

Opinion

Tunisia: Killing the Arab Spring in Its Cradle

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TUNIS — MOHAMED BRAHMI, the left-wing politician who was assassinated outside his home here last Thursday, was born in Sidi Bouzid, the same town where a desperate fruit vendor set himself on fire in December 2010, triggering the Tunisian revolution — and the Arab Spring.

The Islamist party Ennahda, which governs Tunisia, has blamed the killing — as well as the assassination, nearly six months ago, of Chokri Belaid, a prominent human rights advocate — on a young weapons smuggler who has ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

But Ennahda itself bears much of the blame. It should be recognized, and condemned, for being the radical party that it is: a party that has created a climate of escalating fundamentalist violence that threatens the lives of liberal, left-wing and secular activists.

The Western media have portrayed Ennahda as an innocuous voice of moderation, but it has been pushing for a constitution — one Mr. Brahmi vocally opposed — that would lay the foundations for a repressive Islamic state.

Earlier this month, at a rally here supporting the ousted Islamist president of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, Sahbi Atig, the head of the Ennahda bloc in Tunisia's Constituent Assembly, warned: "All those who dare to kill the will of the people in Tunisia or in Egypt, the Tunisian street will be authorized to do what it wants with — including to shed their blood." Commentators have understandably connected these remarks to the death of Mr. Brahmi, who had saluted the ouster of Mr. Morsi as a return by Egyptians to "freedom" and to "the path of Gamal Abdel Nasser."

Since it attained independence from France in 1956, Tunisia has had some of the region's most progressive laws relating to women and families. Many fear that Ennahda is trying to undo those laws. Amel Grami, an intellectual historian at Manouba University, whose campus was besieged last year by Salafi activists opposed to women's equality and secular education, says the Arab Spring has "triggered a male identity crisis" that has magnified the extreme positions taken by Islamist parties.

In Tunisia, she has noted, fundamentalists have called for girls as young as 12 to don the niqab, which covers everything but the eyes. An Ennahda lawmaker has called for "purification of the media and purification of intellectuals," while female Ennahda deputies have urged segregation of public transportation by gender. Some Salafists have spoken of legalizing female genital mutilation, a practice largely foreign to Tunisia.

Many Tunisians I interviewed in the last month — in the political opposition, in academia, in the women's movement — told me that they felt threatened. "You are all Mohamed Brahmi," one mourner chanted on Thursday evening, among those weeping outside the slain activist's home.

"The entire left is under threat," a young female activist in the southern city of Sfax, whose party is in the Popular Front coalition to which Mr. Brahmi belonged, said earlier this month. Just last week, a law professor and women's rights activist, Sana Ben Achour, warned of the real possibility of violence. "We must be very vigilant," she urged.

Neighboring Algeria plunged into such bloodshed in 1991, with the rise of radical Islamism. A “dark decade” of extreme violence ensued.

To prevent Tunisia from going the way of Algeria, all anti-fundamentalist groups must unite — which they are beginning to do — and they will need the sort of international support Algeria’s secular democrats never received. Western governments must pressure the Tunisian authorities to protect those at risk. But so far, the European Union and the United States, focused on Syria and Egypt, have mostly turned a blind eye.

Mourad Sakli, director of the International Festival of Carthage, a cultural event, said the killing of Mr. Brahmi would only strengthen “our determination to defend our rights to culture and to life, our right to be different and our right to free thought.” I attended this year’s festival on July 20, in a packed amphitheater here, where a crowd of young people and families — some women in miniskirts, and some in hijabs — sang jubilantly with the Algerian singer-songwriter Cheb Khaled until 1 in the morning, in Arabic, French and a little Berber: “We will love, and we will dance. C’est la vie.”

That mood of joy has been replaced by an atmosphere that the Tunisian newspaper La Presse has described as “insurrectional.” On Saturday, Mr. Brahmi was laid to rest before some 30,000 mourners. One of them, a female lawyer who scaled the cemetery’s walls after finding the entrance blocked, said: “We’ve been taken hostage by religious fundamentalists. Now we the people have decided to take back our country and our revolution.”

Dozens of delegates are boycotting the Constituent Assembly, the body charged with drafting a new constitution, whose legal mandate technically expired last October. They want it to be replaced by a “national salvation government” that can call new elections.

One delegate, Nadia Châabane, stood amid hundreds of demonstrators, some cloaked in the Tunisian flag, who faced off Sunday against a smaller, all-male phalanx chanting “God is great” and waving the black Salafi flag. “Islam has survived here for 14 centuries,” she told me. “It is not under threat. The solution to our problems is economic, not religious.”

Will the West have the courage and vision to help her, and others across North Africa, who are speaking up for freedom and human rights through peaceful protest? If not, the Arab Spring may die in the country where it was born.

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P.S.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/opinion/killing-the-arab-spring-in-its-cradle.html?_r=0