
TUNISIA'S DANGEROUS IDENTITY POLITICS

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The increasing attacks on representations of saints (*awliya*) and shrines (*zawaya*) up and down Tunisia, defacing and burning over 30 such sites so far, culminated in the burning of Sidi Bou Said's shrine on the eve of the second anniversary of the January 14 revolution that toppled Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The attack on the shrine of al-Beji, known as the 'Captain of the Seas' (*Rais Labhar*) for his 'legendary' protection of ships and sailors since the 13th century, struck a nerve across the country. President Moncef Marzouki, al-Nahda

party leader Rachid Ghannouchi, former Prime Minister Caid el Sebsi, and the Culture Minister Mehdi Mabrouk rushed there within 24 hours. But so did angry local residents, who received them with either the famous slogan "*degage*" ('get out'), or lukewarm applause.

The incident brought to head a 'proxy-identity politics' between Wahabism and a locally-based identity which defends icons either on sacred grounds or for their aesthetic, historical and social importance to Tunisia.

This Sidi Bou Said vs. Mohamed ibn Abd al-

Wahhab clash brings into focus and extends the long-term Wahhabism vs. Zaytouna conflict, which started in the early part of the 19th century when Zaytouna scholars wrote their famous response to debunk Wahhabism: “*al-minah al-ilahiyya fi tams al-dhalala al-wahabiyya*” (God’s Gifts in Obliterating the Wahhabi Deviation). In it, they specifically defend the legitimacy of shrines, burial rites and scarifies.

This dispute has been reinvigorated and taken on a new significance. But what do these identity conflicts have to do with the causes and aims of the revolution? What fed them and by what means? And can they find sufficient ground to take hold in Tunisia?

THE ISLAMIST PROJECT

It is important to stress from the start that expressions of identity, whether ethnic or religious, were one of the victims of Ben Ali’s regime. It is equally important to recall that the repression of identity may have fed into the general climate of discontent but it did not drive the revolutionary movement, nor did it bring down the dictatorship.

However, two years on, to take the example of the draft constitution released in December 2012 as summative of debate and negotiations, it has become clear that concerted attempts have been made to codify, and thereby make permanent, a recasting of identity in Tunisia with a clear Islamist accent.

Indeed, buoyed by victory in the polls and a sudden surge in visibility of religious culture – dress; beards; public preaching; spectacular communal prayers in stadiums and on beaches; colossal meetings, such as the one held in Qayrawan’s historic mosque; an influx of preachers from the Arab East and the Gulf; an explosion in religious book sales, to name but a few signs – al-Nahda and other groupings, such as Hizb Tahrir and Ansar al-Sharia, have entered the public sphere and behaved with

nothing short of entitlement.

This was of course understandable in light of the repression they had been subjected to, the public sympathy they deservedly enjoyed, and the tight group solidarity they fostered over decades of isolation and common purpose. This sense of self-importance was also amplified by international recognition, which took the form of high-profile positions given to Islamists in foreign missions, media appearances, and national-level negotiations amongst others.

During this stage of the revolution, there was what one might call an Islamist continuum, where Islamist figures, parties, associations or informal networks, acted as one and supported one another. It was remarkable to notice, for example, that the radical Egyptian preacher Wajdi Ghunaym, invited by associations close to Ansar al-Shari’a was also welcomed and hosted by the Zaytouna University and Abdelfattah Morou, a founding figure of al-Nahda, and self-styled moderate.

The leitmotif was that the Islamist project was a shared aim, hoping for the re-Islamisation of a society believed to have been led astray by decades of secular rule and culture. The leading perception was that the ‘soul’ of Tunisia was, thanks to the revolution, once again capable of redemption. From setting up religious nursery schools and Koranic associations, to taking over mosques and intensive presence on the airwaves, religiosity and the need to regain it became the shared motto among all Islamist tendencies.

However al-Nahda, being the largest group and the leading block in government, often found itself embarrassed and exposed. After a number of incidents, largely around the limits of artistic and media freedoms – such as the vocal and violent protests against the airing of the film *Persepolis* on a private TV channel and the Abdellia art exhibit – the deadly attack on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012

exposed al-Nahda's inability to reassure its new local and international allies and appease Salafis at the same time.

The incident put the government in hot waters with local opposition as well as with its American and European supporters. Further embarrassment was to come.

In October 2012, a leaked video featuring Ghannouchi, the party president, in conversation with Salafi leaders seems to have revealed a side of the leader that many have feared all along. It has been used by al-Nahda's opponents to show how the Salafis were part of this party's strategy, and to suggest that the two movements agree on the ultimate goal of the re-Islamisation of Tunisia's people and institutions, such as the army, police and media.

Ghannouchi says in the video, "secularists still control the economy, the media and the administration ... the army and police also are not guaranteed". He then advises the Salafi leaders to "use the popular associations, establish Koranic schools everywhere and appeal for more religious preachers because people are still ignorant of Islam". Attempts to discredit the video and diffuse the crisis did not succeed in dispelling this growing mistrust.

TUNISIA'S SHARED ARAB-ISLAMIC HERITAGE

Two years on from the uprising then, al-Nahda is torn between identity politics and politics *tout court* as never before. It is conducting both of these on a terrain it still cannot dominate. A number of concessions were needed, the most striking and spectacular of which has been on the subject of Sharia, which no longer figures in the first article of the draft constitution. Another was the arrest of several Salafi activists.

The reasons behind the Islamists' inability to fully dominate the field are multiple. Indeed, other than the fact that Islamists, of all hues, remain only a sizable minority, other factors are worth sketching here.

Even amongst Tunisia's secular activists and intellectuals, there remains an overwhelming proportion which faithfully promotes the Arab-Islamic heritage. One would be hard-pressed to find a significant exception to this and the explanation of this phenomenon is complex. Its main elements however lie in the fact that the education system, set up by former president Habib Bourguiba's closest advisers, particularly the late humanist writer Mahmoud al-Mas'adi, did not neglect this heritage – teaching it alongside humanist education and foreign languages and cultures. The universal, free and compulsory character of education contributed to the homogenisation of an already fairly harmonious society.

Bourguiba's nationalist elite, including Bourguiba himself, were grounded in the Arab-Islamic heritage as well as in the local constructions of Islam in their own way: Bourguiba was bilingual and his command of the Arabic language rivalled any Muslim scholar of his time, not to mention al-Mas'adi himself, as well as a raft of nationalist scholars like Tahar Haddad and Fadhel Ben Achour. This bilingual education, rooted in the reformist project of the 19th century, led by Khayreddine Pasha al-Tunisi and others, ensured the nationalist elite were fairly rooted in the Arab-Islamic heritage.

This was also the case regarding the opposition to Bourguiba in the shape of Leftists and Arab nationalists. Aside from Youssefists, who were pan-Arabists and largely Nasserist in orientation, the early Perspective Movement (*Harakat Afaq*), which would give birth to the radical left in place today, was clearly borne out of the humanism of their own Bourguibist culture as well as the global humanism dominant at the time. Even the former leader of the former Tunisian Workers Communist Party, Hamma Hammami, is a specialist in Islamic civilization; so too is the Iraq-educated Chokri Belaid as well as many others. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find veiled women and practising Muslims in the ranks of

Leftist parties.

A third strand has been led by figures who are primarily specialists of Islam (Abdelmajid Charfi, Hichem Djaiet, Mohamed Talbi), and whose students can be found across the cultural and academic spectrum, some gaining iconic status, and leading observers to speak of a "Tunisian" reformist Islam. This trend includes several prominent women, such as Olfa Youssef, Amel Grami, Latifa Lakhthar, who use new theoretical paradigms and methodologies, ranging from anthropology and discourse analysis to feminism and psychoanalysis to study and interpret Islam. They are now leading figures in the traditional and new media and in civil society, largely positioning themselves against the "Islamist project".

At the popular level, two things continue: respect, if not veneration, of saints and shrines and the practice of an Islam passed down from generation to generation, known schematically as Maliki Islam. Each of these features deserves more sustained commentary, but here it is simply worth recognising how this side of Muslim identity in Tunisia bears out in the competing identity politics in place today.

At the socio-economic level, people began to realise that identity politics in itself does not provide jobs or daily bread. The economics associated with it – mainly in the shape of timid Islamic banking, loans from Muslim countries and Gulf investment – has not really taken off, and was soon associated in the mind of a large section of the political class with new forms of domination closely tied to the wider re-Islamisation project mentioned above. This is not to mention the fact that it has been argued, from inside the current government itself, that loans from Qatar, for example, were far less favourable than those offered by Japan and the World Bank.

Disheartening unemployment, rising prices and pressure for pay adjustments, not to mention the compensation of martyrs, wounded and thousands of former political prisoners, are far beyond what the economics of identity can handle or disguise. This is one of the main reasons why the national labour union (UGTT) and the left-leaning parties, such as the Popular Front (al-Jabha al-Sha'abiyya) and al-Masar, as well as grassroots activists for economic and social rights have managed to fuel ongoing protests.

WORK, FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

The current situation in Tunisia shows how identity politics, even supported by an identity economics, is a perilous business at this stage of the revolution. In fact, it may prove to be the end of Islamism as we know it in that country. This end would include the real possibility of further radicalisation and its ensuing violent consequences, signs of which have been too obvious to ignore. Whether through attacks on shrines, attempts to insert Sharia into the constitution, the targeting of secular and artistic practices, or violent responses, Islamists have been attempting to drag their opponents to the terrain they know best: identity politics.

If there is any real meaning behind accusations of 'hijacking' or 'stealing' the revolution, this would be it. It consists of displacing the terrain, changing the slogans and inventing a narrative. Identity politics and its attendant economics are not commensurate with the revolution and are therefore seeds for further unrest and continued protest. The Tunisian revolution will fall or succeed depending on how Tunisians handle this battle and stay on the original grounds of the revolution: work, freedom and dignity. The outcome hangs in the balance. ❁