

Viewpoints
No. 72

Is Tunisia's Moderate Center in Danger of Collapse?

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The Islamic terrorist attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis may have serious ramifications on the fragile moderate center of Tunisian politics.

An entente between Islamists and secularists that produced the Arab Spring's only successful transition to democracy is already shaky. Tunisia has also produced the Arab world's largest number of *jihadis* for the Islamic cause in Syria and Iraq, challenging the assumption that democracy is the best antidote for stemming the rise of Islamic extremism.

March 2015

Middle East Program





The attack by Islamic extremists on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis that killed 20 foreign tourists and 3 Tunisians is tragic in more ways than the horrendous act itself. The chief political victim may well be the moderate, secular-Islamist center that has been holding the country together and made possible its successful transition to democracy so far.

The collapse of this moderate center would also call into question the soundness of the basic Western assumption that democracy is the best antidote to rising Islamic extremism in the Arab world.

Tunisia is the one and only country so far to emerge from the Arab Spring far more democratic than ever before in its history. But it is also the Arab country that has sent the largest number of *jihadis* to fight for ISIS and other similar groups in Syria and Iraq. The government calculates 3,000 Tunisians have gone and that it has prevented another 9,000 from leaving.

If there is any evidence that democracy serves to reduce Islamic extremism, it is hard to find so far in the Tunisian example. If anything, the opposite appears to be true: democracy has given space and voice not only to secular and Islamic democrats but to anti-democrats of both persuasions as well. The result has been a polarization of Tunisian society that has turned a growing number of both secularists and Islamists into uncompromising militants of opposing faiths.

Tunisia rightfully lays claim to having given birth not only to the Arab Spring but to the only successful transition to democracy. The string of uprisings against authoritarian Arab rulers began with the self-immolation of a distraught fruit and vegetable street vendor in the backwater town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010. This touched off nationwide protests that in less than a month led to the downfall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled for his life to Saudi Arabia after 24 years in power.

Democracy suddenly flourished and produced a successful, if sometimes rocky, transition to the freest and fairest elections of representative bodies since the country's independence from French colonial rule in 1956. A bewildering array of new parties competed for the 217 seats in the National Assembly elected in October 2011, but it was the Islamic party, Ennahda, that came in first winning 89 of the total.

Absent from this burgeoning new democratic order right from the beginning were hardline fundamentalist Salafis who resorted almost immediately to tactics of intimidation to close down bars serving alcohol and Western-influenced art shows while demanding women to wear veils. In April 2011, seven months before the first elections, the most militant of them launched Ansar al-Sharia, which dedicated to the use of political terrorism such as the failed attack on the parliament building and successful one on the Bardo Museum.

Meanwhile, Ennahda was discovering the costs of democracy to its own standing. In order to govern, it had to accept entering a coalition with two militantly secular parties, forcing it to make numerous concessions in the writing of a new constitution. It gave up on its hope for

creating an Islamic state and agreed to drop any mention of *shari'a*, Islamic law, as a fundamental constitutional principle.

Its political moderation and pragmatism did not stop there. When public sentiment turned against Ennahda in 2013, its highly pragmatic leader, Rached Ghannouchi, convinced his party to give up power and even approve a law allowing its hardline secularist enemies from the Ben Ali era to return to politics. To assuage secularists' fears, Ennahda also renounced running for the presidential election in late 2014 that was won by the 88-year-old Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi, who had served in various past governments and stands as a personification of the return of politicians from the old order.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, Essebsi's party – Nidaa Tounes – won 37 percent of the popular vote, the exact same percentage that Ennahda had won in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly election, although Nidaa Tounes ended up with three fewer seats (86 seats). Nidaa Tounes campaigned on a vehemently anti-Islamic platform aimed at rallying Tunisia's secularists to roundly defeat Ennahda. Still, the moderate Islamic party managed to garner almost 28 percent of the vote and 69 seats.

The reaction of Nidaa Tounes to having only a plurality of votes stands in sharp contrast to that of Ennahda facing the same dilemma in 2011.

Ennahda had quickly decided to look for secular partners to form an Islamic-secular coalition, the "troika" as it was called, in the name of national unity and stability. The three parties divvied up the top positions. While the prime minister was from Ennahda, the country's president and assembly speaker were leaders of the two secular parties in the troika.

By contrast, Essebsi and his Nidaa Tounes made no attempt whatsoever to share power with Ennahda. On the contrary, they sought to shut the Islamists out of any leadership role in the latest government. The new prime minister, Habib Essid, is technically an independent but was Essebsi's interior minister when he was prime minister of the transitional government in 2011. Essid was also a high-ranking security official under the ousted President Ben Ali. The speaker of the new parliament, Mohamed Ennaceur, is a Nidaa Tounes vice president.

As for forming a government, Nidaa Tounes went to great lengths to avoid forming a secular-Islamist coalition similar to Ennahda's troika. Essid's initial list of proposed ministers contained not a single Ennahda figure, but it failed to win enough votes in parliament. His second cabinet included just one Ennahda member, Zied Ladhari, who was given the junior ministry of employment. This was sufficient, however, to gain Ennahda's support, clearing the way for parliament to vote in the present government early last month.

How long Ennahda can afford politically to remain with only a symbolic role in a vehemently anti-Islamic government remains to be seen. It has already lost 10 percent of its support among voters as a result of leading the government between 2011 and 2013. Two of its most militant Islamists, Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou, left the party last year in disillusionment with their experience as deputies in the national assembly. With the attack on tourists, Islamic terrorists have signaled their intent to work for the destruction of the current secular-dominated government that Ennahda has endorsed.

What is clear already is that the moderate center of Tunisia politics built upon an entente between the moderate Islamist Ennahda and secularist parties is frayed. And it now faces challenges that may well cause the weakening of democracy in the one Arab country the United States and Europe have pinned all their hopes upon.

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Edited by Kendra Heideman and Julia Craig Romano
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars