

Many Fear Revival of Islamist Party in Tunisia

Monday 16 May 2011, by [SAYARE Scott](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2011).

TUNIS — Accused as subversives or terrorists, they bore the repressive brunt of the Tunisian dictator's reign — two decades of torture, prison or exile.

But since the dictator, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, fled in January, the Islamists of the once-banned Ennahda Party have emerged from obscurity, returned from abroad and established themselves as perhaps the most powerful political force in post-revolution Tunisia.

Despite repeated assurances of their tolerance and moderation, their rise has touched off frenzied rumors of attacks on unveiled women and artists, of bars and brothels sacked by party goons, of plots to turn the country into a caliphate. With crucial elections scheduled for July 24, Ennahda's popularity and organizational strength are of growing concern to many activists and politicians, who worry that the secular revolution in this moderate state — the revolt that galvanized the Arab Spring — might see the birth of a conservative Islamic government.

And just as the protests in Tunis heralded the revolt in Cairo, analysts are looking to Tunisia as a bellwether for the more broadly influential developments to come in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood enjoys similar advantages and has stirred similar misgivings.

"How do you want us to go up against Ennahda?" asked an exasperated strategist for the Republican Alliance, a secular party. "They're prepared to do anything."

With years of organizational experience, a vast membership and decades of credibility as a sworn enemy of Mr. Ben Ali, Ennahda has proved to be better-equipped than any other party — most have existed only for a matter of weeks — to step into the political void. The Republican Alliance strategist called for the elections to be delayed.

"July 24 is a favor to Ennahda," he said, requesting anonymity for fear of attacks by the party's supporters. "It's suicide."

With Ennahda in power, he said, "It would be Iran."

The party says such fears are unfounded. "We aspire to a free, open, moderate society, where each citizen will have the same rights," said Abdallah Zouari, a member of Ennahda's executive committee and a party spokesman, adding that the party called for equal rights for men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims.

"We are not in agreement with the secularists who want to force others to be secular," he said, "the same way we are against the Salafists who want to force others to be Muslim."

He spoke with a visitor at a modest new party branch on the third floor of a shabby Tunis office building, the rooms still echoing and empty but for some tables and chairs, the white walls dirty and scuffed.

Mr. Zouari — who bears the dark callus on his forehead caused by frequent bowed prayer, common among the devout — was himself imprisoned for more than a decade as a party member.

“The religious sentiment of the Tunisian people is so deep that certain people cannot understand,” he said.

Polling suggests that Ennahda — the renaissance, in Arabic — enjoys broader support than any of the country’s other 60-odd authorized political parties. The party’s weekly newspaper, *The Dawn*, resumed publication in April after a 20-year hiatus and now sells about 70,000 copies per week, party officials say.

The July vote will create an assembly assigned the task of rewriting the Constitution. In anticipation of the elections, the party has opened dozens of local offices, and imams are said to be promoting Ennahda in mosques across the country.

But mistrust of the party remains widespread.

“They’re doing doublespeak, and everyone knows it,” said Ibrahim Letaief, a radio host at Mosaïque FM, a popular station where he offers withering criticism of the Islamists. Ennahda, he said, has only tempered its rhetoric in a bid to win votes, but in power would impose strict Islamic law.

It is a common refrain here, despite having first been popularized by the reviled Mr. Ben Ali. Opponents have made similar claims, anti-Ennahda Facebook groups have drawn tens of thousands of supporters, and protesters have denounced the party throughout Tunisia. Some of the fear seems to stem from uncertainty about who, exactly, will lead the party; the group’s longtime leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, has said he will not seek office.

A democratic Tunisia depends on the banning of Ennahda, Mr. Letaief said, though he acknowledged, “I’m not going to seem democratic, here.” Still, he said, “Islam is very much anchored in society.”

The first article of the now-suspended Tunisian Constitution decreed Islam the national faith, and 98 percent of the country’s 10.6 million inhabitants are Muslim. Public schools dispense religious instruction. Yet religious leaders have never played a role in government.

Habib Bourguiba, the father of Tunisian independence and the country’s first president, was a staunch secularist who banned polygamy, legalized abortion and once sipped orange juice on television during the Ramadan fast in an affront to the faithful.

Ennahda has pledged to maintain Mr. Bourguiba’s social reforms, and voted in favor of a rule requiring equal numbers of men and women on electoral lists in July. Party leaders compare Ennahda to Turkey’s tolerant Islamic ruling party. Other Tunisian Islamist groups have rejected Ennahda as being too secular, and many analysts consider the party to be distinctly moderate.

Still, Ennahda worries that many Tunisians have renounced an “Arab-Muslim identity,” said Mr. Zouari, the party leader, noting that high school math and science are often taught in French, not Arabic. Ennahda would not force women to veil themselves, Mr. Zouari said, nor would it immediately seek to ban alcohol, which Islam forbids. He admitted that a ban might be a goal in years to come.

Asked about widespread accusations that Ennahda supporters had attacked unveiled women, he replied hotly: “When? Where? What names?”

Ennahda is strong in the impoverished interior, a reflection of the cultural gulf between the “very Westernized elite” in Tunis and other coastal cities — many of whom lived well under Mr. Ben Ali — and much of the rest of the country, said Kader Abderrahim, a researcher at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations in Paris.

“The question,” Mr. Abderrahim said, is whether the elite “are ready to accept that there is a part of the population that lives in a different way, and that has other convictions.” Political stability “will not happen without the Islamists,” he said.

Nour Ayari, 19, said she would back Ennahda in the elections. Ms. Ayari, who sells traditional silver marriage boxes from her family’s stall at the Blaghjia souk in Tunis, wore a diaphanous white hijab, a veil banned under Mr. Ben Ali but legalized since his departure. Women may now also appear veiled in official identification photographs, she noted.

“It’s thanks to this party,” she said, referring to Ennahda.

She dismissed concerns that the party might be cloaking fundamentalist intentions behind a moderate front.

“Why would they change their tune afterward?” she asked. Ennahda’s opponents, she said, still have a “reflex of fear” instilled under Mr. Ben Ali.

Mr. Abderrahim, the researcher, called it “paranoia.”

By SCOTT SAYARE

David D. Kirkpatrick contributed reporting from Cairo.

P.S.

* The New York Times, Published: May 14, 2011:
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/world/africa/15tunis.html?_r=1

* A version of this article appeared in print on May 15, 2011, on page A6 of the National edition with the headline: Islamist Party Revived in Tunisia, and Many Fear Its Intentions.