

UNDERSTANDING THE “ISLAMIST WAVE” IN TUNISIA

April 27, 2012

gloria-center.org

On October 23, 2011, Tunisia held the first free and democratic elections in the country’s history. Tunisian voters were called upon to elect 217 members of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), whose task was to appoint an interim government and to draft a new constitution within one year, and to prepare the country for general elections. The Islamist party Ennahda was then declared the winner of the election, obtaining 89 seats. The main problem with these elections, however, was the sheer number of participating forces: no less than 110 parties. The socialist, liberal, and democratic parties failed to run together, thereby dispersing the vote. Ennahda thus profited from this fragmentation; had the socialist-liberal-democratic opposition been united, Ennahda may not have won the largest bloc of seats.

On October 23, 2011, Tunisia held the first free and democratic elections in the country’s history. Nine months after the popular uprising, known as the Jasmine Revolution, which toppled a decades-long dictatorial regime, Tunisians were able to experience one of the most basic facets of democracy: the right to vote. Thus, Tunisians headed to the polls to elect members of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) with a sense of renewed hope. For nearly all of the voters, it was in fact their first time participating in an election. It was also the first time voters could go to the polling station without prior instructions or injunctions.

Voters were called upon to elect 217 members of the NCA, whose task is to appoint an interim government and to draft a new constitution within one year, and to prepare the country for general elections. The final results of the elections were announced on November 14, 2011. The Islamist party Ennahda won a relative majority, obtaining 89 seats. Ennahda was then declared the winner of the election. Tunisians in the cities, in rural areas of the interior, and especially in Europe reportedly voted for Ennahda. Having, however, won a relative majority and not an absolute one, Ennahda was compelled to form a coalition with the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, both secular center-left parties.

THE NEW TUNISIAN NCA

Examining the parties that won seats in the NCA, it is striking to find that the majority of them are from the secular political left. Together, the social-democratic forces won 127 of the seats (considerably more than the 89 seats won by Ennahda). The following is the list of parties and independents elected to the NCA:

PLACE PARTY

SEATS

Won a

1	Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda (al-Nahda, Renaissance); headed by Rached Ghannouchi	plurality, obtaining 89 seats
2	Congress for the Republic party, headed by veteran human rights activist Moncef Markouzi	29
3	Al-Aridha Chaabia (Popular Petition Party), headed by expatriate businessman Hechmi Hamdi	26
4	Ettakatol (the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties), a social democratic party	20
5	Progressive Democratic Party, a liberal party	16
6	Democratic Modernist Pole (a political coalition created in anticipation of the Assembly elections and consisting of four parties and five citizen initiatives), a secular, liberal party	5
7	Al-Moubadara (“Initiative”), a centrist party formed following the Jasmine Revolution and founded by Kamel Morjane, foreign affairs minister for the former regime and a member of the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR)	5
8	Afek Tounes (“Tunisian Horizons”), a secular and liberal party formed after the revolution.	4
9	The Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party	3
10	Movement of Socialist Democrats	2
11	The People’s Movement, a secular party	2
12	The Cultural Unionist Nation Party, “al-Oumma,” a pan-Arabist party	1
13	The Democratic Patriot’s Movement, a Marxist-left party	1
14	The Democratic Social Nation Party, a social-democratic party	1
15	The Equity and Equality Party, focusing on social issues	1
16	The Free Patriotic Union, a liberal party	1
17	The Maghrebin Liberal Party, a center-right liberal party	1
18	The Neo Destour Party, a center-left party	1
19	The Progressive Struggle Party, with a Marxist-Leninist orientation	1
20	The independent list “Social Struggle,” a socialist oriented list	1
21	The independent list al-Amal (“Hope”), liberally oriented	1
22	The independent list, The Voice of the Independent, of liberal orientation	1
23	The independent list al-Wafa (“Fidelity”)	1
24	The independent list The Independent, whose main political orientation is unclear	1
25	The independent list For a Tunisian Patriotic Front, whose elected candidate, Foued Thameur, stresses that Tunisia’s youth are responsible for the revolution	1

- | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| 26 | The independent list “The Justice,” of liberal orientation | 1 |
| 27 | The independent list Loyalty to Martyrs, whose main political orientation is unclear | 1 |

It is noteworthy that the three parties that received the most seats—Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic Party (CRP), and al-Aridha Chaabia—all have leaders who lived in exile before the Jasmine Revolution took place. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda’s leader, lived in London as a political refugee from the early 1990s on. Moncef Marzouki, the CRP’s leader, moved to France in 2002, in order to continue his political activism against the regime. Hemchi Hamdi, the founder of al-Aridha Chaabia, is instead a London-based Tunisian tycoon.

The main problem in these elections, however, was the sheer number of participating forces: no less than 110 parties and 1,570 electoral lists with some 11,000 candidates ran in the elections. This proliferation, a sign of democratic immaturity, would cripple elections anywhere. This is especially the case in a small country like Tunisia, whose population is only 10 million.

Even though many of the socialist, liberal, and democratic parties were nearly identical in their orientation, differing only in small nuances, they failed to run together, thereby dispersing the vote. Many of them wound up with only one seat in the NCA. The result can be referred to as an “asymmetric coordination failure,” where too many parties contended for the same votes, thereby splintering a potential majority, and inadvertently leading to the election of a government that does not accurately reflect the political makeup of the population.[1] Ennahda thus profited from the fragmentation of the secular camp; had the socialist-liberal-democratic opposition been united, Ennahda may have failed to win the largest bloc of seats.

VOTER ABSTENTION AND INVALID VOTES

It is also important to note that many Tunisians did not vote in these elections. Despite initial reports of a 70 percent turnout, official data later confirmed that the real percentage had been much lower: only 52 percent (54.1 percent at home and 29.8 percent abroad). Considering these were Tunisia’s first free elections, this figure is surprisingly low. Furthermore, in addition to voters who failed to show up at the polling booths, numerous voters cast blank or spoiled votes (these accounted for 2.3 percent and 3.6 percent of the votes, respectively).

The high percentage of abstentions and invalid votes may be due, it least in part, to ignorance on the part of citizens, many of whom had never voted before. Some civil society organizations did take the initiative to inform the public, especially in rural areas, about the importance and procedure of voting. However, these initiatives were local and isolated, whereas what was needed was a state-wide campaign to explain the election system and the NCA’s role. Also, the nine-month period between the Jasmine Revolution and the elections was presumably insufficient for effective voter education campaigns.

At the same time, many of the citizens who declined to vote or cast invalid votes surely did so deliberately,

out of a sense of disillusionment with the political system as a whole. Many Tunisians indeed have little faith in the politicians' promises concerning the economy, liberal freedoms, and the curbing of extremism and jihadist threats. Among the abstainers were also supporters of the Salafi movements, who considered the elections "heretical" and thus boycotted them. In fact, no influential Salafi parties participated in these Tunisian elections—unlike in the case of Egypt, where numerous Salafi movements ran for parliament, with considerable success.

THE WEAKNESS OF THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION VERSUS THE STRENGTH OF THE ISLAMISTS

By and large, Tunisians—especially in big cities—are not Islamist in character. In a recent poll published by the Tunisian media outlet *Gnet*,^[2] it appeared that Tunisians living in the capital of Tunis have actually been deserting the mosques in the after-Revolution. *Gnet* mentions that as the radical imams are taking control of the mosques, the majority of Tunisians in Tunis have decided to abandon going to Friday prayers.

Ennahda's electoral victory should thus be ascribed to its effective elections campaign, versus the ineffectiveness and immaturity of the opposition, which failed to unite and was preoccupied with contention and bickering. Tunisian columnist Nizar Bahloul wrote in the Tunisian magazine *Business News*:

[Ennahda] managed to penetrate the heartlands of Tunisia and the remote neighborhoods, and to persuade... the voters.... We must admit that Ennahda accomplished an enormous task in less than nine months. During this time, the other parties were engaged in selfish wars, quarreling over who should be heading the electoral list. Before the vote even took place, they already saw themselves [holding] post-elections talks, [forming] coalitions and negotiating over portfolios. Some politicians already saw themselves in the role of President of the Republic.^[3]

This difference between the Islamists and the secular camp has much to do with their situation under the dictatorship of former Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine bin Ali. The liberals were severely persecuted, arrested, and tortured, and almost completely eliminated. Tunisian Islamists, who were also persecuted and tortured, managed, however, to receive foreign support and financial aid, mainly from the Gulf. The liberals, on the other hand, received no such aid.

Thus, the Islamists became the only organized opposition to bin Ali's regime and attracted numerous followers—even from non-religious backgrounds. Many Tunisian activists embraced the Islamist agenda not out of religious conviction, but as a reaction against the brutality of the regime. Young women, even from secular homes, donned the veil, and young men grew beards, because the veil and the beard had become symbols of opposition to bin Ali.

The Islamist forces retained this advantage in the lead-up to the recent elections. According to columnist Jamel Dridi, of the Tunisian English-language news site *Kapitalis*, Ennahda appealed to wide sectors in the electorate, because they associated it with the desire to rehabilitate society's values after many years

of corruption under bin Ali:

Ennahda has built a great deal of its political program on the respect for values and on a return to morality in Tunisia through the fight against corruption, the promotion of rule of law among all citizens, the fight against all “thieves holding public positions,” etc... Under 23 years of dictatorship, Tunisians lost all their points of reference and their traditional and civil values... In the old political system, the people in government behaved as in the mafia. They did not serve the state and the citizens, but rather used the state to rise to wealth on the shoulders of the citizens... Ennahda was immediately perceived as a “break” with the past. Tunisians no doubt chose Ennahda because it represented the enemy to Ben ‘Ali’s regime. However, most of all, Ennahda, whether rightly or wrongly, represented in the eyes of some of the population a return to morality, righteousness, and justice... And it’s not even a matter of religion, but rather a matter of seeking direction and values...[4]

Another source of strength in Ennahda’s elections campaign was—according to Tunisian media—Qatar’s financial help to Ennahda. Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi is a celebrated figure in Qatar, enjoying good relations with the ruling family and with the emir’s “chief advisor,” Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. The alliance between Ennahda and the oil-rich emirate results from a convergence of shared religious values and ideals. In fact, the Qatari emir is regarded as a major “patron” of Islamist movements, supporting not only Ennahda but also the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. It therefore comes as no surprise that, according to Tunisian sources, Qatar funded Ennahda’s entire electoral campaign, thus helping it to defeat the penniless and fragmented liberal opposition. Tunisia’s Higher Political Reform Commission, which was charged with overseeing legal and constitutional reform in the post-revolution, passed a bill stating that “foreign and private [campaign] funding is prohibited.” However, it was reported[5] that during the course of its election campaign, Ennahda moved its headquarters from a “dilapidated office outside Tunis to a glossy tower block in the city centre, which used to house the state telephone company, Tunis Telecom. The party’s campaign was organized, widespread and unsustainable on the limited public funding made available to all political parties. While Ennahda profited from a wealth of resources, other parties did not receive their complete share of public funding.”[6]

THE ELECTORAL SURPRISE

The party al-Aridha Chaabia has been the surprise of the Tunisian elections. The party headed by Tunisian billionaire Hechmi Hamdi, obtained 26 seats in the NCA. This result ranks the al-Aridha party as third place in terms of seats. Hamdi had conducted a populist campaign promising to give free health care, a subsidy of 200 dinars (100 Euros) for each of the half million unemployed Tunisians. He had also promised to inject 2 billion dinars (approximately 1 billion Euros) of his own money into the Tunisian budget.

This result is even more remarkable considering the fact that the electoral commission decided in the first place to cancel seven of the lists of this party for alleged infringement of the electoral law. It was alleged the party had received campaign financing from private sources, whereas the law prescribes that only

public or personal funding is permitted. It must be stressed that electoral controllers had found that all major parties had violated the electoral law and that even Ennahda has been accused of allegedly having received funds from Qatar. However, only al-Aridha was sanctioned.

The decision to cancel seven lists angered al-Aridha supporters in the town of Sidi Bouzid, where the list was disqualified. Almost 2,000 supporters set fire to a court-house, a police headquarters, the mayor's office, and the offices of the rival Ennahda party. As a result, Tunisian authorities decided to impose a curfew in Sidi Bouzid, which was lifted only four days later. On November 8, 2011, the Tunisian court of appeal reversed this decision, giving back the seven seats to al-Aridha.

Soon after the electoral results were known, a sort of witch hunt began with the goal of destroying the party's image. The enormous fortune accumulated by Hamdi has actually arisen more than one suspicion. Derogatory rumors also insist that Hamdi belongs to the so-called "list of Mounachidine," a term that in Tunisia indicates all those who have invited ex-president bin Ali to run for the 2014 presidential elections. As a businessman, in 1993, Hamdi founded a weekly magazine *al-Mustakilla* ("The Independent"); in 1996 the quarterly magazine *The Diplomat*; in 1999, he founded the London-based al-Mustakilla satellite TV channel; and in 2005, a second London-based TV channel, "Democracy." The party's campaign was actually run almost completely from London. "From this West London base, Aridha Chaabia's promise of an 'economic el dorado' was transmitted to the citizens via Hamdi's television channels, Al-Mustakilla and the Democracy channel," wrote the *Think Africa Press*.^[7]

The Tunisian daily *La Presse*,^[8] formerly the mouthpiece of the regime, published an article dedicated to Hamdi significantly entitled, "*Serial retourneur de veste*" (The Serial Turncoat) in which it narrates the life story of the Tunisian entrepreneur. Born into a middle class family in the province of Sidi Bouzid in 1962, he earned a degree in Arabic literature in the early 1980s from Manouba University in Tunis. In 1983 and 1984, he spent two short terms in prison due to his Islamist affiliations. In 1987, he fled the country to escape the repression of Islamism. In London, he continued his studies in Islamic history and literature and continued to be very close to Islamist exiles, including Rached Ghannouchi, the head of Ennahda.

However, his partnership with Ghannouchi did not last long. In fact, in his Ph.D. thesis, he divulged secret documents concerning the Islamist movement, which, according to Hamdi's detractors, were eventually used by the British secret services. Considered a traitor, Hamdi was expelled by Ennahda and began to seek out new connections. Later, he was accused of having developed close ties to former President bin Ali, although he has always denied this allegation.

In spite of his alleged ties with Bin Ali, Hamdi frequently hosted, eminent members of the Tunisian opposition on his satellite channels. They were given the opportunity to express their opinions on a program called "The Great Maghreb," which had a large audience in Tunisia. The Tunisian regime at that time reacted angrily once again calling Hamdi a traitor and a spy. Hechmi Hamdi may well have "turned his coat" often during his lifetime, but while the left-wing parties have coped with this, it seems Ennahda is not ready to forgive this, especially in light of the al-Aridha's electoral success.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT

As soon as the electoral results were made public, it was clear that Ennahda, having won a relative majority, should have formed a coalition. Behind Ennahda, the two parties with more votes were the CPR and al-Aridha. However, Ennahda's leaders expressed their categorical refusal to negotiate with al-Aridha. Conversely, Hamdi declared that he would stay in London and would not return to Tunisia as long as Ennahda were in power.[9] Negotiations for the formation of the new government hence started among Ennahda, the CPR, and Ettakatol.

Ennahda nominated as prime minister Hamadi Jebali, secretary general of the Islamist party and former political prisoner, who had spent more than a decade in a solitary confinement. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader, preferred not to take a public role, but to maintain his position as Ennahda's "intellectual leader." [10] CPR head Moncef Marzouki became president of the Tunisian republic, whereas the founder of Ettakatol was made president of the Constituent Assembly.

President of the Constituent Assembly	Mustapha Ben Jaafar: founder and secretary-general of the center-left party Ettakatol
President of the Republic	Moncef Marzouki: formerly leader of the center-left party CPR until becoming the Tunisian president
Prime Minister	Hamadi Jebali: spokesman and secretary-general of Ennahda
Minister of Defense	Abdelkarim Zbidi: M.D. from the University of Claude Bernard in Lyon, France. Appointed minister of defense by the national unity government on January 27, 2011. Renominated by the newly elected government on December 22, 2011.
Minister of Justice	Nourredine Bhiri: influential leader within Ennahda
Minister of Interior	Ali Larayedh: Ennahda chairman.
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Rafik Abdessalem: member of Ennahda and son-in-law of party leader Rached Gannouchi; worked as Senior Researcher and Head of the Research and Studies Office at the al-Jazeera Center for Studies.
Minister of Religious Affairs	Nourredine Khadmi: imam of al-Fatih mosque in Tunis
Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice and Spokesperson of the government	Samir Dilou: lawyer and member of the Executive Bureau of the Ennahda party
Minister of Tourism	Elyes Fakhfakh: member of the center-left political party Ettakatol
Minister of Education	Abdellatif Abid: among founding members of Ettakatol's political bureau
Minister of Public Health	Abdellatif Mekki: member of Ennahda
Minister of Training and Employment	Abdel Waheb Maatar: among founders of the CPR
Minister of Transport	Abdelkarim Harouni: prominent Ennahda member
Minister of Communication	Mongi Marzoug: director at Orange, a French telecom company; no party

Technologies	affiliation
Minister of Industry and Commerce	Mohammed Lamine Chakhari: member of Ennahda
Minister of Investment and International Cooperation	Riadh Bettaieb: He is a member of Ennahda. He was the head of the France-based Tunisian Solidarity Association.
Minister of Equipment and Housing	Mohamed Selmane: member of Ennahda
Minister of Finance	Houcine Dimassi: member of Ettakatol
Minister of Planning and Regional Development	Jamel Eddine Gharbi: member of Ennahda and vice-president of Jendouba University
Minister of Youth and Sports	Tarek Dhiab: former soccer player and al-Jazeera sport anchor; no party affiliation
Minister of Women’s Affairs	Sihem Badi: She is member of CPR.
Minister of Higher Education	Moncef Ben Salem: member of Ennahda
Minister of Social Affairs	Khalil Zaouia: member of Ettakatol
Minister of State Property and Real Estate Affairs	Slim Ben Hamidene: founding member of CPR
Minister of Environment	Memia Benna: independent

MINI-CONSTITUTION

Tunisia’s secular camp has lost a historic opportunity to unite and ascend to power. True, Ennahda has been compelled to form a coalition with the CPR and Ettakatol, both secular center-left parties. However, these parties and the opposition have already failed to constitute a counterweight to Ennahda, as evident from the following facts.

Before appointing a prime minister, NCA president, and president of the republic, the NCA had to approve a provisional constitution—or “mini-constitution,” as it has been dubbed in Tunisia—laying the ground rules for the management of the country. Ennahda appointed Habib Khedher, a member of the Islamist party’s legal affairs bureau, to head the Constitutional Council in charge of drafting this constitution. Under his direction, the council drafted a mini-constitution expanding the powers of the prime minister while considerably diminishing those of the NCA president and the president of the republic.

Editorialist Monia Ben Hamadi wrote in the Tunisian media outlet *Business News*^[11] that the leftist parties, which are supposed to act as a buffer to Ennahda’s ambitions, have already failed to do so: “[At this stage] CPR and Ettakatol cannot do much,” she wrote. “They have already signed this agreement. Did they really read it, or were they too busy dreaming that they had reached the peak of their glory? The cry of outrage from their supporters awoke them, but the minute the draft [of the mini-constitution] was made public, it was already too late.”

“So [Ennahda’s leader] Hamadi Jebali will be the new ‘super prime minister’ of what [the new Tunisian president], Moncef Marzouki, likes to call the First Arab Republic. And, just like [in the days of] the old president-Caliph [Ben Ali], nothing will pass without the approval of the head of the government. [Conversely], the new president [will have no authority] beyond certain strictly ceremonial roles. He will not even be authorized to appoint the State Mufti without the consent of the prime minister, or to appoint military chiefs or diplomats.”

On the other hand, according to the “mini-constitution,” the new Tunisian prime minister is authorized to instate, modify or abolish ministerial posts as he pleases, after merely ‘informing’ the president. He is also allowed to appoint and dismiss top officials in public bodies, the civil service and the military. Moreover, if the president is temporarily incapacitated, the prime minister is to replace him for up to three months; whereas, if the prime minister is temporarily incapacitated, the majority party is authorized to appoint one of its own members to replace him.

This imbalance of powers would have been even greater had Ennahda’s proposal to require a two-thirds majority for no-confidence votes been accepted. However, under pressure from civil society, Ennahda was compelled to back down on this issue.

There is no doubt that Ennahda rose to power through a legitimate democratic process. The elections were fair and transparent. However, the mini-constitution that has been approved is engineered in such a way as to ensure the party maximum power and shield it from political opposition.

As a result, Tunisia’s secular society is disillusioned with its political representatives, deeming them incapable of leading reforms and serving as a counterweight to Ennahda. After the election, however, three political parties decided to merge the PDP, Afek Tounes and the new Tunisian Republican Party (RP). The RP is the fusion of two parties, the Republican party and la Voie du Centre, both forming the Modernist Democratic Pole, which consists of four parties and five citizen initiatives, the largest of which is the center-left Ettajdid movement, which might also decide to join the PDP, Afek Tounes and the RP to form together one democratic-centrist party.

The largest opposition party, although it is technically an independent list not a party, is **Al-Aridha Chaabia**^[12]. Hechmi Hamdi, founder of al-Aridha, has been elected on February 4 as Secretary General of the Party of Progressive Conservatives (PPC). The PPC is part of an initiative started by the Popular Petition. “The popular petition is a popular movement and an electoral list that participated in the election. We created this party as a legal umbrella for our supporters and activists and also for future rallies and meetings,” explained Hamdi. The website Tunisia Live informs that though nothing is confirmed, Hamdi announced that the PPC is evaluating the potential for creating coalitions with parties he sees as ideologically compatible – such as the Progressive Democratic Party.

The Tunisian municipal elections are to be held by April 2012, and the presidential and parliamentary elections are supposedly to be held in 2014. Unless the Tunisian left learns from its mistakes, Ennahda will again win a majority – and this time it might even be an absolute majority.

**Anna Mahjar-Barducci, a Moroccan-Italian journalist and author, is president of the Rome-based Liberal*

[1] Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 71.

[2] “Les Tunisois désertent les mosquées !” *Gnet*, May 1, 2011,
<http://www.gnet.tn/sur-le-vif/les-tunisois-desertent-les-mosquees/id-menu-1006.html>.

[3] Nizar Bahloul, “Il faut fêter la défaite,” *Business News*, October 24, 2011,
http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=523&a=27275&temp=3&lang.

[4] Jamel Dridi, “Pourquoi Ennahdha rencontre un succès populaire en Tunisie ?” *Kapitalis*, October 18, 2011,
<http://kapitalis.com/afkar/68-tribune/6378-pourquoi-ennahdha-rencontre-un-succes-populaire-en-tunisie.htm>
.

[5] “Aridha Chaabia: Uneven Treatment?” *Think Africa Press*, November 14, 2011,
<http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/aridha-chaabia-uneven-treatment>.

[8] “Serial retourneur de veste,” *La Presse*, October 30, 2011,
<http://www.lapresse.tn/30102011/39498/serial-retourneur-de-veste.html>.

[9] Hend Hassassi, “Animosity Between Ennahda and Aridha Chaabia,”
<http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/10/28/animosity-between-ennahda-and-el-aridah-el-chaabiah/>.

[10] “Tunisia’s New Government Takes Shape,” *Think Africa Press*, November 18, 2011,
<http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/new-government-takes-shape>.

[11] Monia Ben Hamadi, “Tunisie – Hamadi Jebali, Premier ministre tout puissant,” *Business News*, December 13, 2011,
<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Tunisie—Hamadi-Jebali,-Premier-ministre-tout-puissant,519,28174,1>.

[12] “Tunisia’s New Government Takes Shape.”