

# Ennahda's Options in Post- "Sheikhs Agreement" Phase

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**Abstract:** Tunisia's fragile democracy has been able to survive against all odds, despite being situated amidst a region full of turmoil and civil wars. The historical consensus between Al-Beji Caid Essebsi and Rashid Al-Ghannouchi which was reached during a meeting in Paris on August 13th 2013 and later came to be known as the agreement of the "Two Sheikhs", has been instrumental to the continuation of Tunisia's democratic process while contributing to the relative stability Tunisia enjoys. In this regard, it is essential to follow-up on Tunisia's democratic transition following the death of Tunisian president Caid Essebsi—one of the two pillars of this agreement—to determine how his passing affects Ennahda's options and strategies ahead of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

### Introduction

From the moment Mohamed Bouazizi's death sparked a revolution in December 2010, Tunisia has made significant progress towards democratization and the proliferation of freedom. However, there are still a number of obstacles, especially given the remnants of the previous era that still endure, and prevalent conflicts of interest from the deep state with the gains of the so-called "Jasmine revolution". In addition to that, there has been a marked decline in development indicators, a dramatic increase in unemployment rates and the rise of illegal migration, as well as frequent public sector strikes that paralyse several production sectors, especially between 2012 and 2014. Despite this, most Tunisians are proud of what they have achieved so far in terms of freedoms and rights. Some of these achievements are the organization of the country's first free and democratic elections of the constitution assembly in 2011, followed by the presidential and legislative elections in 2014, and the first municipal elections held in 2018, the peaceful transition of power, which took place in 2013 when Ennahda decided to voluntarily give up power to a technocratic government until legislative

and presidential elections were held, and then again in 2014 during the promulgation of the first democratic constitution and what could arguably be called the smoothest transition of power witnessed by the latest development of the Tunisia's emerging democracy, with the passing of President Caid Essebsi on 25 July 2019.

The historic agreement between Caid Essebsi and Al-Ghannouchi at their historic (secret) meeting in Paris on 13 August 2013, known as the agreement of "the two sheikhs" in Paris - had a critical impact on what Tunisia has achieved to the present. There were hardly any doubts that this meeting was par excellence, a turning point in the history of Tunisia in post-revolution. However, serious and intense criticism are usually leveled by Caid Essebsi's supporters, accusing him of allying with the Islamists. In their view, they are the historic enemies of the Democratic Constitutional Rally. The very same criticism is also directed to Al-Ghannouchi by his Islamists supporters, given that in their view, he drowned the Islamic project through his pragmatic alliance with Nidaa Tounes, Caid Essebsi's party, and with Caid Essebsi himself.

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Therefore, the fundamental question this paper is trying to answer is “what is the fate of the Tunisian democratic transition after the death of one of the two pillars of the agreement, and the leader of two most active political organizations in Tunisia after 2011? And moreover, what is Ennahda’s foreseen role in continuing Tunisia’s democratic process after Essebsi’s death?”

The death of the Tunisian President Caid Essebsi was a shock to the local political forces as well as the regional and international ones despite his age and his recent health crisis. Actually, Essebsi’s death took place days after the Tunisian Independent High Authority for Elections (IHEC) closed the nomination window for the parliamentary elections scheduled on October 6. The number of submitted applications was astonishing: 1592 applications for a parliament of only 217 deputies: 695 were part , 707 were independent candidates, and 190 were supported by coalitions. Compared to the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, or the 2014 legislative elections, independent candidates outnumbered them all for the first time. Only 10 of 223 parties were able to present candidates covering all 33 constituencies, while 175 parties managed to cover a single constituency only. A total of 10 parties did not nominate any candidates, indicating a weak party structure and a decline in Tunisians’ confidence in political parties in general<sup>1</sup>.

In the context of the Tunisian appetite for political action, and with the opening of candidacy for the early presidential elections, nearly 100 persons were nominated for the highest state office, i.e. the Presidency of the Republic, with different social assets, political, and intellectual affiliations. Nearly, three-quarters of the candidates were rejected by the IHEC due to a lack of documents or legal inadmissibility<sup>2</sup>.

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This chaotic spread of parties reflects a microcosm of the party map, and the balance of power that governs it. Only a handful of the ten parties still have a real impact on the Tunisian political landscape, most having been born in the last five years alone. Some have even recently witnessed internal conflict, most notably Nidaa Tunes which split into two opposing wings, the wing of Hafez Caid Essebsi, the son of the President Essebsi, and the wing of the Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. Other parties were the product of accelerated and amputated political processes, such as Amal Tunis and the Qalb Tunis.

Alternatively, new parties were arbitrarily born only weeks before the start of the election race, raising suspicions on the probability of the misuse of Gulf funds, as well as the exploitation of charity work for personal interests. Unforgotten is the additional misuse of public funds and the official media, which served as the traditional enemy of Ennahda Islamist Party.

#### **Al-Ghannouchi's sudden nomination shortly after President Essebsi's death**

Overall, Ennahda Party, by far the largest, most popular, and most well-organized party in Tunisia, is entering its eighth democratic year exhausted by the plethora of distortion and obstruction campaigns mounted against it since it won the first transparent and democratic elections in Tunisia's modern history back in 2011. Ennahda's cadres have learned a lot from their experience in governance—a surprise to all—after the eruption of the Arab Uprisings. More to the point, they are still learning. Here it should be noted that Ennahda has practically never left power since winning the October 2011 elections, although it had shortly handed over power after the death of Shokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013. In fact, while in power, Ennahda did not actually govern given that it has had ministers participating in coalition governments but has not led any government yet. For instance, although Ennahda had the majority in parliament in 2013, it voluntarily gave up power under the pressure of the Egyptian coup against President Mohamed Morsi in July of the same year, choosing not to lead any government. This was done for the sake of



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preserving the gains of the Tunisian emerging democracy and out of its awareness of the importance of consensus and flexibility in dealing with the wave of counter-revolutions. Ennahda has, and still to this day, holds at least two ministers in every post-Troika government. As a result, its cadres have gained significant experience in running state affairs, practicing public affairs, and qualitatively –although at times radically- transitioned from revolutionary spontaneity and rhetoric to the neutrality, accuracy, and sobriety of statesmen.

However, the sudden announcement of Al-Ghannouchi's candidacy for a parliamentary seat in Tunis the capital, while his historical ally President Essebsi was on his deathbed, sparked a wave of outrage against him. This was particularly the case given that he was not a candidate during Ennahda's primary internal elections to be on the party's list for the upcoming legislative elections, nor did he intend to do so. However, the party's executive office intervened in the election results and appointed Al-Ghannouchi as the head of the Tunis-1 candidates list instead of the winning candidates.

In fact, there are two wings that rival decision-making inside Ennahda: the first is the so-called "New Ennahda" led by Al-Ghannouchi along with a number of leaders, including the former Prime Minister of the Troika government, Ali Al-Arrayed. The other is the wing of the traditionalists—or the hawks—who generally reject Al-Ghannouchi's unilateralist decision-making in the party, and the abandonment of preaching in favour of specialized and secular political work.

Ennahda's post-revolutionary strategy brought to the front the disparity between Ennahda's discourse during the underground phase or in exile – a phase which was undoubtedly marked by Al-Ghannouchi's early calls

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for embracing democracy, freedoms, power sharing even in non-Islamic rule, clearly stated in one of his early books entitled "Public Freedoms in the Islamic State" - and the phase of governance, during which Al-Ghannouchi himself followed autocratic behaviour several times, most recently when the Ennahda Executive Office interfered in the lists of candidates as previously mentioned.

With the death of the president Essebsi and the rush for the presidential election that was re-scheduled in mid-September of this year, Ennahda members found themselves facing an electoral challenge that was urgent, tempting, and strategic by all standards. This raised many questions: Will democracy survive after the death of Essebsi and the end of the controversial consensus policy which lasted for five years between the two sheikhs? Should Ennahda nominate a person from within or outside the party for the presidential elections? If Ennahda wins the legislative elections again this year, will secular forces, the remnants of the ruling party under Ben Ali and foreign powers, be allied against it as they did during the Troika? or has the situation changed today and eluded the enemies of democracy what they tried to do after the 2011 elections and

failed? The last and most pressing question, and perhaps the most strategic one, what if Ennahda's candidate wins the presidency? Will he face the same fate of the former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi? Or will Tunisia be different from the rest of the Arab countries?

In answering these questions, Ennahda members were not divided according to the traditional line-up criteria dividing the new Ennahda and the old Ennahda, but answers were subject to individual ideas and opinions and Ennahda members' understanding of the situation and analysis of what happened or will happen. The discussions of tens of thousands of people on social media, in offices and during the meetings of the party, and in public spaces revolved around two basic views. First, Ennahda should not pressure any candidate for the presidency given that this will provide an opportunity for the counter-revolution to attack Tunisia's emerging democracy. However, it should pursue a gradual, patient, and perseverant approach while continuing the consensus policies in and outside the parliament. This could safeguard the gains of the democratic process from disappointment or stumbling.

For instance, Ennahda leader Rafik Abdeslam, a former Tunisian foreign minister during the Troika government, opposed Ennahda's candidacy of any of its cadres, even if it was al-Ghannouchi himself. This is because he sees that the international situation is now characterized by the emergence of extreme right movements entrenched in recessive nationalist tendencies over the values of democracy. According to Rafik Abdeslam, the counter-revolutionary axis, especially at the level of the Arab Gulf, builds its grand narrative on the catastrophe of change in the Arab region and the catastrophe of democracy, which is evident in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and beyond.

On the other hand, the other opinion inside the party is keen on joining the competition of presidential elections, despite the phobia of the counter-revolution and fear of Mohamed Morsi's fate. It considers that the general regional and international situation, even if it is not suitable for the fragile and entrenched Islamist movements and all forces of change all over the world, and that the extreme right is still touring the region and interfering with the stability of the countries and their emerging democracies; the situation in Tunisia is stable regardless of all darkest events (especially between 2012 and 2013). This was obvious shortly after the assassination of two Tunisian politicians Shokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, when Tunisia showed an immunity against sedition, thanks to the neutrality of its military, the solidarity of its people, and the support of many friendly countries, including Algeria—in the last years of Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rule—Turkey, Qatar, and etc.

This view supports the idea that Ennahda can—and must—nominate one of its cadres to the presidency given the situation is now fortified in Tunisia and democracy is taking hold. Most importantly, Ennahda should know how to enter into coalitions, enter into dialogue and discussion, and how to make friends/allies, particularly international ones. The proponents of this view also believe that Ennahda has left the camp of traditional Islamist movements in favour of the national and civil party, by choice rather than coercion, out of its belief in the transfer of power, pluralism, and freedoms.

In contrast, those who criticize this view believe that the stability of the political situation in Tunisia is fragile and that Tunisia would have never survived coups d'états or security threats without the wisdom of both sheikhs and their famous "Parisian" agreement. Now, after the death of President Essebsi, Ennahda has lost a wise partner with whom it was leading the country to stability and success.

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When the party's Shura Council met to resolve this issue in early August 2019, it took them three days of debate and voting a re-vote, resulting in a near-unanimous vote - 98 out of 103 - to decide the nomination of Abdelfattah Mouro for presidency.

At this historic moment, the renouncing of the presidential elections by Ennahda's president Rashid Al-Ghannouchi in favor of his deputy in the presidencies shows Al-Ghannouchi's democratic rule of his party. This is especially given reported leaks that Al-Ghannouchi was against the candidacy of any member from within the party for the same reasons raised by his brother-in-law, Rafik Abdel Salam. Consequently, the disputes over the electoral lists which took place three weeks before the death of the president are now forgotten. Here, one now finds Ennahda's cadres and members supporting Al-Ghannouchi in the parliamentary elections - and perhaps the presidency of the House of Representatives later on, with Mouro in the presidency elections; carrying the dream of Ennahda to reach Carthage.

I have pointed earlier to the transformations of Ennahda during the Troika and its first application of Al-Ghannouchi's theories and approaches on democracy and secularism,

which by the time of the adoption of the second republic's constitution in 2014 had no problem with Islam in the Tunisian context (or vice versa), and had undertaken revisions to its traditional view on how "Islamic" was the Tunisian state (the Tunisian postcolonial state was often described in the literature of Ennahda during the 1980s and 1990s as extremist Ataturk-ist, and fragile hybrid secularist, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

This transition is considered qualitative and attention-grabbing, as Al-Ghannouchi had pioneered the renewal of contemporary Islamic political thought according to what Hassan Al-Turabi began to theorize, and Najm al-Din Erbakan started to practice since the end of the 1980's. So far, he succeeded in moving the Tunisian Islamic project from the revolution to the state offices with minimal loss. But is this guaranteed every time? Can Al-Ghannouchi, with his wisdom and pragmatism, continue to do so in the absence of a wise and effective political partner as he did with his former partner Essebsi?

We have noticed the relative success of the new Islamists<sup>4</sup> in the democratic transition in the post-Arab spring, although it has been accompanied by a marked chaos in crisis management, counter-revolution negation,



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and economic crisis management. However, when we consider the new political behaviour of Ennahda in the management of internal affairs of the party, we notice the transformation into a civilian party in record-time to meet the requirements of the government, state and current circumstances, which may be a painstaking and arduous route to Ennahda members before any other.

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Since the Tenth Congress held in mid-2016, during which Ennahda announced the separation between preaching activities of the movement and the party political activity and Ennahda’s transformation into a civil political party, criticism has arisen against Al-Ghannouchi. This was also compounded by the criticism against his intentions to strengthen the role of the elected president in appointing or forming the executive office under his leadership to serve as his government. On the other hand, the advocates of this practice believe that efficacy and high productivity in the management of the movement and public affairs requires coherence, which will not be necessarily available through voting. Also, this practice is common in elected governments when the party president bears absolute or semi-absolute responsibilities and powers to form the government even if its members are not democratically elected. This option is also popular within some liberal Western democratic parties, and holds a debatable yet considerable view. Nevertheless, giving the executive office the legal authority to decide on the candidate lists for the legislative elections angered some of the party cadres and members.

### **The Possibilities following the elections**

Gradualism, patience and selflessness are characteristic of the neo-Islamists whether in Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia or beyond. However, when the observer overlooks the bigger picture: the realities facing the country, the political phase, and the conflict with the enemies of democratic change in the Arab and Muslim worlds, the neo-Islamists are showered by criticism attacking the core of their democracy and modernity in its Western liberal meanings. Are they really democratic and liberals? Could they be Islamists without belonging to an Islamist movement and without an ideological doctrine that believes in the Islamic State and Sharia? Why don't they stick to the western foundations of liberal democracy like all western countries, where such countries and parties would be led without any autocratic tendencies? The neo-Islamists, Al-Ghannouchi most notably, could theorize - or continue their theorizing attempts - to formulate a genuine, non-hybrid or non-liberal Islamic democracy with Islamic specificities, but is it really time to take up any pen or open any book to conduct re-readings and reviews and accumulate knowledge and theorize problems?

The Tunisian situation is still delicate in terms of its democratic transition and the success of its experience. There are still serious

fears of buying the votes of the poor and marginalized, with some reports pointing to such behaviours in 2014 elections. The sudden emergence of the defence minister which was previously in most of the overthrown president Ben Ali's governments and in post-revolutionary governments, Abdelkarim Al-Zubaidi, may complicate the overall situation as well as hinder Ennahda's dream of Abdel Fattah Moro's victory. If chances of the so-called revolutionary candidates appear to be weak, including Moncef Marzouki, it will be mainly because Ennahda votes will not go to any of them, unlike what took place in 2014 elections. The surprises may come from other candidates as well, including the owner of Nessma television channel, Nabil Karoui, often nicknamed as the 'Berlusconi of Tunisia', who remains a strong candidate due to his investments in charity work for the help and aid of the poor and needy regions. However, his sudden arrest on August 25 on charges of financial corruption and tax evasion could end his fortunes and dreams once and for all. This also applies to another candidate, the businessman Salim Chiboub. As for former Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa and current Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, recent opinion polls have not given them a percentage that would qualify them to form a sudden breakthrough in public expectations.

Most predictions indicate that the Ennahda candidate Mouro is most likely to make it to the second round and to compete with Abdelkarim Al-Zubaidi. What is being observed from Mouro's tours in areas throughout Tunisia to present himself to the people is that he lacks a special political program that distinguishes him as a president. This makes him no different than other candidates. Mouro's charisma is known to everybody, even to his competitors and there is no doubt that his charisma will guarantee him many votes, even from those who are not affiliated with Ennahda. The question remains whether he can succeed in the elections and could the democratic experience succeed because of him? Moreover, would Tunisia then become the first Arab country to tolerate a democratically-elected Islamist to be the head of state?

The answer to these questions will inevitably be known in the upcoming weeks, following the disclosure of Tunisia's voter's intentions. We will also know, more clearly, if Ennahda wins the presidencies and/or the legislation, whether it will most probably and generally continue to find new allies for consensus, compromise, and coalitions in parliament and the government. Whether other actors would directly or indirectly accept that, however remains to be seen. For Tunisia, the future is all at once contentious yet promising, and the coming days will definitely tell us for sure.

## Endnotes

1-Al-Mahdi Mabrouk, "Tunis ila al-Intikhabat... Wa makhawif 'ala al-demoqratyah", al-'Arabi al-Jadid, <https://bit.ly/2m22yT1>

2-Al-Mahdi Mabrouk, ibid.

3-Chamkhi, Tarek (2015) Neo-Islamism after the Arab spring: Case study of the Tunisian Ennahda party. Masters by Research thesis, Murdoch University.

4- The term neo-Islamists or New Islamists were addressed by the author in his 2015 study conducted on the unique governance experience of the Ennahda party during the Troika government shortly after its famous victory and the first of its kind in the Arab world, in the first free post-revolutionary elections. Neo-Islamism is not necessarily a strict abruption of the classical Islamist movement and experience, nor is it a post-Islamism as the sociologist Asif Bayat theorized, but it is in-between. Neo-Islamism is characterized by pragmatism, nationalism, cultural reconciliation with the West, abandonment of the da'wa literature and the name of the Islamist movement, and, most importantly, abandonment of the aims of the Islamic State and Islamic rule. Nevertheless, the neo-Islamists are still imagining of Islamic action, Islamic change, and the dream of an Islamic state, although they do not know how it will come and when. Chamkhi, Tarek (2014) Neo-Islamism in the post-Arab Spring, Contemporary Politics, 20:4, 453-468, DOI: [10.1080/13569775.2014.970741](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2014.970741)

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