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ENNAHDA'S MUSLIM DEMOCRACY IN POST-ARAB SPRING TUNISIA: SYNTHESIZING POLITICAL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

This article explores the interplay between political thought and practice within Tunisia's Ennahda party, first during its period in opposition, then after it took power in 2011, and finally in the aftermath of the 2021 coup. We trace the genealogy of political thought within the party from the point of its foundation. In doing so, we explore the gradual evolution of party ideology, from a *da'wa*-based belief system between 1969 and 1981, to Islamic democracy between 1981 and 2011, to 'Muslim democracy' after the 2011 uprising. We examine this ideological evolution through the framework of three key elements: (i) Islam, (ii) Tunisia's changing socio-political context, and (iii) the broader universal episteme. As we show, a significant turning point came in 2016, with the separation of the da'wa from party politics, which revealed a burgeoning state / party conceptualization of politics. However, the 2021 coup challenged Ennahda's concept of Muslim democracy, as well as all aspects of the party's own sense of continuity as a significant socio-political actor, such as its institutional structure, leadership, membership, social base, political strategy, and ideology. Ennahda is now confronted by an authoritarian resurgence, which aims at containing the party, and at delegitimizing its participation within nation-state structures. Empirical evidence, based on content-analytical evaluations of personal interviews as well as the media's coverage of Ennahda, shows that the party's representatives are increasingly focusing on organizational reform in order to deal with the ramifications of the 2021 coup. Their aim seems to be to democratize both Ennahda and the Tunisian state itself.

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Introduction

The scholarly literature has tended to treat Islamic groups within the framework of "political Islam". This term basically designates non-violent actors who are engaged in political activities within a framework that they subjectively define as Islamic. These actors typically seek to participate in the structures of a constitutional state, and they advocate for a democratic system based on electoral processes (Esposito 1997, Roy 1998, Tamimi 2011, Ouaissa et al. 2015). In recent years, however, Tunisia's Ennahda movement has undergone a transition from "political Islam" to "Muslim Democracy". This marks a shift in political emphasis from Islam to more symbolic or cultural references – that is, a departure from an open commitment to Islamic sharia. In its place, the state's constitution has come to comprise the party's 'sharia'. Thus, from the perspective of Muslim Democracy, political issues are the preserve of the state, and parliament is the place to discuss them. Accordingly, though Muslim democrats can comprise a majority in parliament, they cannot promote their ideology through state and society. Their religious beliefs are instead personal beliefs, based on an individual's conscience. This does not mean that social policy is not affected by beliefs of the politicians but not in the way political Islam aimed to Islamize society and the state.

This article offers a critical analysis of Ennahda's transition by exploring and examining the historical interplay between the party's political thought and practice. In doing so, the article sheds considerable light on one of the socio-political heavyweights of Tunisia's Muslim political landscape and, more generally, of post-Arab Spring Tunisia. It examines Ennahda's role in both opposition and government up to the present day, against the backdrop of a new, dynamic political landscape shaped by the policies of Tunisian State President Kais Saied. Throughout the article, historical references are invoked in order to better *'synthesize'* the relationship between political thought and practice. Synthesizing here means analyzing various elements, ideas, and actions, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how political ideas have been and are being translated into practical politics, or how they have been and are being influenced by political practices. It is not sufficient to merely describe these relationships; the goal is to illuminate their significance and potentially gain new insights or understanding about Ennahda and Tunisian politics more broadly.

To this end, we draw on rigorous empirical research, encompassing detailed data collection and analysis. This includes content-analytical assessments of Ennahda's central reference texts and foundational works by the party's intellectual pioneers, as well as an examination of Tunisian President Kais Saied's rhetoric from 2021 onward, and fieldwork interviews held with Ennahda party leaders. The theoretical framework of the article is significantly informed by key texts authored by Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda's founder, and other associated intellectuals. Such texts offer insights into Ennahda's ideology, political views, and historical development within Tunisia (for example,

al-Hurriyat al-ʿAmma fi al-Dawla al-Islamiyya (*Public Freedoms in the Islamic State)* (1993 [2022]), *From the Experience of The Islamic Movement in Tunisia* (2015) and *Signs of the Revolution* (2015)). They provide nuanced perspectives on Ennahda's concepts and broader political dynamics from past to present. This is also true of "On Muslim Democracy: Essays and Dialogues" (2023), edited by Andrew March and co-authored by Rachid Ghannouchi, which is particularly relevant to an understanding of Muslim democracy, Ennahda's latest core concept. Furthermore, the incorporation of primary texts by influential thinkers like Sayyid Qutb (1949, 1954–1964, 1964, 2004) and Malek Ben Nabi (1954, 1966) further enriches the theoretical foundation.

By synthesizing empirical evidence and theoretical insights, the article examines the interplay between political thought and practice within Ennahda, always against the backdrop of Tunisia's changing historical and contemporary context. The first sections of this article trace the evolution of the interplay between Ennahda's political thought and political practice from a *daʿwa*-based model to Islamic democracy, and finally to the concept of Muslim democracy. We examine specific ideological adaptations or continuities within the party in response to the shifting historical context, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Following this, we address the recent period of democratic backsliding and re-authoritarianization in Tunisia, which has gathered pace since President Kais Saied's monopolization of power in 2021.

In this last section, we focus on the challenges Ennahda faces both internally and externally, including the threat to its institutional structure, leadership, and popularity. To put it differently, the section analyzes how, on the one hand, the politics and discourses of incumbent President Kais Saied have shaped the relationship with Ennahda since 2021, and on the other hand, how the concentration of power in the hands of the President has impacted Ennahda's behavior and its own vision for the future. Finally, we summarize key conclusions, which cover: (i) Lessons from Ennahda's experiences and their relevance to other Islamist movements, (ii) Ideas on Ennahda's transformative potential in Tunisia, and (iii) Reflections on regional political Islam beyond Tunisia.

Ennahda's Evolution: From Islamic to Muslim Democracy

The evolution of Ennahda's thought can best be understood according to three distinct periods of transformation (or Phase I-III). These are (I) between 1969 and 1981, when the group was limited to socio-religious activism, but was nonetheless internally debating its future political ideology; (II) between 1981 and 2010, when it transformed into a public political party, and adopted the concept of Islamic democracy in order to participate in elections with a view to Islamizing the state; and finally (III), after the 2011 revolution in Tunisia, when the party assumed office, reformulated its political ideology, and introduced the central concept of Muslim Democracy.

Phase I: 1969–1981: Institutional formation: From socio-religious activism to debating political ideology

Ennahda was founded in 1969 under the name of the Islamic Group (al-Amdouni 1965, 1981). The idea behind its foundation was to defend Tunisia's Arab and Muslim identity (Ghannouchi 1993). In 1956, Tunisia gained independence, and a republic was founded the following year. Under its first President, Habib Bourguiba, a secular state model was established; this entailed a marginalization of both Islam and the Arabic language. Strongly influenced by France's secular model, Bourguiba saw religion as an impediment to modernity and, in 1956, he abolished the sharia courts and sought to annex 'civil' society institutions, especially through control of the *al-ʾaḥbās* or religious endowments which financed them. This resulted in, for example, the closure of az-Zaytouna university and its associated schools. The new, exclusively secular and centralized model of the state marginalized civil society and caused socio-political division within post-independence Tunisia.

Political opposition to and protests against Bourguiba's project were dealt with by repression (al-Amdouni 1965, 1981, Ghannouchi 2015: 104). Given the symbolic legitimacy Bourguiba had gained due to his role in Tunisian independence, the autocratic nature of his rule was largely overlooked, even when, in 1964, he extended the state's economic monopoly over private properties, and called for the inauguration of a *taʿaāḍud*, a socialist corporatist project (Murphy 1999b). However, Bourguiba's undisputed power and popularity did not last, especially after the failure of the *taʿaāḍud* program, which left Tunisia in a severe economic crisis, and which, by 1968, had given rise to considerable popular turmoil. Given that Bourguiba's political model linked civil society with the state, the impact of the failure of his socialist program was felt by every section of society.

Scholarship has tended to characterize this as a failed modernization project (Murphy 1999a: 651). In any case, it was at this point that Ennahda emerged to oppose Bourguiba's model of westernization (Ghannouchi 2015: 43). As we discuss in the next section of this article, the group was initially influenced at the organizational level by the Muslim Brotherhood. On the ideological level, however, the founding phase of Ennahda was undoubtedly shaped by various movements and notable intellectuals. Internal debates primarily centered on a comparative contrast between the political philosophies of Malek Ben Nabi and Sayyid Qutb. While both philosophers sought to restore Muslim civilization, they differed in terms of how to go about doing so.

Qutb (1949, 1954–1964, 1964, 2004) believed that all humans must submit to the oneness of God, or *tawḥīd*, and that submission to God mattered above all else in order to liberate individuals from material objects, opportunism and idols, be they human or non-human. He contended that this individual value system should be reflected at the levels of family, society and state, and that it presented the only solution to the maladies of Muslim and non-Muslim societies (Qutb 2004: 23). Any materialist developments, whether in the form of

communism or capitalism, lacked this spiritual dimension, and Qutb considered these tainted by desire, materialism, and opportunism.

Islam, Qutb argued, is by definition civilization, and so there could be no civilization beyond Islam (March and Ghannouchi 2023: 93). Consequently, he believed that any ostensibly social problem – such as colonialism, foreign occupation, or corruption – should catalyze the population to a new adherence to "true Islam" (Qutb 1964: 33) in order to restore civilization. Meanwhile, in order to protect religion from human intervention (including by the Muslim clergy), Qutb introduced the concept of ḥākimiyya (or the 'sovereignty of God') which drew no distinction between tawḥīd on the one hand and the application of sharia law on the other. Sharia, he maintained, represents the value system without which civilization is unachievable, so it must be obeyed under all circumstances and at all times, and it cannot be altered for political convenience (ibid.: 93).

Qutb's utopian worldview was initially a major inspiration for Ennahda's political ideology, but it was soon set against Ben Nabi's approach. Like Qutb, Ben Nabi (1954, 1966) also contended that Muslims must acquire the Islamic value system in order to restore civilization, but he disagreed with Qutb that all civilization should necessarily be Muslim. Each civilization – whether monotheistic, pagan, or even secular – should have its own value system. Building on Abdel-Rahman Ibn Khadun's critique of the "objectives of history" (Ibn Khaldoun 2004), Ben Nabi postulated the idea that civilizations develop in three consecutive stages: the ethical, the rational, and finally the stage of desire which paves the way for certain groups to step beyond the civilization. Muslim civilization, Ben Nabi argued, had passed through all three stages, and in order to reinvigorate it, Muslims needed to return to the initial ethical stage based on the Muslim value system, and to transform this into a collective approach.

This transformation would comprise a remaking of the individual into a social, collective-minded being who is fully engaged with society. Here, religion represents the spiritual medium that establishes a common and unified social consciousness and basis for cooperation. The social, cooperative human being is what Ben Nabi refers to as the "individual of civilization", be they Muslim or not. To succeed, this human-based approach demands education, planning and implementation, which means that tawḥīd is not enough if it is not accompanied by a collective value system. Similarly, ḥākimiyya is not independent, and is also subject to this human-based approach. Ben Nabi's theories proved important to Ennahda, as they held that civilizations, regardless of their ideologies, could learn from each other.

In fact, however, Ennahda did not draw exclusively on Ben Nabi's approach; it also tapped into nineteenth-century sources. These included the writings of Muslim thinkers such as Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, who focused on the application of European-style institutional and legal reforms within the Ottoman Caliphate and its provinces – known as "organizations" (al-Tunisi 1987: 11) – in order to restore Muslim civilization and secure its continuity. Al-Tunis' central premise was that the weaknesses of the nineteenth century Ottoman

state stemmed primarily from flaws in its administrative structure. Thus, he envisioned a basic compatibility between Islam (or sharia) and the European modern state model.

Increasingly, then, Ennahda drew on thinkers such as Ben Nabi and al-Tunisi to hold that Muslims could learn from other societies and philosophies – a basically universalist premise. Ennahda's vision was therefore to establish a collective value system and a modern vision to reform the state and introduce this as the framework of Islamic democracy. Although Islamic democracy was inspired by sharia, it is not an essentially sharia-based, but rather an umma-based approach. This means that the population or the electorate are the source of legitimacy, and the results of elections must be accepted even if a secular party were to win and rule – which is the virtual reverse of Qutb's sharia-based approach, whereby sharia is subject to ḥākimiyya, and thus independent of the umma's decision in the sense that it is context-free.

In the 1970s, Ennahda not only grew at the intellectual level, but also organizationally and in popularity. In the late 1960s, the Islamic Group was limited to "inviting [a few] people to the mosque and teaching them how to pray" (Ghannouchi 2015: 43). By the early 1970s, however, they were able to gather large audiences in mosques across the country. By the end of the decade, they had thousands of followers, as became evident during the General Strike of 1978 and the Bread Revolution of 1982 (Ghannouchi 2015: 56–57, 62f., 115). This intensive political activity caught the attention of the regime, which began to monitor the group's activities, leading to the discovery of the organization on 5 December 1979. Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda's founder, considered this to be "the worst event in the group's history" (Ghannouchi 2015). However, Ennahda was able to turn an apparent setback into an opportunity, and declared the foundation of a political party, marking the start of the second phase of the group's existence.

Phase II: 1981–2010: Becoming a Public Political Party: Adopting Islamic Democracy for State Islamization through Elections

The Islamic Group in Tunisia held its foundational conference in 1979 and announced the birth of its political party under the name of the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) on 6 June 1981. The idea was to end the organization's commitment to secrecy – which was a common characteristic of Muslim Brotherhood groups – and to establish a public organization or party to participate in elections. In short, Ennahda proposed a comprehensive approach with politics at its heart.

The period between 1981 and 2010 thus marked the transformation of Ennahda into an Islamic democratic party. However, debates have continued over the validity of this approach, given that the struggle for "public freedoms" (Brayik 2013: 24) began in the context of a secular state that was antagonistic to both democracy and Islamic ideology. Ennahda's focus lay on ensuring compatibility between Islam on the one hand, and the modern state and liberal

democracy on the other. The party's internal debates thus intensified and split it into two factions. One, led by Ghannouchi, supported a "Salafi" approach, in order to firmly root modern Tunisian statehood and democracy within an Islamic narrative. This was based on an Islamic approach known as *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* (the goals or objectives of sharia) (Qaradawi 2008).

In *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State* (2022), Ghannouchi claimed that freedom and justice are the essence and the goals of Islam and democracy. In so doing, he offered a historical reinterpretation of the society of Medina, widely considered the first Islamic state, and from which the prophet Muhammad issued the Constitution of Medina in 622 A.D. This stipulated a pluralism of religions and beliefs. The people of Medina were therefore not obliged to follow the Quran or the constitution of Muslims; instead, they were enjoined to create an independent constitution which would guarantee their cultural differences and their own religious practices based on the concept of citizenship.

The faction within Ennahda which endorsed this Salafi approach was confronted by a second, which instead called for the marginalization and annulment of both sharia and the concept of the Islamic state. This second faction viewed Islam not so much as a set of obligations, but more as a system of values, beliefs, rituals and ethics. From this perspective, the only obligation was not to sharia per se, but to the values of freedom and justice. However, they failed to convince most of their fellow party members, and so they decided to leave Ennahda and found "the Islamic left" (Ghannouchi 2015: 34). According to Ghannouchi, while this factionalism "could have ended the experience of the Islamic movement altogether" (ibid.), the Salafi approach was ratified at the Fourth Conference in 1984, and concepts such as pluralism, democracy and citizenship were added to the Islamic group's repertoire.

Ghannouchi continued to stress that the electorate itself provided the primary source of legitimacy, and that, should the communist party win elections, he would respect it (ibid.). This marked the birth of the so-called "Islamic democracy", and Ghannouchi was seen as "a democrat within Islamism" (Tamimi 2001). And yet, although Islamic democracy accepted pluralism, its ultimate goal was to gradually Islamize the state (interview by author with Sami Brahem, 2023). Democracy was thus not accepted as a fundamental principle, but merely as a tool to organize elections and help the party gain power. Ennahda's argument was that most Tunisians were Muslims, and that the objective of "Islam as a comprehensive approach" as opposed to "laicism and opportunism" was "an approach of the [Tunisian] state itself" (The Founding Carta of the Islamic Tendence Movement 2012b: 15).

This certainly fitted with Ennahda's aims to gradually transform state and society. As the party literature itself explains, "the relationship between us and Islam is a top-down one revealed by God to us, and we impose it on the people" (Ennahda Movement 2012b: 20). Given this ideological standpoint, Ennahda's cooperation with other secular parties in the 1980s was unsurprisingly rather limited. However, the state's growing repression encouraged all opposing parties, whether Islamic or secular, to temporarily put aside their ideological

differences, and to cooperate in combating government repression. This co-operation helped to create new boundaries that would reshape Ennahda's approach with respect to the Islamization of state and society.

In 1987, prime minster Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali orchestrated a coup against President Bourguiba and assumed the presidency. Lacking charisma or socio-political legitimacy, Ben Ali sought to co-opt the opposition. He met Ghannouchi and promised a democratic transition and elections for 1989, as well as the acceptance of Ennahda as an official political party. Ennahda in turn changed its name from the MTI to *Ḥarakat Ennahda* (the Ennahda Movement), a move that was taken to mean that the party no longer represented Islam but had become part of Tunisia's political spectrum. Also significant was Ennahda's acceptance of the *Majallat al-Aḥwal al-Shakhsiyya* (Code of Personal Status), which accepted equality between women and men and outlawed polygamy (Sfeir 1957).

Ben Ali's power-sharing gambit allowed a tiny minority presence for Ennahda in his parliament, and to make this goal achievable, Ennahda was supposed to limit its number of candidates. Instead, however, the party broadened its candidacy, and despite widespread electoral fraud, it received around 17% of the vote. An alarmed Ben Ali banned the movement two years later, jailing tens of thousands of activists and forcing thousands more into exile. The regime took advantage of the civil war that erupted in Algeria in the early 1990s to justify a crackdown on the opposition under the pretext of fighting "Islamic radicalism" and "terrorism" (El-Khawas 1996). Faced with this unprecedented repression, Ennahda voluntarily dissolved itself in 1993. However, in an echo of developments under the Bourguiba regime, official repression had a unifying effect on opponents of the regime. In a 1996 leaflet published to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the party's formation, Ennahda expressed acceptance of pluralism as a set of values, at least within the context of cooperation with other secular parties in alliance against state repression (Ennahda Movement 2012b: 57–90).

Ben Ali's strongarming continued until the mid-2000s, intensifying particularly after 9/11 under the pretext of fighting terrorism. The first easing of state repression occurred only in November 2005, when Tunisia hosted an important international event: the World Summit on the Information Society (Brayik 2015). With the eyes of the world on Tunisia, the opposition became more active. Ennahda leaders stressed the importance of the event, not only to join with other opposition parties to coordinate activities, but also to reconstitute their own organization within Tunisia (interview by author with Riad Chaib, 2024). On the eve of the summit, Ennahda formed "the Committee of 18 October", and quickly announced a hunger strike. This generated peaceful popular protest, which in turn encouraged coordination with other opposition groups to demand public freedoms and democratic elections. Cooperation between Ennahda and other parties led to the issuing of a common document on equality between men and women – a dramatic departure from the Salafist approach of 1980s Islamic democracy (ibid.).

In 2006, Ennahda started to reorganize itself within Tunisia for the first time since 1993 and, to this end, formed "the Higher Committee for Internal

Debate". These debates were nominally separate from the party structure itself, at least from the perspective of outsiders. One Ennahda leader later stated that "what helped us [to reorganize] was the release of political prisoners who had finished their sentence between 2000 and 2005" (Ibid). Ben Ali's extended period of repression offered an opportunity for Ennahda to cooperate with all other Tunisian parties, regardless of their political and ideological standpoint, which later facilitated its ideological and intellectual transformation during the "Arab Spring".

Phase III: 2011–2021: Reimagining Governance:
The rise of Muslim Democracy

The Tunisian revolution on 17 December 2010, and the subsequent ousting of President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, were key aspects of the Arab Spring movement. For Ennahda, they represented an unprecedented opportunity. Not only was it accepted as an official political party in February 2011; it also won the first democratic elections in October of the same year (Kirkpatrick 2011). Ennahda's cooperation with other opposition groups and secular parties prior to the revolution finally came to fruition in the form of the 'Troika' – a government coalition comprising Nahda and two smaller secular parties, Ettakatol and Congrès pour la République – which would rule post-revolution Tunisia.

However, once in office, Ennahda's self-perception as a party of Islamic democracy clashed jarringly with reality. Based on interviews with Ennahda leaders, a key reason for this was the failure of Ennahda parliamentarians and statesmen to find a balance between their ideological values and the quotidian political requirements of a long-established secular state (interview by author with Sami Brahem 2024).

Against this background, Ennahda once again renegotiated its reformist approach, and formally introduced the concept of Muslim democracy at the Fourteenth Party Congress in 2016 (Ghannouchi 2016: 58–67). In practice, however, this marked the onset of internal strife, particularly with respect to the envisioned extent of Ennahda's Islamism. The conceptual focus was now on reforming the state's institutions in order to streamline decision-making through the democratic rotation of power. This would remain distinct from sharia, which had not been the case under the concept of Islamic democracy. In short, Ennahda had not previously considered democracy to be a value system on its own terms, but as a set of tools and mechanisms which were designed to help the party ascend to office and implement its ideological agenda.

In contrast, Muslim democracy dealt with the state as an ideologically neutral arena based on the value system of liberal democracy, which incorporated individual freedoms, including freedom of conscience, as well as citizenship, pluralism, and civil society. Ennahda's leader, Riyad Chaib, has suggested that Muslim democracy was not only the result of internal debates; it constituted a debate in its own right, which included scholars and activists from the broader Tunisian political and ideological spectrum (interview by author with Riad

Chaib, 2024). Muslim democracy therefore came with a new vision, not only for Ennahda's internal organization, but also for the way the party conceptualized state and society. This entailed "functional specialization" in order to create a balance between different powers to achieve "efficiency and success." (Ennahda Movement 2016: 78).

In this context, functional specialization refers to the separation of Ennahda as a *daʿwa* movement from Ennahda as a political party, as evidenced by its new official name, the Ennahda Party Movement, from 2016. The *daʿwa* movement was concerned with cultural activities in society and played no formal role in politics, which became the designated responsibility of the group's political wing. The party ceased to preach religious ideology at the level of state or society. As such, being religious or a practicing Muslim was no longer a condition for joining Ennahda, which was now "open to all Tunisians" (ibid.: 79).

Muslim democracy therefore came to represent the party's transformation from an Islamic ideological formation to a merely symbolic or cultural unit, with no legal basis in sharia law. From the perspective of Muslim democracy, the national constitution of the state became the sharia. According to Sami Brahem, a former Ennahda activist and a proponent of Muslim democracy, religious and moral factors were no longer the main concern for the political wing of the party (interview by author with Sami Brahem, 2024), which now gave political and economic issues "the maximum priority" (Ennahda Movement 2010: 79).

Externally, functional specialization was extended to include the separation of state and civil society, arguably to strengthen the country in times of crisis. Ennahda leaders believed that civil society should not be annexed to the state, arguing that if, for example, the state's economic program should fail, society could act as a back-up for the state. This position obviously drew on historical precedent; the abject failure of the *taʿāḍud,* the socialist corporatist project, between 1964 and 1969. Ennahda's new vision for society aimed at mitigating the power of the state, which had spread its almost monopolistic influence across Tunisian society ever since the foundation of the republic in 1957. At this time, Bourguiba had annulled the *al-ahbas* or *waqf* (religious endowments) which had historically underpinned the Muslim version of civil society. State centralization was thus seen to contrive a poverty of social participation (ibid.: 197).

Civil society became the realm in which the *daʿwa* movement could operate through cultural and religious activities to shape the value system of society, beyond the influence of the state. Meanwhile, Muslim democracy sought to render civil society institutions, including mosques, independent of political competition in order to exclude and marginalize extremist voices from playing roles that could influence politics. Ennahda leaders claim that extremist groups had previously influence and power in some mosques and Muslim democracy and functional separation aim to neutralize religious places from political polarization. The same approach is employed on social sector such as charities that helped the poor, that could influence the public mood with

regard to politics (ibid.: 95). Thus, the social contract between the political party and civil society is a moral and ideal one, but the bylaws that determined their interaction were less so, which meant that they were intended to be mutually complementary, but only on the basis of complete legal independence (Ennahda Movement 2010: 82). The goal was to defend the Muslim and Arab culture of the state through civil society, while avoiding political polarization and partisanship (ibid.: 82).

In brief, Muslim democracy is based on the idea that "the middle path approach demands the understanding of realities before the interpretation of the Quranic rule of revelations" (ibid.: 93). This relative pragmatism rendered Islamic ideology more adaptative to the existing historical context, and its demands took into consideration "the socio-cultural reality of the country" (Ennahda Movement 2010). Chaib emphasizes that Ennahda should not "stand on the theoretical constant of the movement and should not look for a new horizon for the Islamic project, because the Muslim Brotherhood basis of the project has lost its legitimacy" (Shaib 2013: 17).

To sum up, this section has argued that Ennahda's newly adopted self-understanding as a party of Muslim democracy marked its transformation as a vessel for an ideology (Phase I) to a player in more conventional party politics (Evolution from Phase II to III). Moreover, this intellectual transition points to the organizational reshaping of Ennahda from a protest movement (Phase I and II), as described in Ghannouchi's book *Signs of the Revolution* (Ghannouchi 2015), into a sort of state-centric-movement *and* a political party (Phase III), in which reforms can only happen through state politics, and through democratic elections and the rotation of power. However, President Kais Said's coup of July 2021 undoubtedly represented a challenge to Ennahda's concept of Muslim Democracy. Now that repression is once again on the rise, will Ennahda combine the state-based and protest-based approach, and will we once again see a united front of Ennahda leaders and activists alongside other opposition voices?

Ennahda under Democratic Backsliding and Re-authoritarianization: Unravelling Power Dynamics since 25 July 2021

Since July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied has endeavored to consolidate his regime's authority, notably through the invocation of a state of emergency, as detailed in Article 139 of Decree 88. Central to this strategy was the issuance of Decree 117, which conferred unprecedented legislative powers upon Saied, enabling him to enact laws via legislative decrees (e.g., Nafti 2023, Brésillon 2021, Dihstelhoff and Simon 2024: 102ff., Ben Achour 2022). These measures firmly entrenched legislative authority within the president's domain, facilitating the restructuring of Tunisia's political landscape. A crucial juncture in Saied's program of consolidation occurred with the adoption of a new constitution, which lay the groundwork for substantial transformation in alignment with his vision. The subsequent parliamentary elections in December 2022

and January 2023 validated this constitutional overhaul, further solidifying the president's position (Dihstelhoff and Mrad 2023). In sum, Saied's accrual of power, from July 25, 2021 up to the present, illustrates Tunisia's re-authoritarianization following a protracted process of formal institutional democratization (Thyen and Josua 2023).

It can also be argued that Saied's consolidation of power has intersected with the internal and external decline of Ennahda. His concentration and consolidation of power intensified pressure for change within the party, with internal petitions advocating crisis management and a shift in leadership. Indeed, in the years since 2016, Ennahda has been increasingly plagued by internal division and fragmentation, especially with respect to the divergence around Islamism, which has set supporters of Ghannouchi against dissenters who question his ideological authenticity. Moreover, Ennahda has found itself confronted by a growing disconnect from its own grassroots supporters, which has been exacerbated by myriad conservative resignees from the party aligning themselves with Salafists. Generational tensions have further strained the party, as younger members have assumed public roles but without ascending to leadership positions (interview by author with Sami Brahem, 2023).

These challenges have been compounded by an acute leadership crisis within Ennahda, as Ghannouchi's dominance and advanced age have fostered a growing discontent. The lack of 'internal democratization' has exacerbated tensions, thus prompting resignations and calls for reform, especially in reconciling ideological divisions and pragmatic approaches to government. Externally, since 2010/2011, Ennahda has held significant sway in Tunisian politics, often serving as the largest party in parliament, and a key player in government coalitions (Dihstelhoff and Simon 2024, Brésillon 2021). The party has thus borne the brunt of the growing disappointment of many Tunisians with their post-revolutionary political system (Yerkes 2022, Patel 2022a, Brésillon 2020). Overall, this mounting disillusionment, compounded by a decline in Ennahda's support base by approximately two-thirds since its peak in 2010/2011, has severely undermined the party's influence.

Saied's political re-authoritarianization serves as a stark reminder that electoral democracy alone cannot safeguard Ennahda's political fortunes. For Ghannouchi, "Tunisia is currently facing its largest democratic crisis since the Jasmine Revolution in 2011" (Ghannouchi zit. n. Ennhadha Partei 2021). Several factors contribute to Ennahda's vulnerability. Firstly, the party has often found itself isolated due to some staggering political miscalculations, such as a gross underestimation of President Saied's rising influence after his assumption of power in 2019 under the 2014 constitution (Patel 2022a, Brésillon 2020). Secondly, this Muslim democratic party faces relentless opposition from secular factions, who oppose its Islamist orientation, and accuse it of promoting an agenda contrary to their vision of a secular state (ibid., Thielicke 2021). Thirdly, Ennahda continues to grapple with widespread public discontent, fueled by economic stagnation and money laundering allegations, which have eclipsed ideological considerations in shaping public opinion against the party (Patel

2022a, Patel 2022b). Fourthly, Ennahda has alienated a significant part of its highly religious and conservative base by adopting a more moderate and consensus-driven politics in post-Arab Spring Tunisia. This "pacted transition" (Dihstelhoff and Simon 2024: 86) is seen as a move away from Islamic conventional approach into more secular policies. Since 2016, tensions grew between Ghannouchi's supporters who favored a pragmatic approach in politics, on the one hand, and other party leaders and grassroots members, on the other hand – leading to a notable internal division and fragmentation. Notwithstanding, many scholars viewed this devaluation of religious approach as a process has neutralized Salafist-aligned Karama coalition and paved the way for the shift towards the Muslim Democrat member as a new identity politics. Finally, Ennahda has faced some damaging accusations, ranging from links to terrorist groups to complicity in state corruption, which have tarnished its reputation and further eroded public trust (Présidence Tunisie 2024, Brésillon 2021).

Unfortunately for Ennahda, the party's internal struggles have coincidence with President Kais Saied's re-authoritarianization, marking a significant shift in the country's post-revolutionary power dynamics. Saied's rise has mirrored Ennahda's decline, highlighting the party's vulnerabilities and the fragility of political power. The setbacks of 2021 pose a multifaceted challenge to Ennahda, shaking its core principles of Muslim democracy, and threatening its institutional integrity, internal cohesion, and political strategy. An increasingly authoritarian state aims to diminish Ennahda's influence and discredit its role in the nation-state structure, raising questions about its future trajectory.

Saied's Approach: Neutralizing Ennahda and Reshaping Tunisian Politics

Saied's approach towards Ennahda represents a dramatic departure from the political consensus which had obtained since the Arab Spring. The leaders of political parties viewed as potential opponents of the regime have come under increasing pressure or political repression. Saied has drawn on widespread discontent to indirectly vilify Ennahda, though without explicitly naming the party, thereby positioning it as the primary scapegoat for Tunisia's myriad crises (Yerkes 2022).

In 2022, for example, he darkly implied that, "after an emptying of the state's coffers by those who now claim they seek redemption, it's the Tunisian people who want redemption from them" (Présidence de la Tunisie 2022). In 2024, he contended that "the state is not a party state or a group of parties. The state belongs to all Tunisians. Anyone seeking to disrupt the normal functioning of public facilities will bear full responsibility" (Présidence de la Tunisie 2024). He has implicitly attributed the failure of Tunisia's post-revolution governance to Ennahda by denying that the party had ever formally adhered to national consensus politics: "There are those who have rejected social and political dialogue, so why are they now calling for it?" (ibid). Moreover, in 2023, he laid the blame for Tunisia's current woes – poverty, food insecurity, corruption, and more – at Ennahda's feet:

Whoever commits a crime against the Tunisian people must pay the price according to the law. We will not leave a single penny for those who stole them, because they took it from the pockets of the poor and the destitute, (Présidence de la Tunisie 2023).

These were by no means isolated comments without concrete consequences. In fact, Saied's anti-Ennahda stance has come to form a pivotal component of a broader political crackdown (Patel 2022a). This has culminated in a restructuring of Tunisia's political landscape, consolidating power under his presidency through constitutional amendments (e.g., Dihstelhoff and Mrad 2022, 2023). Legislative changes have restricted party participation in elections, skewing outcomes in favor of Saied loyalists (ibid., Yerkes 2022). Notably, and in echo of political repression under Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the regime's strongarm tactics have targeted Ennahda's leadership rather than its grassroots, with arrests and legal actions alleging threats to state security, corruption, and money laundering.

Scholars such as Hamza Meddeb have suggested that the regime's goal is not to completely eradicate Ennahda, but rather to neutralize the party's influence, which has in any case waned in recent years due to internal crises and growing fragmentation: "[It is] not aimed at repressing an ideology or a radical movement, but at punishing and holding politically accountable leaders who have been in power" (Meddeb cited by Ben Hamadi 2024). This "neutralization strategy" involves stripping Ennahda of its popular base and capacity to muster effective dissent. Repressive tactics have included arrests, harassment, travel bans, and asset freezes, while party offices were closed on 18 April 2023, and bans on public gatherings were introduced (Human Rights Watch 2023).

Moreover, since December 2022, Tunisian authorities have arrested at least 17 (former) members of the party, including its two vice presidents, Ali Laarayedh and Nourredine Bhiri. Perhaps the zenith of state aggression was reached in April 2023 with Ghannouchi's arrest. Most of those detained have been charged by authorities with "conspiring against state security" (Présidence Tunisie 2024). And yet Human Rights Watch contends that these charges were made with no disclosure of the alleged criminal acts constituting a conspiracy (ibid., Human Rights Watch 2023b).

All in all, Saied's actions reflect a deliberate effort to curb Ennahda's influence through state coercion and legal maneuvering, signaling the onset of a protracted struggle for political dominance. All of this suggests that Saied is well aware of both the significant role of Ennahda in the past, of its ongoing political influence, and perhaps also of the danger it poses to his monopolization of power.

Ennahda's Response to Tunisia's Re-Authoritarianization

When Saied embarked on his attempted monopolization of power, Ennahda initially adopted a cautious approach, aiming to resist without provoking violent reprisals or alienating allies and members. Maher Madhioub, an adviser

to Ghannouchi, emphasized Ennahda's awareness of the imperative to prevent escalation and maintain composure within the party's democratic framework. "Violence and civil unrest are not desired by anyone here, despite our firm stance on characterizing the situation as a coup" (Interview by author with Maher Madhoub, 2023).

Consequently, the first session of Ennahda's Shura Council on August 4, 2021, indicated the party's willingness to engage in proactive yet very mild crisis management, both in terms of tone and concrete demands. In the session's accompanying statement, delegates made almost casual reference to Saied's "unconstitutional coup" (Ennahdha Media 2021c), while also engaging in introspection and self-criticism. They expressed a desire to understand the popular discontent which manifested in the events of July 25, and they acknowledged the need for party reform:

> [The Ennahda Party Consultative Council] stresses the necessity of the party undertaking a profound internal self-critique of its policies during the last period and of the necessary revisions and renewal of programs and leadership structures (Ennahdha Media 2021a).

Additionally, Ennahda delegates expressed a commitment to the state's anti-corruption efforts, and to dialogue with other political actors in the country, including the President. However, the clear message was that no change of internal leadership would occur under the existent circumstances of political pressure (Larbi 2021). Consequently, Ennahda's Shura Council meeting did not resolve the internal dissent within the party which, in the past, had occasioned mass resignations, most notably on the part of the "Group of 100" in September 2020. Besides this, internal petitions from party members called for the dissolution of the executive office and a "crisis leadership" to deal with internal dissent. Aware of Saied's popular support and military backing, the party's central demand was a return to legitimate participation in constitutional structures:

> [Ennahda] calls on all national forces – parties, organizations and associations – to reach agreement on the minimum level of national consensus that guarantees the return of legitimate constitutional life and protects the stability and unity of Tunisia (Ennahdha Media 2021b).

Secondly, the establishment of the National Salvation Front on 31 May 2023 constituted a significant development, as Ennahda joined this coalition against the perceived coup of July 25, 2021. The party made strategic concessions, such as abandoning its primary demand to restore the pre-coup composition of parliament and advocating instead for national dialogue and early elections based on the 2014 constitution (Patel 2022a).

Since the first wave of repression in February 2022, Ennahda's strategy has reflected an attempt to navigate between, on the one hand, avoiding direct confrontation, which could lead to further repression, and, on the other, to maintaining unity with non-Islamist parties. This delicate balance is crucial for

preserving the party's position amidst growing authoritarianism. Nevertheless, arrests within the National Salvation Front have further weakened Ennahda's political foothold, stifling its capacity to operate effectively (McCarthy 2024, Al-Jazeera 2023).

In this context, Ennahda continues to pursue a state-centered reform approach. The party is actively engaged in developing both a comprehensive party program, and localized municipal initiatives, with a particular focus on the concept of decentralization (interview by author with party leader in Sfax, 2024). It thus seems that Ennahda's central minimum requirement is a formal return to legitimate participation in rule-of-law structures. At the time of writing, and due to Saied's restrictions, Ennahda operates primarily through its *daʿwa* movement, which serves as a nationwide force within civil society organizations and mosque communities.

To be sure, Ennahda's General Secretary, Ajmi Lourimi, has proposed a potential renaming of the party (Lourimi 2024), while former Ennahda leader Abdellatif Mekki has established an explicitly conservative party (Business News 2022), which aims at a diverse, less ideological, though basically socially conservative and economically liberal support base. Despite these developments, however, it is far from obvious that the concept of Muslim Democracy has undergone intellectual revision.

Conclusion

The synthesis of Ennahda's political thought and practice has arisen from the party's historical trajectory. As we have argued here, Ennahda's evolution can be divided into four distinct periods. In Phase I (1969–1981), the party emerged as an ideological force advocating Political Islam. This period witnessed its transition from socio-religious activism to debating its political ideology. Phase II (1981–2010) was ushered in by Ghannouchi's "Signs of the Revolution". This second phase saw Ennahda emerge as a public political party, which aimed at state Islamization through an advocacy of the concept of Islamic democracy in elections. During this period, the party evolved in the direction of conventional party politics, while retaining some elements of its past as a protest movement. The Arab Spring marked the advent of phase III (2011–2021), during which Ennahda reimagined governance, and increasingly incorporated the concept of Muslim democracy. It transformed into a state-centric party, blending activism with governance.

Notably, the embrace of 'Muslim democracy' involved a shift towards a state-centric approach, whereby the state is intended to safeguard individual and political freedoms, regardless of ideological differences. The adoption of this position distinguished Ennahda from other Islamic movements in the MENA region. Despite the onset of Phase IV from 07/2021, we have argued here that the core principle of Ennahda's political thought, Muslim Democracy, remains prevalent, that it continues to underscore the party's ideological orientation, and its aspirations within Tunisia's changing political landscape.

Certainly, Ennahda is driven by ongoing challenges around reform and party leadership. However, due to the underground nature of the party's recent political work after the 2021 coup, it is difficult to assess this conclusively. Nevertheless, the broader Tunisian political context in the wake of Saied's power grab points heavily to the onset of a phase IV, whereby Ennahda is much less able to translate the concept of Muslim democracy into political practice. The decline of the concept lies in Ennahda's inability to pursue the prioritization of the political over the civil society field within the overall framework of a new, more authoritarian political arrangement.

In light of the circumstances which characterize phase IV, Ennahda's future looks bleak. Externally, the party is confronted with an authoritarian resurgence and finds itself marginalized from current political processes. It is suffering under severe repression, which echoes a broader state targeting of political opposition. Internally, and despite the appointment of a new interim leader, Mondher Ounissi, on 26 April 2023, Ennahda lacks effective leadership and direction (Brahem 2024), and a reconciliation with state officials seems unlikely, especially given impending presidential elections in October 2024. The party remains paralyzed by arrests and internal strife, which have constrained its political agency and diminished its influence in Tunisia's evolving political landscape.

To some extent, the presidential elections could serve as a much-needed reality check (Guesmi 2022), or as a window of opportunity for the party. They might allow for institutional reform and internal reconciliation, as well as greater purposefulness in the party's leadership and governance. Unlike Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 which suffered unprecedented repression, Ennahda could benefit from Saied's approach, which might afford it some maneuverability in terms of forming alliances, while simultaneously allowing it to intensify its *daʿwa* work. In this sense, Ennahda increasingly operates more as a movement than a political party.

This points to the fact that, although Ennahda's political dominance has declined, its model remains relevant within – and potentially beyond – Tunisia. The party persists as a pivotal opposition force, maintains structural and geographic robustness, garners support from conservative citizens and those culturally aligned with Arab heritage, and mobilizes support from lower social strata, uniting diverse population segments socially and politically. Furthermore, Ennahda, akin to other players within political Islam, has endured prolonged periods of oppression in its history, and has demonstrated remarkable adaptability as a political entity. Its persistence suggests that its dissolution is improbable, although another reinvention might be on the cards (McCarthy 2024).

Indeed, as one Al Jazeera journalist has suggested, the party is "perhaps the only force remaining in Tunisia that can realistically act against President Saied's autocratic regime – but to succeed, it needs to reform itself" (Guesmi 2022). Of key importance here could be internal democratization, which might generate party unity and leadership cohesion. Equally important are the sustainment of grassroots connections, restoring credibility, realigning the party's agenda and communication, attracting young talent to leadership positions,

maintaining influence within the security apparatus, and forming a robust op-position bloc. Addressing these measures and challenges is imperative for Ennahda's success in navigating Tunisia's political landscape, and for fulfilling its role as a potential harbinger of change from autocracy, ensuring its relevance and efficacy amidst evolving political dynamics and resistance.

How does Ennahda fit into broader regional trends with respect to political Islam as a socio-political force? Three phases can be outlined here (e.g., Lynch 2024, McCarthy 2024): 1) Before 2010, Middle Eastern states controlled Islamists in order to shore up their own power base; 2) In the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring', movements and parties of political Islam entered the mainstream; 3) Since 2013, there has been a marked return to authoritarianism, which has jeopardized the role of political Islam in state structures. Overall, however, the political opportunities opened by the Arab Spring have fundamentally altered the relationship between political Islam and regimes.

For instance, in Tunisia, large-scale protests and regime change led to the emergence of an Ennahda-led government (2011–2013), while in Morocco, more limited protests resulted in the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) becoming the largest party in government (2011–2021). Since 2013, an undoubted authoritarian resurgence has compromised the presence of Islamists in state structures. This has included a crisis of legitimacy, marked by a decline in the political, societal, and cultural sway of Islamists, as well as escalating political polarization. It has also included a reimposition of regime control, which took place as early as 2013 in Morocco, and which was marked by the rise of Saied in Tunisia in 2021. In Egypt, the previously influential Muslim Brotherhood, once hailed as a model of political Islam, has been severely suppressed and forced into exile following Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's 2013 military coup. Meanwhile, in Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood has experienced internal fragmentation due to the emergence of a reformist faction. All of this shows that the legitimate participation of Islamist parties within nation-state structures is once again confronted by severe challenges. Societal orientations toward political Islam, and their toleration by Middle Eastern states, appears to be changing. The future remains unclear.

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Enahdina muslimanska demokratija u Tunisu posle arapskog proleća: sintetizovanje političke misli i prakse

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad istražuje interakciju između političke misli i prakse unutar tuniske partije Enahda tokom njenog perioda u opoziciji, nakon što je preuzela vlast 2011. godine, kao i nakon puča 2021. godine. U radu pratimo genealogiju političke misli unutar stranke od tačke njenog osnivanja. Čineći to, istražujemo postepenu evoluciju partijske ideologije od *davetskog* (misionarskog) delovanja između 1969. i 1981. godine, preko islamske demokratije između 1981. i 2011. godine, do „muslimanske demokratije" nakon ustanka 2011. godine. Ovu ideološku evoluciju ispitujemo kroz okvir tri ključna elementa: (i) islam, (ii) promenljivi društveno-politički kontekst Tunisa i (iii) univerzalnu epistemu. Kao što pokazujemo, značajna prekretnica nastupila je 2016. godine sa odvajanjem *davetskih* aktivnosti od partijske politike, što je otkrilo rastuću državno-partijsku konceptualizaciju politike. Međutim, državni udar 2021. godine doveo je u pitanje Enahdin koncept muslimanske demokratije, kao i sve aspekte sopstvenog osećaja kontinuiteta partije kao značajnog društveno-političkog aktera, kao što su njena institucionalna struktura, rukovodstvo, članstvo, društvena baza, politička strategija i ideologija. Enahda je sada suočena sa autoritarnim oživljavanjem čiji je cilj obuzdavanje stranke i delegitimizacija njenog učešća u strukturama nacionalne države. Empirijski dokazi, zasnovani na sadržajno-analitičkim procenama ličnih intervjua, kao i na medijskom izveštavanju o Enahdi, pokazuju da se predstavnici stranke sve više fokusiraju na organizacionu reformu kako bi se izborili sa posledicama državnog udara 2021. godine. Njihov cilj, čini se, jeste da demokratizuju kako Enahdu tako i samu tunisku državu.

Ključne reči: Enahda, politički islam, muslimanska demokratija, funkcionalna specijalizacija, re-autoritarizam, organizaciona reforma.