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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ISLAMIST MOVEMENT IN TUNISIA

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The Rise and Fall of the Islamist Movement in Tunisia

by

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One cannot help but see a certain number of paradoxes in Tunisian Islamism. On one hand, it is a relatively open movement in comparison to others of its kind, characterized by a strong conceptualization of modernity and a structure which allows it to function equally well in public life and underground to pursue a more or less credible approach to a legal strategy. In the 1980s, observers were impressed by these characteristics, to the point that some forecast that the movement would become part of the political system. But parallel to its public activity--and this is the first paradox--Tunisian Islamism, like other Islamist movements in the Arab world, yielded to the temptation of infiltrating the security institutions (e.g. police and army,) pursuing a strategy of violence in order to take power.

Tunisian Islamism has been in existence for approximately twenty years. In the 1970s it was marginal, as will be demonstrated later in this paper. In the 1980s, it made spectacular gains, becoming the second largest political force in the country. No one could have imagined--and this brings us to the second paradox--that after such a remarkable achievement there could have been a pendulum effect that would again relegate the movement to the periphery at the beginning of the 1990s. No one, including those in power, thought that this movement could be so easily dissipated.

Thus, it is useful to re-evaluate the notions of party, movement, and mass movement--not to mention the contradictions created by the politicization of religion. What is certain is

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[1] This is an unrevised translation from the French original.

that Tunisian Islamism was associated with the end of a man and his regime, and that it probably played a role in the transition leading to the democratization of the post-colonial political system. But the paradox is that though Islamism may in some ways have contributed to political pluralization, it has nevertheless demonstrated that democracy should be built without it.

The twenty years of Tunisian Islamism may be divided into three main phases. First, the foundation of the movement and diffusion of its views, from 1972 to 1980. During this period, it was known as *Al Jamaâ Al Islamiya*, active in mosques and concerned with issues of both faith and doctrine aimed at the re-Islamization of society. At the beginning, nothing distinguished it from the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt--it was characterized by the same social conservatism, the same intellectual and political limitations. It promoted its views through publications such as *Al Maarifa*, *Al Mojtamaa* and *Al Habib*, virtually taking them over.

The second phase was from 1981 to 1987, the heroic age of the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*. This movement, which had been clandestine or marginal with respect to unions and leftist movements, suddenly emerged to claim a place of its own following President Bourguiba's announcement of his intention to institute political pluralism. The Islamists wanted to form a political party like the others, and they submitted an application for the legalization of their activities. They made their leaders and ideas known through an intense schedule of press conferences and activism within major Tunisian institutions. This was a period of intense interaction with the other ideological movements in the country, because of both the need for solidarity with their leadership--imprisoned as soon as the application for legalization was made--and the discovery of the egalitarian discourse which characterized the beginning of the Iranian revolution. Thus, Islamist discourse took on a

progressive tone in universities and professional unions alike. With its emergence from the mosques, the movement was politicized and acquired the concepts of organization and operation that had until then been the monopoly of the left. But the espousal of objective Leninism was tempered by the interaction of Islamist leaders with groups having democratic values, such as the *Movement des Démocrates Socialistes* (MDS) and the *Ligue des droits de l'Homme* as well as by its association with the journal *Erray*.

In the final phase of the Bourguiba regime, only the ruling party was affected by the dramatic rise of Islamism. There was also some concern in those sectors of the left (not be confused here with parties such as the MDS, which had a more flexible and, therefore, more "diplomatic" attitude), for which Islamism represented a dangerous, if not formidable, competitor. After many years of struggling against the authoritarianism of Bourguiba, the left was now witnessing the rise of an opposition that not only engaged in different discourse, considered obscurantist by the left, but that was making inroads into the same traditional territory of the left: the universities[2] and the unions. It was as though the left had to choose between a "*parvenu* and anachronistic power" on hand, and a worn-out, but modernist regime, on the other. Still, the left chose to support Bourguibism, that is, to defend the *acquis* of a republican regime and to block the rise of "obscurantism".

The rise of political Islamism essentially took place under the Mzali government, that is, at a time of economic and political liberalism, characterized by a climate of economic crisis and social protest movements which climaxed in the bread riots of 1984. This was a period of general disorder and reorientation of political actors. In the 1960s and 1970s, the role of opposition was played by students; in the late 1970s and 1980s, this role was played

[2] 36% of secondary school instructors were Islamists; an estimated 10% of university students were militants and sympathizers of Islamism. See Abdallah Amami, Al-Nahdha, (in Arabic) MTE, 1992, pp. 70, 73.

by the unions. Though the actors were different, the government tended to react the same way. The Islamist challenge was tolerated, if not encouraged to counter the student left. Later, it was used to defeat the *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT).

It is well-known that the Mzali government negotiated the liberation of Islamist leadership, only to neutralize it while undermining the UGTT. After the mosques, the Islamists made significant inroads in education through scouts and cultural associations, and turned their efforts to infiltrating the professional unions.

"The strategy devised by Mohamed Mzali to weaken the union organization took about two years, from the summer of 1984 to the summer of 1986. During this time, the leaders of the Islamist movement enjoyed total freedom, holding press conferences, issuing communiqués denouncing everything that was not to their advantage, and exploiting the Prime Minister's compromise to undertake an initiative that they had not dared try until then: the organization of the founding meeting of the Union Générale Tunisienne des Etudiants (UGTE), which was to become the umbrella organization for all the Islamist groups within the universities."[3]

The relationship between the fall of the union movement and the rise of political Islamism has been interpreted in various ways. The correlation between the two phenomena is the following: the crisis and subsequent fall of the UGTT occurred between 1978 and 1989, and the *Movement de la Tendance Islamiste* (MTI) emerged during roughly the same period. But it must be pointed out that correlation does not mean causation. While it is true that the Islamists benefitted from the weakening of the UGTT, it is difficult to speak in terms of a plot. It would be more appropriate, if the notion of conspiracy is to be maintained at all costs, to speak of objective, rather than subjective conspiracy. In any case, and in terms of

[3] Abdallah Amami, Al-Nahdha (in Arabic), MTE, 1992, pp. 192-93.

Realpolitik, there is nothing surprising about this; on the other had, it is no longer possible to doubt that the Islamist sphere of influence had sought to infiltrate the security institutions (army, police, customs)--first as a means of defence in 1975, but later as a form of aggression in the 1980s. Between the Slimane conference in 1984 and that of El menzah in 1986, it became clear to all informed observers of the Tunisian political scene that the Islamist movement was undergoing change. A new generation of leaders was emerging that included professionals, manipulators of the masses, communications specialists, masters in swaying public opinion and experts in logistics. This generation of organizers, engineers, and professionals was seizing the leadership from the established orators and cultural exponents.

Faced with a faltering Bourguiba, a worn-out political elite, and the absence of unions (which had been either eliminated or marginalized), the Islamists' hunger for power increased. Initially desirous simply of the right to exist and freedom of expression, their goal was suddenly to take power. To this end, they had to devise a true strategy of war.

This new situation was to become apparent with the ousting of Mohamed Mzali from his position as Prime Minister in July, 1986. After only a few weeks, the MTI held its convention at El Menzah (a suburb of Tunisi) during which two important decisions were taken:

1. The adoption of a new, harder and more centralized party line, in which only a single opinion could prevail, even in the absence of leadership. (This new plan is stated in a document entitled "Theory and fundamental methodology of the movement", which contained the alternative action plan proposed by the "special wing" and aimed at overthrowing the regime.)

2. A new strategy which entailed the escalation of tension by calling for a one-year strike at the university; the disruption and obstruction of the baccalaureate exams at

the secondary school level; and, finally, civil disobedience on 23 April 1987--a date set for protests in major cities and towns, protests that were to be repeated until the crisis reached its climax.[4]

But this strategy was to encounter two major obstacles: (i) popular indifference to a struggle which may have attracted their attention, but which did not touch them; (ii) the skill of the administration and the police, who were able to contain the violence of the protests. These two factors led to the failure of the plan for insurrection in the cities.

Given this situation, the Islamists decided to proceed with a symbolic blow. They chose to strike Monastir, Bourguiba's city, during his birthday celebrations at the height of the tourist season. On 2 August 1987, bombs exploded at Hana Beach, Hannibal Palace, Le Kuriat and Sahara Beach. Following this summer of tension, the military phase of the plan to overthrow Bourguiba was set for 7 November. But Ben Ali pre-empted the coup: he ousted Bourguiba, imprisoned those planning the *putsch*, and announced a far-reaching plan for national reconciliation and democratization.

The events of 7 November, which ushered in a new era for Tunisia and for the Maghreb, benefitted two main groups: the followers of Ben Ali and the Islamists. The relationship between the new leadership and the MTI was characterized by realism, a certain degree of affinity, and also some controversy. Exposed on 4 November, that is three days before the takeover, the military operation would have been--as Rached Ghannouchi was later to say--"as embarrassing for President Ben Ali as for us".

From the outset, the new regime adopted a new style and approach which was soon to change the shape of the political landscape, particularly at the top level of state institutions.

One of the characteristics of the new style was its goal of national reconciliation. This

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[4] A. Amami, *op. cit.*

consisted essentially of a sort of ideological truce, putting an end to all types of symbolic violence against the Islamic and Arab identity of the Tunisian people. At the level of the political elite, this reconciliation took the form of the *Pacte National*, which was the expression of political consensus among all camps. Another aspect of Ben Ali's project was the launching of the process of democratization. A third element, still at the initial stages, is putting the country to work.

As for what pertains specifically to Islam and Islamists, everything points to a three-part approach: the reinstatement and reaffirmation of Islam as the national religion; the adoption of a more conciliatory attitude toward what for the first time is considered moderate Islamism; and, finally, strict measures--now legal as opposed to repressive--against all types of subversive activity in the name of Islam.

While there may have been reservations on one side or the other, all indications pointed to an entente that was to be ushered in by the release of Rached Ghannouchi. President Ben Ali said that he had only disobeyed President Bourguiba twice: first, when Bourguiba ordered the dissolution of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (LTDH--the Tunisian Human Rights League); and then when he opposed the death sentence of Rached Ghannouchi--only a few hours before the sentence was handed down.

The reaction of the Islamist leadership to President Ben Ali was clear and immediate: it considered the "act of 7 November a historic event" and even went further to state that "if the political world interprets this act as the response to a popular aspiration for change, our movement sees it as more than that, as a divine act to save the country from a civil war created and maintained by the former president." And for the first time, the MTI addressed the head of state, expressing its complete willingness to "leave the past behind, [to] engage in dialogue (with you) without reservations or preoccupations, [to] support the stability and

security of the country, and [to] contribute to achieving everything that (your) appeal of 7 November entails.[5]

The two years that followed were to be years of cooperation, accommodation and relative stability.

For its part, the state made six concessions to the Islamists:

1. A general amnesty was granted to release all prisoners belonging to the MTI, including those in the military.

2. The MTI were represented in the *Haut Conseil Islamique* (the High Islamic Council), a consultative body created by the government to deal with all religious matters.

3. The Islamists took part in the formulation of the *Pacte National* (National Pact) which brought together all the political parties in Tunisia and set out the general principals for political activity.

4. The Islamist movement took part in the elections of 2 April 1989, thus putting an end to its "clandestine period".

5. The Islam student organization (UGTE) was legalized.

6. The publication of the newspaper *Al Fajr*, the organ of the Islamist movement was officially authorized on 8 January 1990. Its publication was destined to continue until the January of the following year.

With regard to the legalization of the Al-Nahdha movement, there was much hesitation. The head of state said on more than one occasion that he was still considering the matter and that he would not oppose it once the required conditions were met.

At the same time and with the aim of "de-ideologizing" religion, the government

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[5] *Le Monde*, 8 September 1988.

passed two laws: one pertaining to mosques, increasing administrative controls on places of worship; the other outlawing the formation of political parties based on religion, or ethnicity. It must be said during this period that there were significant debates within Tunisian Islamism, with efforts to adapt to the times--at least in certain formal ways, such as changing the name of MTI to Al-Nahdah, disengaging the movement from security forces, accepting the *Code du Statut Personnel* (Statute of Personal Law). In other words, it played the game to win the confidence of the authorities.

The Electoral Test

There was little change in the period 1987-1989, though a number of differences emerged between the Islamist movement and those officially responsible for establishing dialogue with it. These differences persisted until the beginning of the preparations for the elections of 2 April 1989. The government was firmly committed to these elections to gain political legitimation. Though they did not grant the Islamists a permit to form a party, the authorities were willing to allow them to participate in the elections as independent candidates. This was to mark a turning point in the events. As the majority vote favoured a *Rassemblement Constitutionel Démocratique* (RCD)-led parliament, the authorities submitted two proposals to the parties, both to ensure that the opposition would have some representation in parliament and to protect the constitutional institutions from anything that could lead to a sudden change in the political balance: the first proposal called for elections based on proportional representation, which could lead the way to amendments in the electoral law. When the MDS rejected this proposal, demanding universal suffrage, the authorities suggested the establishment of a coalition which would encompass all the parties that were signatories of

the *Pacte National.*

Despite the differences within the Al-Nahda movement, it accepted the second proposal and participated in the elections as part of an electoral coalition. But when the parties involved met with the Prime Minister, the Al-Nahda representative was surprised by the position taken by Ahmed Mestiri (MDS), who rejected the idea of a coalition and stated that he preferred his party to participate in the elections alone. This was a clear sign of impending political crisis.

At the same time, there was a significant and unexpected change in Al-Nahda policy. After having accepted the principal of not taking part in the elections, and possibly even that of not opposing the support for the RCD lists in exchange for legalization, the Islamist movement suddenly reversed its position and ran lists of independents. It later moved rapidly from symbolic representation in a few constituencies to presenting lists in all constituencies, and in many cases were the only opponents to the ruling party at both the local and national levels. Thus, instead of settling for a token presence in the various constituencies, the movement went on to gain a huge following and mobilize thousands of supporters and sympathizers. It reached such numbers that the official authorities, overcome by apprehension, had no choice but to resort to any possible measure to address this sudden turnabout in the policy of the Islamist movement.

As for the Islamist candidates, they did not, as expected, limit themselves to moderate electoral speeches, but made many proposals that were completely contradictory to the declarations the leaders of the movement had made at the time they signed the *Pacte National* , particularly with regard to the equality of women and human rights in general. This led the political class to express its concern and to oppose the political platform of the Al-Nahda movement, the "*projet de rassemblement*", accusing it again of resorting to ambiguous and

contradictory discourse.

Then, the elections were held. The Al-Nahdha supporters were mobilized to oversee the counting of the ballots. Though they were the second political force in the country, with 17% of the vote according to official results, their statement immediately following the announcement of the results was the most vehement attack on the authorities. Given the importance of the electoral experience--an experience that gave the various actors a true measure of their support, and considering its implications, it is useful to present some other aspects of this experience.

In addition to the meticulous organization of their militants and the impressive number of their sponsors (they even lent some to other candidates)[6], the Islamists presented their candidates well during the election campaign.

In two internal communiqués disclosed by the weekly *Le Maghreb*, the Al-Nahdah party explained what was at stake in the elections and instructed its militants on the action to be taken.

These elections meant that for the first time in their history, the Islamists were engaged in a new type of political struggle. "We are at the forefront of the force of change. We must evaluate the real impact of our ideas, of our electoral power and of our vote on the state institutions. We call for our militants to mobilize themselves, to rouse themselves from inaction and to play the role that the current phase demands."[7]

With this text, the Islamists demonstrated that they saw themselves as being in a well-defined phase--the second having been the legalization of their party, the next step obviously being their rise to power.

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[6] *Le Maghreb*, 23 March 1989.

[7] *Idem*, pp. 13-14.

In the second communiqué, the Islamist leaders called for the consolidation of the democratic process and the creation of a climate conducive to the recognition of the movement, that is, they made an appeal to

> . . . participate in the constitution of the new parliament which will support the freedoms and just causes of the people, and which will defend the Islamic identity of the country; . . . induce the masses to participate in this political practice; . . introduce a certain number of messages pertaining to their identity, to freedoms and to Palestinian and Afghan issues; . . . prepare themselves for this political practice, for work with the masses and with the other parties; . . . check the names on the electoral lists; . . . mobilize the people, convince them to register and explain the importance of the vote to them; . . . mobilize the greatest number of citizens, essentially the marginalized, the young, and those regularly going to the mosques;

The Islamists addressed a particular audience. During the electoral campaign, the party leadership asked its militants to make their candidates known and to "work to get votes for them". They had to arrange things in such a way that people could attend their meetings, accompanying them if necessary to the campaign rallies of their candidates. In addition they were to expose their opponent's faults (policies, hostile attitude toward Islam, immoral behaviour). Finally, on election day, the militants were called upon to vote and to accompany the electors to the polling stations.

Nothing was left to chance, suggesting that the Nahdha had long been prepared for the elections (a possibility which is not to be excluded).

Some comments should be made about the instructions and directives for the Islamist militants and sympathizers. The tone and vocabulary used are indicative of a certain degree

of political maturity and shed light on the Islamist ideology and on the nature of its militants.

For example, when referring to the election, the Islamists used the expression "this political practice", which means that it is foreign to their ideas--not because free elections had never been held in Tunisia, but because they were not in keeping with the Islamist model of the legitimation of power. As Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist movement would say, "God is the source of all power".[8]

The use of the imperative in the Arab text suggests that the militants were required to follow orders, or face the consequences. Clearly, these orders were followed to the letter, as demonstrated in the Ben Arous area of the capital. The meticulous organization in all aspects indicates that the Al-Nahdha party was very well-structured, and that it had a much larger number of militants and sympathizers than the other opposition parties. It was represented in 17 out of 25 constituencies, and where it was not represented, the "party" said that it supported the candidates who defended change and the democratic process, even if they belonged to the RCD. Of course they would not campaign by appealing to the left. In the four constituencies in which the coalition was represented by parties of the "left", the Islamists spared no effort to criticize them throughout the campaign.

The Islamists constituted their lists in record time. Their candidates were generally well-educated (lawyers, physicians. engineers, professors). These candidates were not all openly Islamists. Three types of Islam were represented: liberal Islam, represented by Mr. Hila, a very popular lawyer from Tunis; traditional Islam, represented by Sheik Lakhoua, a graduate and former Sheik of Zitouna[9], who came from the Tunisian upper classes; and

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[8] *Idem*, p. 12.

[9] This school of theology had regained its status and many of its former adherents came forward after 7 November 1987.

political Islam, which is closest to the image of the Al-Nahdha party, represented by Moncef Sliti, an engineer and journalist at the weekly *Le Maghreb*, the top candidate in the list in Ben Arous. Thus, the Islamists were organized so as to include some candidates of their party in all the independent lists. These were the most numerous and the best organized.

It was not the electoral meetings which constituted the strong points of their campaign, but rather the technique of the militant Islamists who left their mark on RCD candidates everywhere; for example, the Islamists would come in with leaflets, purple balloons (the colour symbolizing Islamist lists) and cover up all traces of their adversaries-- even to the point of tearing down their campaign posters.

The incident which perhaps best sums up the events is the following: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdelhamid Escheikh, who headed the list in the constituency of Tunis 1 inaugurated a mosque by laying the first stone; the stone was removed shortly after the inauguration. (Coincidentally, this was done in the middle of the election campaign--and performed as part of his official functions, although such activities were not among his duties--as though the people were anxious to pray and the construction of a place of worship could not wait until after the elections.)Thus, the strategy of the RCD was to compete with Islamists on the Islamic identity of Tunisia by showing that religion was important to them as well.

The campaign was dominated by three major themes which reflect the bipolarization manifest in the elections of 2 April 1989.

Themes of the Election Campaign: Identity, Democracy, Development.

Identity. In thirty years, the subject of identity had never been given so much attention. This was the culmination of a political struggle that the Islamist movement had already been

engaged in for several years, and for which it now had a legal outlet in the form of elections.

Reference to the Arab-Islamic identity, as the Islamists like to call it (which is actually historically incorrect), appeared on all the electoral posters of the independent lists, as though the Tunisian people doubted that they were part of the Arab-Islamic civilization.

All the political parties were forced to debate this issue, although the RCD was the Islamists strongest challenger on this ground. Aware of its strong representation, the RCD concentrated its efforts on opposing the Islamists, and was unconcerned with the other political groupings because they did not constitute a real threat, and were even allies on this point.

The debate took the form of leaflets and meetings, and turned into a competition about the meaning of Islamic identity. The RCD reproached the Islamists for mixing politics with religion; the Islamists accused the RCD of having drifted away from Islam, despite the reinstatement of La Zitouna University, televised calls to prayer, and the creation of the National Islamic Council--the head of which was Abdelfattah Mourou, a founding member of the Al-Nahdha party.

It would appear that by taking these steps, the ruling party did not do the Islamists a favour, as the "defence" of the Islamic identity constitutes the *raison d'être* of the latter.

Democracy. Given the 7 November declaration affirming political pluralism, it is not surprising that one of the main themes of the election campaign was support for the process of democratization. Though all the parties wanted to make this an inalienable right, it was not always perceived or presented in the same way.

For the RCD, change in this direction was its preference and mission, and it was Ben Ali, a life-long member of the party, who achieved it.

The Islamists viewed this change as the validation of their struggle against Bourguiba--a phase of a process which had ended in their favour. The former president had been ousted at a time when he was seeking to have them sentenced to death. The period of repression that Islamist militants had been subjected to in 1986-87 was frequently recalled during the election campaign, securing the Islamists' place in the Tunisian political arena--particularly since they had "offered" martyrs to the "democratic cause". This means that if democracy and pluralism existed, it was thanks to the Islamists.

For the other opposition parties, the democratization of the country had long been the object of their struggle, and constituted the *sine qua non* of their political activity. As they were not revolutionary parties, the MDS, the PCT and the PUP played according to the law throughout.

Development. The theme of economic development was surprisingly the one which lacked substance insofar as no party, with the exception of the RCD, could present a clearly defined alternative, though the Islamists were not without tactics in this regard.

The main stakes in the elections were political, and the thirty years of autocracy had obviously left their mark on Tunisian politicians. It would appear that they had made the democratization process a priority in order to create new political traditions which were to be irreversible.

Of course all the candidates spoke of unemployment, the need for infrastructures and the reform of the public service, but the meetings, pamphlets and newspapers of the opposition parties did not present a program that could constitute an alternative to the prevailing policies.

Although most emphasis has been on the political implications of the elections, it

should be kept in mind that the opposition parties, particularly those which had been most recently created, did not have the time necessary to prepare themselves. But is this true of the MDS and the Islamists? Certainly not. Ahmed Mestiri's party had 18 years of experience, and although it did not always undertake legal activities, it had had ample time to prepare a platform, gain support, and set out a clear political and economic program that was to be used during the course of the election campaign. The information available, mainly in the press, indicates that reference to economic issues was marginal and that it was dealt with superficially--basically only to blame the PSD (later known as RCD) for the economic crisis.

The Islamists' claims were even less substantial. Candidates did not offer real economic alternatives, but made promises for concrete measures that would affect the daily lives of the electorate, because they needed a majority in the Assembly. Furthermore, they promised free transportation in Sfax, solutions to the housing shortage, and assistance for the poor in Ben Arous, but did not really say how this would be achieved.

There was an obvious "worldly" element in these promises, in contrast to their usual religious rhetoric. The Islamists demonstrated that they had made an effort to understand the problems of Tunisian society by addressing the people's desire for material things. They also showed that they recognized the importance of the economy in political struggles, though economic themes are in fact presented within purely religious sermons. It is this, among other things that characterizes political Islam.

Religious rhetoric, which had always been predominant, reached its peak during an electoral campaign in Tunis 1 by the "independents". At this meeting, the candidate heading the list, Sheik Mohamed Lakhoua, did not hesitate in pushing his beliefs to the point that he came into conflict with various members and the Al-Nahda party distanced itself somewhat from his position. The 65-year old sheik, who had apparently had 500 women come forward

to support his candidacy, advocated a return to corporal punishment (*hudud*), constantly attacked women who worked outside the home, and recommended revoking the Tunisian *Code du Statute Personnel.* Proposals of this type were often suppressed or avoided in official Islamist discourse as they were contrary to the progressive laws in force.

What is most striking in these affirmations is their similarity to the rhetoric of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt.[10] This is particularly evident in Sheik Lakhoua's support for the notion of an Islamic state whose laws are set down in the Sharia, and his stand against the *ijtihad*, that is against the effort to find ways to adapt Islam to the contemporary world.

This type of propaganda made the electoral campaign extremely "ideologized". One member of the Al-Nahda party even indicated that the goal of Islamist activities in the election campaign was to separate the believers from the non-believers. This is not surprising given that the Islamists considered themselves the only ones qualified to talk about religion, and were increasingly inclined to dominate the field and speak in the name of all believers.

Although the Islamists had felt that change would be positive and had supported it, a few days after the election, they made a speech which seemed to be a departure from the delcaration of 7 November and the *Pacte National.* This caused concern in the RCD and in the other opposition parties. While the latter had advocated an Islam characterized by openness and modernity, the RCD had remained mid-way between liberal Islam and fear of religion. But the RCD's discourse was not without religious connotations. In addition to the traditional *Bismillah* which began its meetings and prefaced its leaflets, it supported its arguments with verses of the Koran. By 31 March, the closing date of the election campaign, it was clear that two political forces had emerged as a result: the RCD and the Al-Nahda.

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[10] Founded by Hassan El Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the first Islamist organizations in Egypt. It was persecuted by Nasser, but still exists today.

There were two clear indications of this: the extent of their resources and their indirect way of communicating with each other, virtually ignoring the other contenders.

The results posted on the evening of 2 April 1989 confirmed the bipolarization that had begun to emerge during the election campaign. With 79.5% of the vote, the RCD had come away with all the seats. The lists of independents supported by the Islamists had won an average of 14% of the votes. But considering the meager results of the opposition lay parties, the Islamist movement suddenly became the second major political force in the country. This assertion must be qualified, however, because even if a proportional system had been adopted, the Islamists would not have been able to win more than 24 seats. In fact, if a fully proportional system had been applied on a national scale, the RCD would have taken 114 seats, the "independents" 24 and the MDS three. [11]

The first lesson to be learned from this is the decline of the opposition parties and the sudden emergence of the Islamists as the second major political force in the country. But this must not be overestimated: with less than 300,000 votes out of approximately two million, according to the electoral regulations, Al-Nahda could not expect more than 24 deputies out of 141 according to the proportional system and only 13 according to the combined system that was soon to be adopted.

The second lesson is that of the relative renewal of the RCD, the ruling party that had been "saved" and revived by the events of 7 November, to the point of becoming the hegemonic power of the country. The Islamists certainly made gains in three areas: the capital (around 30%), the large coastal cities (Bizerte: 24.60%; Sousse: 28.6%; Monastir: 22%, Ben Arous, 29.95%) and certain irredentist cities of the South (Tozeur, Gabés, Kébili, where they

[11] *Assabah*, 6.4.1989 and 11.4.1989

claimed 25-28% of the vote). Nevertheless, the ruling party continued to control 60% of the urban districts and 100% of the rest of the country.

Despite the lack of empirical analyses, it is clear that the Islamists benefited from a protest vote, particularly in areas such as Bizerte, where their opponents were rather mediocre. There were also unusual situations, such as in the constituency of Ariana, where great lengths had been taken to disqualify the Islamist list, even until the last day before the elections. This can be explained because Ariana, a northern suburb of the capital, represented a microcosm of the country: it encompassed people from all regions--north, south, centre, the Sahel and Sfax--and from all social classes, including the leftist areas of Hay Ettadhamon and Oued Ellil, as well as the chic residential neighbourhoods of El-Menazahs. In a region of conflicts and tensions, obvious hardship and compelling aspirations, everything pointed to a virtually guaranteed victory for the Islamists in this constituency. But Ariana was practically the capital, and an Islamist victory would not have been tolerated there.

The general rule followed by the Administration and upheld by the international press was that of allowing all the political forces to express themselves as naturally as possible. Of course, in terms of security there was an interest in letting underground forces emerge so stock could be taken of the enemy, but the regime had clearly decided against a leap into the unknown; there was an incontrovertible interest in knowing the true political map of the country. This concern for the truth considerably reduced the systematic practice of falsifying election results.

At first, the Islamists, while disappointed, admitted defeat. Their leader said: "17% of the votes undoubtedly constitute a victory, because Islamists have done more than win votes--they have mobilized forces which could not otherwise have taken part in the elections. The mere fact of having mobilized groups that had been marginalized until now constitutes a

victory.[12]

Three months later, the second in command of the movement, Abdelfattah Mourou was already expressing his disappointment: "Although we were concerned with the political balance and did not ask for more than 10 or 15 seats in parliament, did not meet even this objective."[13]

But as more time passed, there seemed to be a tendency to exaggerate the results. For example, in Rached Ghannouchi's works, he asserted that "Al-Nahda was the most damaged party inasmuch as it had been the party of the majority, which had taken 60% of the votes in Tunis".[14] Later, he told Gilles Millet, of the Paris daily *Libération* that "we are a political movement that wants to come to power by political means. A majority party like ours which has the support of 80% of the Tunisian people does not need to use violence."[15]

Thus, the elections exacerbated the tensions between the regime and the opposition parties. While lay parties pushed for greater resolve with respect to the Islamists, the latter, who had already referred to the "lists of evil" during the election campaign, opened the hostilities and spoke of "rigged elections". Only a few weeks after the elections of April 1989, Rached Ghannouchi left the country as a sign of protest, but this also presaged more serious things to come. The Islamist leadership was preparing itself for confrontation. Offensive declarations from outside the movement would soon make dialogue difficult and divide the leaders of the movement.

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[12] Announcement by Rached Ghannouchi in Al Watan Al-Arabi, 5.5.1989, p.19.

[13] *Réalités*, no. 207, 4.8.1989.

[14] Rached Ghannouchi, interview with Qouçay Darwish, Khalil Media Service, London, 1992, p. 182.

[15] *Libération*, 3,4 October 1992.

In addition to the verbal attacks, there were indications as early as May 1989 during the secret convention in Sfax that the movement had proceed to replace Rached Ghannouchi with Sadok Chourou, its motto now being "no politics without force". A military and paramilitary strategy had apparently been devised to achieve with military means what seemed to have been definitively lost using political means--in other words, to regain by force what had eluded them on 7 November and during the electoral process.

This, then, is the conclusion that I draw after analyzing various interpretations and facts: the Islamists were playing their last card to prevent their movement from being condemned to marginalization forever. This interpretation is supported by the statement made by the principal leader of the movement, Rached Ghannouchi: "Until now, we sought only a shop and we did not get it. Now its the whole *souk* that we want."

While it is difficult to assess all the reasons for taking such a move, the risks it involved are only too clear: although an attempted coup may have contributed to destabilizing the Bourguiba regime, it was not likely to prevail over the new regime of Ben Ali. The Islamist movement grossly underestimated the strength of a regime which in three years had replaced its leadership, diversified its base and ensured that both its rhetoric and activities kept pace with social change. The movement also overestimated its strength as it was forced not only to resort to known (i.e. "washed-up") figures, who engaged in operations such as those of Bab Souika where innocent men died in fires-- which contributed significantly to discrediting the Islamists in the eyes of the public. Another indication of their loss of support was that when the UGTE (the union of Islamist students) wanted to organize a demonstration during the Gulf War (a demonstration which had been authorized as long as it was held on Mohamed V Avenue), the number of protesters did not amount to more than 200-300 and the organizers had to cancel the demonstration.

Today, a precise analysis of the relations between the authorities and the Al-Nahda movement must account take into account the strategic error committed by the movement during the election. It resorted to methods that raised fears among the authorities and alarmed the political elite, as it unexpectedly went from being a political party seeking legalization and a few seats in parliament to one that wanted to play the role of the dominant power. The movement was no longer content to lead the opposition; rather, it felt it had the competence and legitimation necessary to consider itself the overwhelming majority in parliament already, claiming that the turnover of 7 November would have been inconceivable without it. This having been said, the elections were a double-edged sword: a party that does not know how to play by the rules runs the risk of quickly forgetting its own ideology and overlooking the obvious notion of proceeding in stages and by degrees. Thus, it succumbed to the malady of impatience and haste, in the illusion that power was ripe for the picking and the balance was upset.

In addition to the election, two external events were to increase the rift and cause the Islamist movement to flounder and contributed to its defeat: the Gulf War and the impact of the Algerian Front Islamic de Salut (FIS) on the Tunisian scene.

The Gulf War

Like all Islamist movements, the Tunisian movement had traditionally had warm relations with the Gulf, with a common discourse, beliefs and many shared interests. On the other hand, they were hostile to Saddam Hussein, because of his authoritarianism and particularly because of his pseudo-lay position. The Gulf crisis forced the Islamists to choose between their cultural links and vested interests. They could no longer engage in populist rhetoric

while supporting the oil investors backed by Bush.

As the Gulf crisis occurred at a time when the Tunisian Islamists were filled with resentment following their elections, they unconditionally supported Saddam, in the hope that demonstrations in the street would undermine the regime which would prove unable to meet the challenge at the national level.

During this period the discourse of Rached Ghannouchi unexpectedly took on a much more belligerent and demagogic tone than the reasonable and rational one he had been known for. In a speech made barely a month after the beginning of the Gulf War, Ghannouchi declared his unconditional support for Iraq. His assertions included the following:

- After the fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War, a new war is beginning: the fight against Islam and the Islamic nation, waged by America and the zionists.

- To accept the plan of the West is to go against lawfulness and make an enormous political error.

- The *Scharia* is explicit: "When the infidels come into the territory of Islam, Muslims have no choice but to fight with any means until they retreat." And this battle concerns not only the occupied country, but all neighbouring countries; if not it would be a mortal sin for everyone.

- Those governments which collaborated with the enemy, turning their troops into mercenaries and making their territories bases from which the enemy could attack-- that is Saudi Arabia (which claims to be the guardian of holy places) Egypt, Syria and Turkey (which had been the home of the Muslim Caliphate for five centuries)--have lost all religious and national legitimacy because of their treason. Their citizens must disassociate themselves from them

and demonstrate in the streets to force them to withdraw their troops from the combat zones, "those places of shame and sin".

- Other government (i.e. Algeria, Yemen, PLO, Jordan and Tunisia) have limited themselves to express verbal support for Iraq. Their support is merely formal and they said nothing that could be considered a rejection of what is known as "international law"., or of what we continue to call the "Security Council". Furthermore, they did not provide any real assistance to Iraq. It is therefore the obligation of the citizens of these states to rise up in order to force their governments to change their position or step aside and give their place to those who have pledged their souls to God."

Ghannouchi condemned the neutrality of Iran, the country symbolizing Islam which had decided the fate of all Muslims. Now it was dashing the hopes of all those who had gone to its defence and endured the greatest sacrifices. Shouldn't it have also remained neutral with respect to Western countries?

Ghannouchi also harshly condemned Al Sabbah, the ruling family of Kuwait: "They are criminals who dared commit treason again by wanting to regain Kuwait at any price--even at the cost of destroying the entire nation." Ghannouchi called for a general uprising in all Arab and Muslim countries, urging them to:

- break diplomatic ties with all countries allied against Iraq;

- use mosques, associations and schools as recruitment and training centres for volunteers in the struggle;

- form an immediate union, as borders where merely signs of blasphemy;

- to fight against the interests of countries allied against Iraq.

Ghannouchi also expressed his suspicions of all Western statements about civil

liberties, human rights, and international law, which he considered myths and nonsense.

Ghannouchi has been quoted at length here for two reasons: first, because he was speaking out during the crisis when few others were; second, because his texts reveal another aspect of his personality, a Ghannouchi who was closer to the Al Takfir wal Hijra group which had in fact originated the idea of the break from the West in the same way--someone who believed that collective rights prevailed over individual rights, and that the rights of the nation superseded those of the individual Muslim. For this reason he preferred the government of the most powerful (if not the most honest) to a weak one, however religious it may be. Similarly, he would readily accept a government which was able to conquer the enemy and preserve national unity--even if it ignored certain principles, such as consultation, for example.

Thus Ghannouchi had succumbed to the worst extreme, shattering the image that he had wanted to project--that of an Islamist who believed in democracy, human rights, institutions and development in phases--i.e. a moderate and conciliatory Islamist. By adopting the initial positions of the Egyptian Brotherhood, he was caught in a bind, alienating all the Arab and Islamic regimes that were allied with Saudi Arabia. The latter lost no time in cutting off supplies to the Tunisian Islamist movement, which led to the secession of moderates like Abdelfattah Mourou.

The Tunisian regime, like most of the Maghreb governments, had in fact opposed a military solution to the resolution of the Gulf conflict, thereby anticipating and placating the popular reaction. It must be said that what was at stake in the Gulf War from the beginning was above all the support of public opinion. The Islamists saw this war as a chance to defeat the regime at the national level. The government, on the other had, could not allow itself to fall into the trap: at the risk of letting the West down, it had to use the opportunity to express its indignation about the coalition that adopted the policy of "one law for the rich, another for

the poor".

Having frustrated Al-Nahdha's attempts to regain the support of the people, the government started to capitalize on its victory.

In fact, it was in the momentum of the war that the government began to discover caches of weapons and that it began more serious and systematic efforts to disband Al-Nahdaha. Following a long period of reacting to the various offensives launched by Al-Nahda, the government decided to take up the initiative. After having limited itself to erasing graffiti, tearing down posters, confiscating leaflets and dispersing demonstrators, the administration decided to respond to the escalation with a "counter-escalation": it arrested activists, confiscated printed matter, banned all forms of demonstration. Their slogan became "offence is the best defence". This strategy was extremely effective because the Islamists lost both the university and the man in the street as a result. As far as the Islamists are concerned, the period since the elections may be divided into three phases:

- December 1989 to the end of 1990: dropping out of the game

- December 1990-September 1991: confrontation;

- October 1991-May 1992: *mihna*, that is the painful disbanding of the movement.

According to Secretary of State Abdallah Kallel, it is no longer an issue: "Since then, everything is quiet. There have been trials--that of Al-Nahdah and that of the commando, for a total of 274 sentences. Thus, the hard core is in prison. Everyone else has realized that the Islamists have abused them and have ruined their lives. They have become the most determined adversaries of fundamentalism. If you want to find Tunisian fundamentalists now, you have to go to London to see Ghannouchi--or especially to Paris, where Mohamed Chaman, Salah Karakr, Habib Mokni and about 40 of their followers been since Algeria expelled them in May 1992 and where they received a surprisingly warm welcome.

The Bet on the FIS

The prior legalization of the FIS and the victories of the Algerian Islamists in the municipal and parliamentary elections had given hope to the Al-Nahdha militants and led them to bolder activities. Islamists and politicians alike, particularly Ahmed Ben Salah, who had counted on an FIS victory and the domino effect that it would have in the region, however, were soon to be disappointed. Even in the opinion of Rached Ghannouchi, who was certainly speaking with Tunisia in mind, the Algerian Islamists committed a serious error by ignoring the nature of the opposing social forces. By acting as though it were a mass movement capable of organizing demonstrations and attracting certain segments of the public, the FIS overlooked the quality of the forces that constituted the backbone of the political system, that is, the army, the Berber community and the Algerian middle class.

These forces did not identify with the Islamic discourse. The "quantitative" approach of the Islamists, who did not take the political equilibrium into consideration, was to lead to disaster:"This will lead to a military coup or a strike. . . If the FIS were to come to power, there is nothing to prevent the unions, which it does not control, from exploiting the economic hardships to trigger recurrent strikes. The Berbers, on the other hand, could initiate a separatist movement and benefit from international support."[16]

This led Rached Ghannouchi to the following conclusion: "The Algerian affair did us a great disservice and gave our adversaries the opportunity to appear threatened. It created the impression that the West needed them to face the danger that is spreading from Algeria toward Europe. This book of interviews with R. Ghannouchi is an admission of failure from

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[16] R. Ghannouchi, interview with Qoućay Salah Darwish, Khalil Média Service, London, pp. 161-62.

beginning to end. The Islamist leader acknowledged that his movement mismanaged the 1989 election. Was participation in this election aimed only at winning 5-15 seats in parliament, or was it aimed solely at gaining recognition of the movement? By all accounts, the means used were excessive and the techniques counter-productive. The movement's responsibility for its own failure has virtually been admitted: "A movement that participates even indirectly in elections must take all outcomes into consideration." (p. 181-182).

It also acknowledged that the Gulf War, which had increased Western hostility toward "fundamentalism", had been used by the regime and exploited to its own advantage: "The Gulf crisis undoubtedly made our prospects uncertain." In contrast, it gave the Ben Ali regime room to manoeuvre, enabling him to rally the opposition around himself, strengthen his image in terms of solidarity with the Arab nation, and put the Al-Nahdah on the defensive.

Thus, it was a combination of historical and sociological factors, but mainly the way the elections were managed domestically that led to the rift between the actors. It seemed that after coming to the realization that power had first eluded them on 7 November 1987, and that the parliamentary elections of 1989 had served only to reconfirm their exclusion, they tried to regain lost ground by counting on external events: the Gulf war and the rise of the FIS, not to mention human rights principles, which were to serve as a Trojan horse. But again in this regard, it seems that they missed the train of history.

In light of the foregoing, Tunisian Islamism may only be described in terms of missed opportunities.