that is small in its geographic size, modest in its natural resources, but great in its people enamored with freedom, democracy, and peace.

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