RELIGION AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN TUNISIA

Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone

Introduction

Amidst the chaos that has gripped the Arab world since the 2011 uprisings, only Tunisia seems to have emerged as a democratic success story. Although the country suffers from a profound economic crisis and faces considerable security challenges, procedural democracy has been consolidated and ordinary citizens still support the liberal-democratic structures put in place after the fall of Ben Ali (Robbins, 2015; Teti et al., 2018). What has been more surprising for external and domestic observers alike is that the Tunisian political system has integrated the Islamist party Ennahda into the structures of the state despite the domestic and international scepticism about the ability and willingness of Islamist parties to play the ‘democratic’ game due to their religion-inspired ideology and policy preferences. Furthermore, the country seems to have found a shared constitutional framework within which to ‘do’ politics without either reifying or delegitimising religion. As Mekki (2018: 4) argues:

more than four years after the promulgation of the new Tunisian Constitution on January 27, 2014 we can state that the Tunisian constitutional process has been a clear success on a number of dimensions. Elections have been organised according to the constitutional charter, there has been a peaceful change-over in power and new institutions have been set up, functioning relatively well.

The academic and political discussions surrounding the role that Ennahda plays – and played – in Tunisian political and social history revolves inevitably around the relationship between religion and politics and more broadly around the compatibility between Islam and democracy (Goddard, 2002), although it should be recognised from the start that religion per se is a major social and political concern for all sorts of actors and is therefore not limited to Islamist parties. For decades, scholars and policy-makers have been divided over the issue of the compatibility between Islam and democracy, with some arguing that Islamic religious precepts prevent democratic politics (Lewis, 1990) and others countering that Islam actually promotes it and even requires it (Mazrui, 1997). A more nuanced perspective holds that Islam can legitimise or delegitimise any political system and that it is necessary to instead look at how individual actors...
employ religion selectively to promote their policies and how the institutional environment around them deals with their emergence and success (Brumberg, 2002).

The Arab uprisings reignited these debates, as Islamist parties and movements across the region became prominent actors in the processes of transition in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and, to a lesser extent, Morocco. The failure of democratisation in these countries – with the exception of Tunisia – together with the rise of extremist and violent Islamist groups brought back discussions about the role of religion as an obstacle to pluralistic and peaceful politics. While scholarship on the Middle East has moved away over time from the Orientalist perspective that had dominated the discipline in the past, the problem of the relationship between Islam and politics remains central, particularly when political actors claim religious precepts as a guide for their ideology and policy preferences, facing off other actors claiming secularism as the doctrine they abide by when they think about the nature of the state. The post-uprisings regional chaos, including democratic reversals, civil wars and authoritarian retrenchment, seem to confirm the validity of this binary opposition between religion and secularism. In this context, Tunisia then seemingly represents an exception to this binary trend, leading scholars and policy-makers to ask what has made the country exceptional in its ability to reconcile the tension between secularism and religion. A number of different explanations have been put forth to account for the ‘Tunisian exception’, ranging from the absence of a powerful military (Bellin, 2013) to the strength of civil society and from the power of trade unions (Yousfi, 2015) to the support of the international community (Marzo, 2018). They are all reasonably convincing when taken together, but it is also important to look at how the socio-political actors involved in the transitional game perceived their actions and the ones of their counterparts. How do actors themselves explain the apparent reconciliation between religion and secularism? As Volpi (2017) argues, just as the spark for political change is complex, messy and contingent on unexpected turns of events, so is its direction. In the Tunisian context, the controversial role of religion in politics has shaped the transition and political parties have had to contend with its presence in the process of negotiating the construction of a new political and legal system, but the narrative of reconciliation between secularity and religion seems to reflect more the self-perception of the actors than the reality. This chapter, building on the assumption that two concepts take on different meanings in the Arab world from the ones they have in the West, argues that the relationship between political parties and religion – in Tunisia and elsewhere – is much more complex than a simple binary division that needs to be bridged in order to have pluralistic politics. The reality is that so-called religious parties might not be that ‘religious’ in the doctrinal sense and are more interested in political outcomes and results while so-called secular parties might actually have policy preferences and references that are ‘religious’.

Religion and political parties

There are three different stories that can be told about the way in which Islam has been ‘dealt with’ on the political and institutional scene and by extension there are different stories about the success of the Tunisian transition as political parties tell it from their vantage point.

The Islamist story

For the Islamist party Ennahda, the story is one of progressive change both inside and outside the party and this evolution has permitted the construction of a democratic system where religion is protected and the real Islamic state, providing justice and equality, is actually established. It is equality and justice thus that underpin a genuine Islamic state, not the application of sharia.
The dynamics of change the party refers to are the outcome of the social, political and economic transformations the country went through since the 1970s and to which the party adapted, leading it to ultimately become a pillar of the new democratic Tunisia. In its own historiography, the party was founded in the late 1970s when religion was perceived to be under attack from a modernist and, crucially, authoritarian state. For the party, the later Bourguiba years in particular were ones when the very identity of Tunisians as Arabs and Muslims was in danger of being erased in favour of a mindless effort to ape Western modernity. Thus, at the time, the Islamist movement proposed a radical vision on how Tunisia should change and this vision, borrowed from the ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, revolved around the centrality and totality of religion in all aspects of political, social, cultural and economic life. For the party, the establishment of the Tunisian state was premised on the eradication of Islam in the spiritual, cultural and social life of the country and this was the reason why the country was experiencing a profound crisis in the mid-1970s when the Islamist movement first became active. It follows that Bourguiba’s modernist reforms needed to be opposed and reversed, if Tunisia was to solve that crisis. Back then the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood influenced the political positions and the stances of what would become the Mouvement Tendance Islamique (MTI), Ennahda’s previous incarnation (Cavatorta and Merone, 2015) and it led the MTI to borrow symbols, language and references that did not necessarily reflect the Tunisian reality. The movement at the time did not have a fully developed autonomous ideology or a detailed political programme, focusing much of its attention on religious education and proselytising in order to create the social conditions for a political takeover. In that respect, the party reflected the mainstream approach of Muslim Brothers across the region whereby the increased religiosity of individuals would ultimately undermine the authoritarian systems in place, leaving the door open for political, social and economic solutions based on Islam.

Despite some success in attracting support, Ennahda found it difficult to break through broader sectors of society because the movement’s ideological and political visions seemed only marginally concerned with social justice, economic policy or the management of state structures, preferring instead religious platitudes and sloganeering about sharia and the Islamic state without much detailed thought about how this would work in practice. In addition these concerns and solutions were distant from the daily preoccupations of ordinary Tunisians and the movement’s appeal stalled, particularly when it was confronted with a much more coherent and still broadly appealing leftist ideology, which many young Tunisians subscribed to, notably in university circles. Over time, the party and its leader shed the ideological influence of the Muslim Brothers, having experienced a considerable degree of social rejection in Tunisia precisely because the movement was perceived to be unable to offer concrete solutions to the daily problems of citizens (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013). Through internal debates and ideological re-articulation, by the late 1980s they embraced democracy and human rights as an alternative to the authoritarian system in place (Allani, 2009) and began ditching the more problematic aspects of religious influences on policy preferences. The decline of the left also contributed to the greater success the party had among Tunisians and for this reason it was harshly repressed. From an ideological perspective, the party remained ‘Islamist’ and religious precepts still played a central role, but religious symbols and language were employed differently from the past and began to be used to justify a return to democratic politics rather than simply offering ‘Islam as the solution’ to all problems. While underground and in exile, the party was committed to defend Islam against what it perceived as the encroachment of the radical secular modernism the ruling elites implemented because it was done through authoritarian means, while, in its view, religion was truly emancipatory because it advocated for pluralism and democratic politics. At the same time, the party began seeking out allies among secular opponents of the Ben Ali
regime, reassuring them that the party had no intention of creating an Islamic authoritarian state (Wolf, 2018). By the eve of the uprising, Ennahda had moved away from the fundamentalist politics of the 1970s to embrace what can be called democratic Muslim conservatism (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013).

When the uprising overthrew authoritarianism, the party was in a position to evolve in the context of pluralistic politics. Despite the volatility inherent in the transition, the party saw its participation in the constitutional assembly and in institutional politics more broadly as the vindication of its stance and of its attachment to the emancipatory values of religion against the potential authoritarian backsliding the country faced. According to the party, the new liberal and democratic institutions no longer see religion as an enemy of the state as was the case under the previous authoritarian regimes and therefore are accepted and acceptable as the only framework through which policy preferences can be articulated. In addition the constitution and the democratic structures in place guarantee individuals that they can ‘live’ their religion as they see fit without interference from the state as it was the case in the past. Thus, there is no longer any reason to have an Islamist party because religion is no longer under attack, having been secured through democratic politics, the construction of which has seen the party play a decisive role. The party can therefore become simply the party of Muslim democrats (Ghannouchi, 2016) and, at the 10th party congress held in 2016, the decision was made to separate the religious movement (haraka) from the political party (hizb). Following this congress, the party’s official instances declared that Ennahda was now the party of Muslim democrats, for whom the religious reference functioned as a moral inspiration rather than as an ideological all-encompassing vision of the world, as is the case for typical Islamist movements (Souli, 2016). Therefore, Islamist activism, in the sense of dawa-oriented activities pertaining to religious education and promotion of correct Muslim behaviour, should not be the party’s preoccupation any longer. Ennahda had to become a fully autonomous and specialised political party, on the model of parties in the party systems of liberal democracies, splitting from the wider movement and giving up completely on the original idea of radically transforming and re-Islamising society.²

Crucial to this outcome has been the internal debate about the role of dawa. The separation between dawa and politics is a typical debate within Islamist movements, which refers to the relationship between the haraka (movement) and the hizb (party). As mentioned, the Tunisian Islamist party, quite differently from some of its ‘cousin’ parties (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan or the PJD in Morocco), did not separate these two functions until 2016. The notion of haraka is directly linked to the idea of ‘transforming society’ with dawa as the main instrument. The concept of hizb for its part is an innovation in respect to the traditional religious concept of jama’a. The hizbiyya (partisanship) relates to the secular/liberal concept of politics, more technocratic and less holistic (shumuli), and is often rejected by hard-line Islamic actors such as Salafis. This debate between dawa and hizbiyya, haraka and hizb, as it developed after 2011 in the Tunisian Islamist party, came to represent the division between two different ideas of Islamic politics. On the one side were those who thought that the historical mission of the movement to provide an Islamic identity to the country was to be accomplished within democratisation and in particular through the drafting of a new constitution that would ensure the institutionalised recognition of Islam (Bobin, 2016). On the other side were those activists and preaching-minded members who wanted to keep the party fully focused on Islamic grassroots-type of politics, actively fostering ‘Islamic’ change within society. At Ennahda’s 2012 congress, the decision on separation was delayed to avoid potentially traumatic splintering at a crucial time in the Tunisian transition. Beginning in 2013, however, the political climate steadily changed. In response to the assassination of the Nasserist member of parliament, Mohamed Brahmi, in July, the Tunisian opposition leaders organised a ‘salvation front’, mobilising several
thousands of people against Ennahda. In August, Ennahda’s president Ghannouchi met Beji Caied Essebsi (founder of Nidaa Tunès, a ‘big tent’ secularist party) in Paris and began preparing the ground for national reconciliation and institutional compromise to avoid being eliminated from the political scene through an Egypt-like scenario. In the following months, the so-called quartet, a group of four civil society organisations with the Union Générale Travailleurs Tuni-siens (UGTT) at the helm, helped to set a political consensus, which eventually led to the approval of the constitution in January 2014. The agreement on the constitution and the acceptance of electoral defeat in 2014 (McCarthy, 2018a) signalled that Ennahda was ready to become a ‘real’ political party engaged in democratic institutions that catered to the material needs of ordinary Tunisians (Ghannouchi, 2016). The party achieved its historical objective of protecting religion and it has been able to do so because it has contributed to build a democratic political system, which is the only guarantee for the protection of the faith of individuals. In short, the party has saved Tunisia thanks to religion and now that Tunisia is safely democratic religion does not need to be any longer formally represented in the party structures.

The secular story

For the secular, leftist and nationalist parties and figures religion has always seemed a problematic ‘enemy’ that should not be employed for political and social mobilisation, but clearly restricted to the public sphere. At independence, Bourguiba’s secular modernist faction of the nationalist movement was able to marginalise the other currents, most significantly the Ben Youssif one, which was pushing for a Tunisian identity more clearly based on the Arab and Muslim heritage. Bourguiba then set about modernising the new state through the single party Neo-Destour and crucial to his vision was the marginalisation of religious institutions, which, according to him, would otherwise prevent Tunisia from embracing modernity and economic development. From reigning in the power and prestige of the Zeitouna as an institution of religious learning to passing a very progressive personal status code, Bourguiba became the symbol of secular Tunisia. By the mid to late 1970s, though, Tunisia faced a number of significant economic and social difficulties, as the post-independence developmental drive stalled. The regime became even more authoritarian and entrenched, facing both an Islamist and a leftist-Marxist opposition. By the mid-1980s the regime was on its last legs and Ben Ali replaced Bourguiba at the helm. Despite his early promises of democratisation (Anderson, 1991), Ben Ali installed an equally autocratic regime that also rhetori-cally promoted a modernist secular ethos. By then the left was no longer a powerful opposition and sectors of it supported Ben Ali’s political strategy, which was centred on preventing political Islam from taking root in the country. Ben Ali was thus able to ensure a type of authoritarian stability built on economic success that kept many leftists and modernists on board because the regime delivered political stability in an unstable region and a provided new economic opportunities (Sfeir, 2006). The repressive campaign against members of Ennahda found favour with a broad sector of Tunisian society afraid that Ennahda was employing religion to impose a theocratic government despite indications from the leadership of the party that this was not the case. However Islamists are very rarely believed when they proclaim their commitment to democracy and to human rights and this facilitated Ben Ali’s repressive measures. Thus, Ennahda’s ideological moderation throughout the late 1980s and 1990s was dismissed. For the secular modernist camp, religion has to be relegated to the private sphere because any attempt to make it central to policy-making inevitable leads to authoritarianism. In that case it was better to stick with a ‘known’ quantity – Ben Ali – rather than incurring the risk of ending up living in an Iranian-style theocracy. According to this broad informal alliance, the state and its institutions were for them in danger of falling prey to the authoritarian Islamo-fascist project of Ennahda.

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This ad hoc coalition between the regime and many leftist secularists held firm until the mid-2000s when some leftist figures and movements, tired of the regime’s authoritarian practices and aware of the economic difficulties the country was encountering, entered talks with Ennahda in exile to create a united anti-Ben Ali front (the October coalition) that would be able to offer an alternative to the regime based on a shared belief in democracy and human rights. When the uprising occurred, the agreement on how to proceed to build a new political system held in place despite the inherent volatility of transitional processes. Soon after Ennahda became the leading partner in the post-uprising government coalition with two centre-left parties, Ettakatol and Congress for the Revolution, an anti-Ennahda front quickly emerged within the party system and in society. The bone of contention was again the role religion should play in public policy-making. For the self-styled seculars, Ennahda represented a mortal danger for the nascent Tunisian democracy because, they contended, the party had a hidden agenda. Harking back to the rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s, many seculars argued that Ennahda had duped its non-Islamist partners after winning the 2011 elections. A number of self-proclaimed secular parties argued that Ennahda would employ democratic means to end democracy, imposing a theocratic state where sharia law would be the only source of legislation. This would bring to an end therefore the progressive and modernist drive that Bourguiba had set in motion since independence and that needed to be revived albeit through democratic procedures. The return of political leaders from the Bourguiba era on the scene to defend his legacy can be construed as an attempt to re-impose a Bourguibian order where religion would not be part of discussions on public policy-making issues. This renewed hostility between the Islamist camp and the modernist one seemed to characterise post-uprising Tunisia since its inception and was most evident during the drafting of the new constitution when a series of polarising debates took place, suggesting a sharp division over the role of religion in politics. Thus, when Ennahda floated the idea of writing in the constitution that women were complementary to men rather than equal to them and that sharia should be considered as one of the sources of legislation, the modernist camp took to the streets to protest and secular members of the constitutional assembly worked tirelessly to prevent Ennahda from having its way. The very creation of the party Nidaa Tunes is the outcome of the coming together of different ideological currents and personalities with only one thing in common: their visceral opposition to Ennahda and its perceived attempt to hijack the institutions of the state through democratic means to subsequently employ religion to both devise policies and delegitimise opponents. According to this story then, the post-uprising period saw the victory of liberal-democracy because the seculars stood firm against Ennahda and its neo-authoritarian project, forcing it to accept pluralism and democratic politics. In short, political parties in the nationalist secular camp successfully kept religion out of politics, ensuring the success of the transition and saving Tunisia from authoritarian backsliding.

The real story?

For more neutral observers, the story is not as simple as Ennahda and its adversaries tell it, although there is a degree of truth in both accounts. When one examines more closely the history of Tunisia as well as the history of the parties and personalities involved in the transition, it appears that the relationship between political parties and religion is much more complex and is bound up with the instrumental nature that the concepts of secularity and religion have been immersed in.

When it comes to the secular and modernist camp and its relationship with religion, the self-perception of being the defenders of the secular Bourguibian heritage and the promoters of the relegation of religion to the private sphere out of ideological conviction does not reflect the
way in which religion has also been employed. From the beginning of his tenure Bourguiba was more interested in getting rid of alternative centres of power such as religious institutions to cement in his own grip on the state than actually subscribing to a genuine secular project. As Boulby (1988) noted,

Bourguiba did not present himself as a secularising reformer in the style of Turkey’s Kemal Ataturk. Instead he offered himself to the Tunisians as a modernist reformer of Islam. ‘Our concern’, he said in 1959, ‘is to return to the religion its dynamic quality.’ Ever sensitive to the Islamic personality of his country, Bourguiba knew that religious custom and belief were firmly entrenched in Tunisian society. He saw rightly that Islam was a powerful legitimising factor for the mobilisation of the masses.

The Tunisian constitution, for instance, fully recognised the Islamic nature of the country. Under Ben Ali there was a similar attitude towards religion. Rather than undertaking a specific project of secularity, Ben Ali instrumentally employed religion to draw a sharp distinction between legitimate interpretations of it in on the public scene and illegitimate uses – the ones employed to undermine his rule. During the 2000s, for instance, Ben Ali – through the ruling party – ensured that the regime would appear ‘religious’ and in tune with the Muslim nature of the country. He permitted – in fact encouraged – a sort of Tunisian a-political Islam to counter religiously inspired opposition. He did so by allowing Islamic banks, a religious radio and a TV channel. In addition he permitted quietist Salafis to organise educational activities, implicitly undermining the education system of the country, which was nominally secular (Haugbølle and Cavatorta, 2012). Just like the regime’s secularity had been instrumentally employed in the past to generate international support for the regime (the mythology of a secular regime defending secular values against Islamist obscurantisme plays well in the West), so has been the use of religion. Many self-declared Tunisian secular parties have continued to perpetuate the problematic relationship with religion whether intentionally or not. Part of the problem is that both secularism and religion tend to have multiple meanings attached to them.

In dominant and Western-inspired discourse, secularism is usually shorthand for modernity and liberalisation from the weight of oppressive religious precepts, particularly when it comes to individual beliefs and self-expression attitudes. On the contrary religion becomes shorthand for a return to obscurantist practices and beliefs that impinge upon individual rights. In short, secularism is modern and emancipatory while religion is un-modern and conservative. From a political perspective this translates into secularism being liberal democratic and religion authoritarian. In the Arab context, the two concepts of secularism and religion find a different ‘translation’ and this is the reason why the notion that secular parties are genuinely secular and religious parties genuinely religious might be misplaced. This becomes confusing then for both participants in and observers of the political interactions between parties. In the Tunisian context, as Wolf (2018) for instance convincingly argues:

Nidaa Tounes … was created by strongmen to counter Islamists, but this occurred more out of a desire to defend … strategic interests than for ideological reasons. As such, Nidaa Tounes … initially adopted a distinctly negative identity centred on a desire to keep Islamism in check. In short, (Nidaa Tounes) did not follow any explicitly secular agenda.

This explains why Essebsi – the leader of Nida and current president of Tunisia – often employs religious language and symbolism to implement policies and draw up legislation. The social
conservatism of the party is furthermore in tune with the attitudes of the majority of Tunisians (Teti et al., 2018), suggesting that there are other factors beyond religion affecting such attitudes given that they find support in nominally secular parties and supporters. The summer 2018 debate about the controversial proposition to divide inheritance equally between male and female heirs has demonstrated once more that social conservatism is alive and well in Tunisia, with demonstrations and counterdemonstrations taking place in Tunis.

The problem of the relationship with religion affects Ennahda as well, probably even more than the other political parties. As McCarthy (2018b) noted: ‘the relationship between the political and the religious within the movement has been conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable, rather than interdependent and cohesive.’ Following from this insight it becomes clear that religion can be both emancipatory and conservative/authoritarian. On the one hand, the story of the progressive moderation of the party is true insofar as religious precepts have been employed ultimately to liberate the party from its early ideological tenets (suspicious of democracy and imbued with Qutbist ideological tenets) and struggle in favour of democracy at a time when very few other opposition parties believed that taking authoritarianism on was the right choice. This change within the party has taken place not by abandoning religion as a source of inspiration, but by doing precisely the opposite: re-elaborating religious precepts to embrace their emancipatory value and using them as a moral guide for political action. On the other hand, the story of a seamless progressive moderation is problematic because it does not take into account how the party has in many ways betrayed some of its core beliefs and policy positions that are inextricably linked to a conservative and un-modern interpretation of religion.

As Netterstrøm (2015) highlighted, the party leadership had to work hard and enforce a top-down approach during the transition to democracy to convince ordinary members that the road towards the construction of a democratic order was worth sacrificing the creation of an Islamic state with sharia at its centre because in the meantime the meaning of Islamic state had evolved to such an extent that it now coincided with a liberal-democratic order without sharia. This speaks to the conflicting ways in which religion and politics have co-existed within the party, which went through splits, defections and acrimonious partings during its history.

This ambivalence can be seen clearly in the way in which the formal separation between movement and party functions. To be the guarantor of democracy at the political level and the proponent of a reformist form of Islam the new roles of the party/movement in the post-revolutionary institutional set-up. While the political participation of the party in a national unity government was the pillar of its political strategy, the teaching of a reformist Islam, based on the Malekite Tunisian tradition, was the guideline for the activities the dawa-oriented members undertook. This strategy is based on the implicit deal between (moderate) seculars and (moderate) Islamists that the Islamic frame of the constitution is shared and not negotiable. The separation is more a division of labour than a clear-cut paring, as Karim Azouz, at that time Ennahda MP, states. Azouz interestingly proposes to compare Ennahda’s separation between political and dawa activities to that of socialist European parties between the party and worker unions (Gaveriaux, 2018).

In more practical terms, Ennahda members leaning towards preaching were asked to take their activism into civil society and pursue the strategy of implementing Islam there, indirectly following the Gramscian suggestion that political change could only occur when the battle of ideas and behaviour was won within civil society. Those members who were instead more interested in party politics were encouraged to get involved in actual governing. It should be highlighted though that this division of labour is not a Machiavellian move to dupe political opponents and the international community, but it is the outcome of the debates that took place over time within Ennahda and the choices it made. In particular, the constitutional
compromise the party’s leadership struck with the representatives of the nationalist/secular sector of society meant the achievement/end of Ennahda’s historical mission to provide a clear Islamic identity to the country, as the constitution referred to Islam as the religion of the Tunisian state (art. 1) and, conversely, to the state as the protector of religion (art. 6). Whether this is sufficient to keep all party members on board is difficult to say, although a recent study by Grewal (2018) suggests that there will be a splintering of the party in the near future. Grewal notes that the party has been losing consensus since it tied itself to the experience of government while giving the impression of giving up dawa. This could lead to a split within the party, especially if the next parliamentary elections confirm the negative polling trends. However, Ennahda is not the only victim of the current tendency among Tunisians to feel disconnected from and dissatisfied with party politics. This has much less to do with the role of religion in politics than with the seeming inability of all political parties to deal with the considerable socio-economic challenges the country faces.

In short, the success of the Tunisian transition did not rest necessarily on the bridging between religion and secularity thanks to the self-congratulatory actions of Islamists or seculars. It rests instead on the realisation that the social classes and constituencies that the two blocs represent have much more in common than traditionally argued (Gorman, 2018) when it comes to economic interests and social policy and that liberal-democracy represents the system to empower them equally while taming and marginalising the Tunisians from the lower classes (Merone, 2015).

**Salafi parties**

The conflicting relationship between religion and party ideology that has traditionally characterised political parties in Tunisia is absent when it comes to Salafi parties. While Salafism is not a new phenomenon in Tunisian history (Torelli et al., 2012), the presence of Salafi parties such as the Front of Reform, the Authenticity Party and the Mercy Party is a novelty and not only for Tunisia. With the exception of Kuwait where Salafi parties (Pall, 2017) had existed for some time, they represent a novel trait of the post-2011 period. Salafis had traditionally shunned institutional politics and preferred to focus on education and charitable work to ensure that individuals lived a ‘proper’ Islamic life (Meijer, 2009). After the fall of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, many Salafis decided though that it was time to engage in politics and move away from their traditional quietist stance in order to protect religion against the encroachment of liberals and Muslim Brothers alike (al-Anani, 2017). Their participation in elections was a radical departure from their previous positions and their acceptance of the democratic game was surprising at the very least. This however does not mean that there is unconditional acceptance of the democratic system. Quite the opposite is true. For Salafis, religion and religious precepts are not simply a source of moral inspiration for acting in the political field as they are for Muslim Brothers (Lacroix, 2016). Religion is a totalising and exclusive guide for individual life and for managing society and the state. Solutions to all problems and answers to all issues are to be found in the religious texts and their literal interpretation. From this it emerges that ‘Islam is the solution’ is still the guiding principle of their political action, which means that they accept democracy only as instrumental to implement religious precepts as enshrined in sharia which are immutable and set in stone since the time of the Prophet because Salafis reject innovations and re-interpretations of religious texts. When these beliefs are translated into political positions and policy proposals, the liberal aspect of democracy disappears and democratic mechanisms become then dispensable. As Karagiannis (2019) convincingly explains, participation in the Tunisian democratic institutions and
acceptance of the discourse of democracy are simply a master frame within which Salafis operate because clearly standing for authoritarianism and the imposition of behaviour would not fly with the majority of the electorate, but their policy preferences have a clear authoritarian bent. In any case, the presence of Salafi parties can paradoxically strengthen Tunisia democracy because ‘they have evolved into a movement that can utilise democracy as a master frame. In this way, electoral Salafis can gain legitimacy and support from pious Tunisians who participate in the democratic process’. The three parties mentioned above have been unable to win seats in the legislative assembly so far, but their very participation ensures that the preferences of a sector, however small, of Tunisian society that believes in the fusion of politics and religion find an official and legal outlet.

In the case of Salafi parties, religion, or more accurately a specific reading of it, is the structuring ideology and the source of policy solutions. This clearly distinguishes from all other political parties in the Tunisian party system and they can be considered the only actors within which an authoritarian strain remains because their objective of radically transforming and re-Islamising society would inevitably encroach on individual rights and enforcing state-sanctioned behaviour would create repressive dynamics incompatible with liberal-democracy.

Conclusion

Tunisia, as the rest of the Arab world, continues to live the contradiction of political elites calling for democracy without fully accepting a strong Islamist party. Since 2011, Tunisia has confronted again this dilemma and it has seemingly been able to find a solution in the compromise between the secular and religious camps. On the surface, the agreement on the new constitution and the subsequent coalition between the leading party in the secular camp and the Islamist party in the religious camp testify to the success of bridging religion and secularism. This compromise has led to both camps claiming that the success of the transition and the triumph of democracy are due to their ability to withstand the authoritarian impulses of the other side, forcing it to accept the democratic game as the only viable compromise. The reality however is somewhat different.

With the exception of Salafi political parties, which represent a very small part of the electorate and are clear about the necessity to fuse religious precepts and public policies, Tunisian political parties, including Ennahda, have had and still have a much more complex relationship with religion. This has to do with the conceptualisation of religion in the political field and with the meaning of secularism in the Arab world (Asad, 2003) as well as with the specific history of Tunisia. Thus while political parties might believe that there is a highly significant amount of polarisation between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, both qualitative studies (Gorman, 2018) and quantitative ones (Wegner and Cavatorta, 2019) show that Tunisian voters and citizens are not that distant from one another on a number of sensitive issues where one would expect religion to play a prominent role in dividing people.

Notes

1 The Islamic jama’a became a party in 1981 under the name of Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami (Islamic Tendency), just to change its name in 1988 to Harakat al-Nahda (The Renaissance Movement), to become finally HizbHarakat al-Nahda (Party Nahda Movement) in 2016.
2 The congress decided that the party’s members would be banned from proselytising or leading civil society organisations.
3 Sayyid Qutb was a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In 1966, he was convicted of plotting the assassination of Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and executed by hanging.
4 Ennahda members prefer to talk about ‘specialisation (takhassus)’ rather than separation.
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