

# Arab Exceptionalism? Tunisia's Islamist Movement

Written by Alex Stark

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ALEX STARK, JAN 31 2011

The notion of "Arab exceptionalism" has become a popular explanation for the notable lack of democratic governance in the Arab world. This term refers to a global trend of individual transitions within developing countries in (almost) every region of the world from authoritarian rule to democracy. Dubbed by political scientists like Samuel Huntington "the Third Wave" of democratization, its inception has been linked to the failure of competing political systems such as fascism and colonialism by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This 'wave' was swelled greatly by the collapse of the Communist bloc in the late 1980's and the democratization that took place in Eastern Europe as a result (Angrist, 730). To many analysts, representative democracy has increasingly been thought of as a universal ideal value that has the potential to be applied to every region of the world, regardless of culture, socio-political structures or historical-political development. Yet in the 1990's through the present, academics increasingly began to take note of the fact that the Middle East and greater Arab/Islamic world was almost completely resistant to this trend, "Arab exception" to the inevitable democratic transition. Although political scientists observed promising opening behaviors in Arab regimes including in Jordan, Yemen and Tunisia, behaviors that had been identified as factors that led to a democratic transition in other countries, these Arab states had largely reversed the trend by the early 1990's (Salame, 5). As a result, except for Turkey, which has had a more or less stable democratic system since the late 1940's, no Arab or North African state has experienced even the possibility of a "real change in the locus of political power," let alone witnessed a transition to representative democracy (Angrist, 730).

The theories that abounded to explain this notable 'exception' included most prominently an analysis that locates Islam, and more prominently political Islam, as the central reason. Reviving the old Orientalist clichés abhorred by Edward Said, many analysts point to an inherent inability for Muslims to reconcile their religion with democracy or even secular government. They argue that Islam conflates religion and government in such a way that it is impossible to separate the two, and further that the Qu'ran inherently says that the only truly Islamic government is an authoritarian one, relating back to the original *Umma*. Some go even further, implying that 'Islam is Islam and the East is the East' and that there is some kind of mysterious tension within the people of the East themselves that prevents the embrace of political democracy (Salame, 5).

These analysts see what they conceive of as the permanent tension between democracy as a universal value, embraced for the large part by the rest of the world, and Islam's desire to isolate itself from the rest of the world. They point to the Islamist movements in many Arab countries as a prime example (Salame, 5). These movements often espouse a rejection of Western influence when it comes to everything from models of governance to cultural modernization, and advocate a state that is run by conservative, traditional Islamic law, which by implication excludes the potential for a democratic government. Yet this outlook clearly takes a monolithic view of Islamism and Islam in general. In order to prove or disprove this theory, it is possible to examine a detailed case study, in order to determine whether there is indeed an inherent tension between Islamists and democratic principles.

This paper will take Tunisia as its case study. Tunisia is particularly relevant to a discussion of the "Arab exception" because its tradition of progressive social policies, reform and openness and Western-oriented elite make it very similar to countries in other regions that have recently experienced a democratic transition, yet Tunisia remains tightly controlled by an authoritarian government.

This paper will first give a brief political history of modern Tunisia, and an examination of the current political system.

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Next, it will outline the history of the Islamist movement there, and specifically Rashid al-Ghannouchi's Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) party. Several different theories about the *raison d'être* of Islamist parties will be examined in the Tunisian context, and be rated as more or less plausible based on the specific characteristics of Tunisia's Islamist movement and the MTI party, such as the characteristics of its main backers. In the context of these theories, it will explore whether or not the MTI is in reality committed to a true democratic transition. Finally, it will examine the implications of whether or not the party is truly committed to democracy. In the context of the debate about "the Arab exception," as well as existent examples of oppressive authoritarian Islamist regimes in Iran and Algeria among others, the conclusion will discuss whether or not the MTI's actual intentions matter for the potential of democratic governance in Tunisia.

## Case Study: Tunisia

### *Political History*

Tunisia gained independence from the French in 1956 under the guidance of Habib Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party, founded in 1920 as a nationalist opposition movement to French colonial rule (Perkins, 130). Bourguiba became the new republic's first Prime Minister in 1957, and his government implemented extensive policies to modernize and secularize the country and its economy and to raise living standards, including educational and legal reform. His government was also noted as an advocate for women's rights, ending the practice of polygamy and restricting the use of the veil. Bourguiba's efforts to reduce the role of religion in politics were increasingly opposed by the political opposition, and in 1974 he reacted by banning the existence of other parties and declaring himself president for life. As opposition towards Bourguiba's policies hardened, despite the reintroduction of the multiparty system, he was deposed in 1987 and replaced by former General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who remains in power today and is continually re-elected by overwhelming majorities despite irregularities in elections and the banning of Islamic opposition parties. Ben Ali's administration liberalized the political system, abolishing the lifetime presidency, and continued Bourguiba's policies of emphasizing social and economic development, women's rights, and the creation of jobs. These policies have ensured strong social progress and contributed to political stability ("Tunisia-Country Profile").

### *Current Political Situation*

The modern Tunisian state has been shaped by the personalities of two individuals, the country's only Presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Bourguiba's party and leader of the independence movement, the Neo-Destour (Constitution) Party, became an essential part of the Tunisian government: according to Kenneth J. Perkins, Tunisia is a "state in the service of the party, party in the service of the President" (Perkins, 130). Tunisia adopted a constitution modeled on the French system in June 1959, which enshrined the highly centralized presidential system that remains in place today ("Background Notes: Tunisia").

According to the Tunisian constitution, the President serves five year terms. He holds extensive centralized powers that include initiating and directing state policy, and appointing judges, provincial governors, and all other high officials. There is a Presidential cabinet, headed by a Prime Minister, but this too is under Presidential control. Thus, the President effectively dominates all aspects of governance of the state. Political centralization has created a personality cult surrounding Ben Ali in Tunisia, with official Presidential portraits displayed on billboards along main thoroughfares throughout the country, and hung in virtually every bar, restaurant and hotel in the capital city Tunis (Julliard). However, Ben Ali's reign has provoked allegations of corruption, including for example Ben Ali's regular reelection by an average of 99% of the voting public. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even simple economic transactions such as applying for a loan become a test of loyalty to Ben Ali, as applicants are often asked to produce

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their voting card (Sadiki, 69). Accordingly, Tunisia is rated by the organization Freedom House as having a continually declining political rights score (Freedom House).

Tunisia's government is theoretically an electoral democracy, but in actuality functions as an authoritarian dictatorship, rated as "unfree" by Freedom House (with a Political Rights score of 7, on a scale of 1-7 where 7 is the 'most unfree') (Freedom House). Although Ben Ali faces elections every five years and runs against official opposition candidates, he is routinely re-elected. Opportunities for citizen representation are also limited. The unicameral national assembly, Majlis al-Ummah, has members elected by free, direct and secret ballot, and all citizens over the age of 20 may vote. The assembly was expanded to include a total of 182 members in 1997. However, this elected body has very little real power. The assembly sits only twice a year, and Presidential ratification is required for any bill to become law ("Tunisia-Government").

Political life in Tunisia is focused around President Ben Ali's party, formerly President Bourguiba's party and later renamed the Constitutional Democratic Party. Tunisia has been described as "a 'hegemonic party system' where some opposition parties are legal, though in reality they have little or no chance of competing for power" (Hermassi). There are 8 legal official opposition parties, although only 5 are currently represented in the national assembly. Due to constitutional reform in 1997 while the official opposition parties always receive 20% of the total seats in the assembly, they are effectively blocked from occupying any of the other 80% of seats, which are all occupied by members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Party or other parties allied with it as part of the National Front. This means that there is little representation of opposing views. Finally, many commentators claim that the official opposition parties are chosen for their passivity in not criticizing the ruling regime, whereas the most critical opposition parties are banned from participating in elections. The most prominent and controversial example is the Islamist party in Tunisia, the Movement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI).

Although Ben Ali's government is severely repressive, his reforms often indicate a commitment to democracy at the surface. The legalization of certain opposition parties is an example. As a creation of the ruling regime, the opposition parties have become "another State resource that the ruling elite uses for legitimation purposes" (Sadiki, 64). Further, the Tunisian government tightly controls the activities of non-governmental organizations, in particular human rights groups. The Tunisian Human Rights League, the first human rights organization in the Arab world and Africa, operates under severe government restrictions. Other less prominent human rights organizations have been denied legal status outright, and are forced to organize and publicize information illegally. As a result, civil society remains a weak force for organization and activism ("Background Notes: Tunisia"). The regime cultivates an image of democratic reforms and sensitivity to human rights issues not only to gain support domestically, but also to promote the image of a modern Arab state abroad. Ben Ali continually uses democratic imagery in speeches in order to support his image as a reformer, saying for example in 1987 "our people have reached a degree of... maturity where every individual and group is in a position to constructively contribute to the running of its affairs, in conformity with the republican ideal" (Sadiki, 63). However, the liberal reforms that have been implemented are tightly controlled by Ben Ali's government, leaving no room for actors outside of the governing party (Sadiki, 63).

### *The Islamist Movement: History of the MTI*

The contemporary Tunisian Islamic movement traces its origins to the Quranic Preservation Society, founded in 1970. The movement grew under the benevolent watch of the Tunisian government throughout the 1970's, until labor strikes and political violence in 1978 politicized the movement. Although Islamists had previously worked solely on a platform of social values, criticizing cultural alienation and moral degradation and advocating a 'more Islamic' society, the MTI had emerged by the end of 1979 serving as a coalition of the existing movement and with the intention of forming a political party (Waltz, 652-653).

As a political entity, the party emphasized (and continues to strongly support) the values of tolerance and pluralism, advocated for democracy and condemned personal rule and government corruption. Its leaders expressly embraced the idea of democracy as a universal heritage. After its official founding in 1981 by Rashid al-Ghannushi and others, the party came to be viewed as a symbol of political change by many Tunisians. Six weeks after its founding, its founders were arrested by Bourguiba's government and the party was banned and its members persecuted.

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Confrontations and tensions between the MTI and Bourguiba's government escalated throughout the 1980's, and Bourguiba's removal from power in 1987 was seen as a chance for reconciliation between the Islamist and the government. The new President, Ben Ali, lacked the personal charisma and revolutionary legitimacy of Ben Ali, and therefore was forced to cooperate more closely with domestic political actors. Both Ben Ali's government and the MTI party made conciliatory gestures, and the party was even allowed to participate in the creation of the 1988 national charter.

However, the MTI's emphasis on democracy and pluralism and Ben Ali's reluctance to let go of centralized power in fueled a resurgence in tensions. Al-Ghannushi was forced to flee the country in 1989, and the authoritarian Ben Ali excluded the party when other parties were legalized as part of the official opposition in 1992. Today, the party continues to be persecuted, and official government propaganda denounces it as "terrorist fundamentalism" to drive off potential supporters (Hermassi, 215-218).

## Analysis

Academics and researchers have posited a multitude of reasons as to why Islamist movements and parties have been so successful in different parts of the Arab world. R. Hrair Dekmejian, for example, lists seven "crises" in the Middle East that contribute to Islamist popularity: crises of identity, modernity and culture, military impotence, class conflict, elite misrule and legitimacy (Dekmejian, 1985). The obvious answer might be that Islamist movements are popular because many Middle Easterners genuinely believe in fundamentalist Islam and that their country should be ruled by a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. Indeed, many Westerner citizens (and politicians) subscribe firmly to this view. However, empirical survey research as well as academic work has found that, while many of the leaders of Islamist parties do indeed believe this whole-heartedly, most of the lower-level adherents and party members are not as ideologically motivated, although of course their belief in Islam does play an important role (Woltering, 2002). Specific to the Tunisian context and the MTI party, we can examine four main motivations: human rights, economic, psycho-social and political.

Academics have hypothesized that the Islamist movement receives support as a proponent of human rights. Just as most of the Middle East suffers from domestic authoritarian rule, Neil Hicks argues that they also suffer from "a crisis of human rights implementation," as these governments have often engaged in widespread human rights violations. In Tunisia this problem is acute, particularly when it comes to media restrictions and the right to free speech and to organize, although when it comes to women's rights for example Tunisia is one of the freest countries in the Middle East region. Tunisia has a strong tradition of human rights organizing despite governmental restrictions on civil society, and it seems possible that this movement would dovetail with the Islamist movement because they have similar goals in many ways. However, there is in reality a huge ideological rift between the two groups. In fact, the Islamist movement is for the most part deeply suspicious of the human rights movement, which it views as "working to a Western agenda" that deliberately seeks to "undermine the distinctive identity of Islamic society" (Hicks, 361). Islamists are fiercely opposed to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and similar human rights ideals which they view as part of a Western, hegemonic ideology, and similarly oppose transnational human rights organizations like Amnesty International for the same reason, even though they may protest the same violations.

On the other hand, human rights organizations, which are for the most part secularly oriented, tend to see Islamists and their quest to implement religious law as "backward-looking, obscurantist and a threat to basic freedoms" (Hicks, 362). It is probably the case that human rights supporters, particularly those of a secularist orientation, ally themselves with the human rights movements and organizations such as The Tunisian Human Rights League (see page 8) rather than the MTI. Thus, we might assume that while many supporters of the MTI also oppose human rights violations in different terms, they do not join the MTI solely for this reason.

A second explanation for Islamist popularity in the Middle East argues that economic discontent drives Tunisians to support the MTI. This argument says that a university education has been offered to young people as the primary means to economic success in Tunisia, yet a recent demographic explosion has led to a quickly growing youth cohort

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with increasing prospects of unemployment. Similarly, women are being educated at an increasing rate, but are less likely to be employed upon graduation than men. This explanation would explain why women and highly educated youth are the most numerous supporters of organizations like the MTI. These economically dispossessed cohorts will be more likely to join the MTI, the explanation goes, because of its charges of "economic injustice, corruption and Western domination/exploitation" leveled at the government (Waltz, 662).

There are several reasons why this explanation makes less sense in the Tunisian context. First, Susan Waltz (1986) argues that the well-educated youth most likely to support the MTI are largely students in science and technology departments. These students are far more likely than liberal arts students to receive a prestigious, high-paying job. Thus, the high incidence of these students joining the MTI does not make sense in the economic context. Second, this argument largely fails to explain the MTI's appeal to women. In generally, the MTI "downplays the economic importance of women, arguing unmistakably that women properly belong in the home, raising children and safeguarding the family" (Waltz, 662). Further, she argues that most of the women who support the MTI are actually employed, and presumably prefer to keep their jobs.

Finally, Tunisia is actually remarkably successful economically, and development is well-progressed. Tunisia has maintained a surprisingly steady decline in poverty and an increase in living standards while simultaneously achieving constant growth in GDP. Tunisia's recent economic development has been largely shaped by government policies that focus on social development and mitigating the impacts of structural adjustment programs on the poor. The government has been committed to poverty alleviation since independence in 1956 and unlike many other developing countries was able to maintain this commitment through the structural adjustment process of the 1980s, most notably by cutting social government expenditures less than any other kind of government expenditure (World Bank, Country Operations Division, 1995). Tunisia's Human Development Index, which measures achievements in education and health and growth in GDP per capita, increased dramatically from 0.516 in 1975 to 0.745 in 2002, and has continued to improve to 0.765 in 2005 (Ayadi, 3). This remarkable economic progress indicates that people are not turning to the MTI primarily out of discontent with the way that the economy is governed.

Many academics posit psycho-social alienation as an explanation of Islamist popularity. They say that the previously described explosion in youth unemployment, coupled with rapid cultural modernization, has led youths particularly to feel as though they have been 'rejected' by their society. These youths, who are a cohort that is rapidly growing in numbers in Tunisia, struggle with feelings of alienation, and are "on the market for an ideology that could reaffirm both their economic and cultural self-worth" (Waltz, 665). This experience is particularly acute for the many students from poorer, rural backgrounds who are increasingly able to attend university in cities. These youths come from small, culturally insular communities, and face the dual issues of unsettling questions of morality that the more 'modern,' urban society challenges their upbringing with, and a feeling of loneliness. The Islamist movement, and the MTI, is able to solve both of these problems, by promoting the traditional values of Islam and simultaneously downgrading the cultural importance of 'modern,' Western ideas, and by providing a circle of like-minded peers to interact with. The Islamist doctrine also reaffirms the youths' feelings of economic and cultural self-worth.

Waltz also argues that the Islamist tenets are particularly appealing to young women, who form a large constituency in the MTI, because it is a means of preserving their honor and avoiding sexual censure. Young women in particular are often caught in the middle in a society that traditionally presses women to remain chaste and behave and dress modestly to preserve their own and their families' honor, at the same time as society is undergoing a rapid transformation to 'modernization' in which women's sexual roles are less clear. Women receive a double psychological burden in this case, because they may be unsure of what the proper behavior may be when it comes to sexuality and relationships with men, at the same time that society often places the blame for a perceived transgression solely at their feet. Thus, it is sometimes easiest to retreat to a values system in which rules about these matters are clearly defined, and if a young woman behaves and dresses in a certain way then she is clearly observing conventional norms. In other words, the Islamist movement provides young women with certainty in a time of psychological chaos (Waltz, 668-669). Thus, this explanation is appropriate to the Tunisian context because it is able to explain why particularly in Tunisia women and young students form such a large constituency in the MTI, and does not contradict what is actually happening currently in Tunisia's politics, economy and society.

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Finally, many theorists argue that political motivations are key in attracting adherents to the MTI and the Islamist movement in Tunisia. The MTI may have originated as an organization that was solely concerned with religious matters, but as a strong component of Tunisia's civil society, it immediately came into conflict with Bourguiba and later Bin Ali's political power structure. In order to maintain his own power, Bourguiba created a system after decolonization that gave him personal control over the entire government, and in which there was only one legitimate political party. He enjoyed considerable political support because of policies that promoted economic growth throughout the 1970's, but by the end of the 1980's the global recession had slowed growth and created a swelling of political discontent. Bourguiba cracked down on all opposition parties and movements at the time, including the MTI, as a result. Bourguiba's harsh repression of the MTI, and later Bin Ali's similar treatment, forced the MTI into the role of the main opposition party, even in a system that did not sanction its existence.

Bourguiba's crackdown against the MTI and continuing oppression of the party forced the creation of a binary system, in which there was an incumbent party, the Neo-Destur, and an opposition party. Ironically, Bourguiba's and later Bin Ali's actions made the MTI more popular, because it was the largest and best-organized way for individuals to express their discontent with the regime and actively work towards a more open, democratic system (Alexander, 36-37). Further, the MTI worked to build a political constituency that was loyal to the MTI not specifically because of its policies but because of the patronage that it offered. Specifically, the MTI worked actively in poor urban areas, developing informal networks of mutual aid that provided social services that the government does not offer. As a result, the individuals who actively use and participate in this network have become loyal to the MTI in a dynamic reminiscent of patron-clientelism (Ismail, 37-38). Thus, this is an accurate description of the political conditions in Tunisia, and therefore a plausible explanation as to why the Islamist movement in Tunisia is so popular.

## Conclusion

Out of the four explanations for the popularity of the MTI Islamic movement in Tunisia, psycho-social and political motivations seem like the most plausible in the Tunisian case specifically. Of course it is possible that individual members and followers of the party have not just one but multiple motivations for joining the party, including economic or human rights-related ones, as their individual cases dictate. It is also possible that they have another motivation entirely, or that they have joined the Islamist movement simply because of their religious fundamentalist beliefs. However, empirical studies of adherents of the movement in Tunisia have found that in the majority of cases, do not join the party explicitly because of religious reasons, although this is often not the case for the top ruling members of the party.

This implies in turn that if radical political changes did happen in Tunisia, and the MTI somehow came to power, this will not mean automatically that strict conservative Islamic law will be instated and the political system will return to authoritarianism. Rather, it seems likely that the previously described adherents who joined the party for non-religious reasons, who are after all the vast majority of its members, will shape its policies. Those who joined for political reasons will have accomplished their goal of protesting Ben Ali's oppressive rule and the tightly controlled one-party system, so it is likely that they will feel ambivalent about continuing to support the party. Further, if their goals are truly to liberalize the political system so that dissident voices can be heard, it seems likely that they will actively support the imposition of a democratic system instead of an authoritarian government resembling Ben Ali's in structure except with an Islamist individual or party in charge. We can be less certain about those who have joined the party for psycho-social reasons. After all, they are theoretically attracted to the party for its unambiguous religious rules and for the companionship that membership provides, and therefore might be thought to feel deeper bonds to the party itself than those who have joined for political reasons.

How likely is it that the MTI, having gained power, would instate an authoritarian system and strictly enforce religious law? American and Western foreign policy experts often point to the 'paradox of democracy in the Middle East,' that any freely held election will be in danger of bringing to power an Islamist, anti-democratic regime. They specifically cite the 1979 Revolution in Iran which brought to power an oppressive Islamic regime, the 1989 military coup in Sudan that brought to power a government supported by the National Islamic Front and elections in Algeria in the early 1990's that resulted in the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front, but that was later shut down by a non-democratic military coup. A notable difference between these regimes and the MTI in Tunisia is that they never

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professed to be supporters of democracy, while the MTI is an explicit proponent of democracy and greater civil liberties. Of course, it is entirely possible that this platform is simply a smoke-screen, meant to conceal the MTI's true intentions, although it is unclear whether this 'conspiracy' extends only amongst the party's elite or whether the majority of its members are also in collusion. Indeed, it is nigh on impossible to find out in advance what the party's true ambitions are, although we can deduce a number of things from the party's members, as mentioned above.

But how much does this debate even matter to the future of governance in Tunisia? As Schwedler (1998) points out, the fact is that the MTI, like many Islamist parties under authoritarian regimes, has very little chance of achieving a position of power, or even participating in a democratic election, at any time in the near future. Further, the debate about Islamists' intentions obscures a more immediate, and arguably much more pressing, issue: that is that the current ruling regimes have already refused to respect the tenets of democracy even as, in the case of Tunisia, they pretend to behave like one, holding elections that are blatantly rigged. These regimes often use the Islamist parties in their countries as "a threat to inspire fear and slow down the pace of democratization" (Schwedler, 27). Perhaps then academics and politicians should not be focusing as much attention on whether Islamist parties are *potentially* interested or not interested in democracy, so much as what is *currently* inhibiting authoritarian regimes like Ben Ali's from transitioning to a more democratic structure of governance in the first place. Since many of these regimes are avowedly secular, Islam can not be explicitly blamed. It seems that the "Arab exception" phenomenon must be ascribed to some other political dynamic.

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