

## The Growth of Political Islam in Tunisia: Rachid Ghannouchi and Ennahda

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**Abstract:** The article highlights Rachid Ghannouchi's political ideas in the context of the growth of political Islam in the Arab world by focusing on historical and political development that underlie the democratic process in Tunisia. It discusses political idealism he developed in Ennahda movement (The Renaissance Party) based on the principles of freedom and justice and its uncompromising opposition to the autocratic regime of Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) and his successor Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). The study is qualitative in nature in the form of documentary and content analysis. It used descriptive, analytical and historical approaches to analyse data derived from established archival sources. The study found that Ennahda Movement which was co-founded by Ghannouchi in 1981 as "The Movement of Islamic Tendency" had broad influence in mainstream Islamic politics in Tunisia, that espouse to dismantle the autocratic rule and decolonise the corrupt practice and political suppression of past regime. The influence it developed had broadly impacted both Islamic and secular forces to converge and commit toward democratic rule, human rights and the principle of justice, freedom, and the rule of law.

**Keywords:** Rachid Ghannouchi; Islamic Tendency Movement; Ennahda; Tunisia

### Introduction

The study discusses Rachid al-Ghannouchi Khriji's (born June 22, 1941) political views, and his philosophical premises in articulating the theoretical foundation of democracy and human rights as expressed in his writings such as *Ad-dimuqratiyah fil-Islam* (democracy in Islam) - translated from Bennabi's lecture, *Al-hurriyyah al-'ammah fi al-dawlah al-Islamiyyah* (Public Liberties in the Islamic State) and other works that manifested his pioneering thoughts on the principles of governance, the notion of freedom, separation of power, multi-party system, and the fundamental nature and

doctrine of Islamic politics (*siyasah shar' iyyah*). His thoughts on the political principles were largely developed in Azzam S. Tamimi's work *Rachid Ghannouchi: A democrat within Islamism* (2001) which describes historical backdrop of his political career and tracing his political impact and strategic rise of Tunisian Islamist political party Ennahda and the influence it exercised in converging secular and Islamist forces and organizing popular rise of democratic movement throughout the Middle East .

The study highlights the historical development of Ghannouchi's formative years, and his tendency toward political activism and its unprecedented influence in the Muslim world. It traces his background and impact across the wide spectrum of Islamist and secularist ideology as an influential democrat and activist across Tunisia and North Africa that converge under his popular leadership in the Troika coalition.

The imprint of his legacy has resonated within the Ennahda party (*Hizb Harakah al-Nahdah* - The Renaissance Party) that carried his creative and intellectual framework of *ijtihad*. Ennahda was the largest Islamist party in Tunisia, gaining majority support and recognition in popular convention that cut across geopolitical divides. The reformist tradition in Tunisia stems from its Islamist and secular root projecting back to the nineteenth century. The process of Ennahda's evolution and formation began in the 1960s, from *Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah*, to MTI (Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique), to Ennahda (Wolf, 2017).

Since achieving democratic transition that took the nation into mass revolution in 2011, the Ennahda-led government had passed Tunisia's new constitution on January 27, 2014, geared by Ennahda parliamentarians that drafted and ratified the charter - which has laid the foundation for democratic rule that protected civil and religious freedom (Ghannouchi, 2016). Since the last five years Tunisia had achieved significant political progress which was made possible by such an unparalleled democratic process. The rise of *Hizb al-Nahdah* or the Renaissance Party of Tunisia was perhaps the most interesting event that caught the Islamic world recently. Ennahda was the manifestation par excellence of a moderate and inclusive movement that embraces the progressive ideas of democracy in post-Arab Spring. Its leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who came back after living for more than 22 years in exile since 1989, led the party in the general election in his homeland that finally won 40 percent of the seats in October 2011.

Ghannouchi was uncompromising in advocating the principle of *shura*, democracy, liberalism, accountability and secularism, terms that were highly contentious in Islamist circles. In his speech at the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy on March 2, 2012, on "Secularism and the Relation of Religion to the State" Ghannouchi remarks: "Perhaps the most important idea in the ensemble of these procedures is the idea of the state's neutrality i.e. towards religion and its abstention from interfering with people's conscience. Whereas, the state's scope or jurisdiction is limited to the 'public domain', religion's scope extends to the 'private'." He also said: "The primary orbit for religion is not the state's apparatus, but rather personal convictions. The state's duty, however, is to provide services to the people before anything else, to create job opportunities, and to provide good health and education, not to control the people's hearts and minds" (Ghannouchi, 2012b).

Such progressive outlook was instrumental in bringing about Ennahda's success in suppressing the escalating political tensions and conflicts in Tunisia. Its historical struggle has significant meaning and impact to illuminate such confronted matters between "Islam and political rule" (Ghannouchi, 2012b), public reason, religious conception and values, moral conscience and democratic ideal while addressing the challenge of Western secularism and increasing moral and spiritual consciousness. Drawing from popular support the Islamist party has formed the largest faction in the Tunisian parliament. It advocated political compromise and participation in a coalition of Islamist and secular parties and placing greater emphasis on democratic rule and procedures, that establish the compatibility of Islam and secularism "based on the historical distinction between religion and politics in Islamic societies".

The basic ideological trajectory of Tunisia's Islamism and its consequential democratic transition and policies were designed to safeguard the principle of freedom (*al-hurriyyah*), justice (*al-'adl*), and human rights (*huquq al-insan*), and to provide constitutional guarantee of judicial independence, and the institution of governance that establishes the ideological platform of the moderate Islamist Ennahda in championing plural and inclusive values in the political structure.

In his foreword to the ACMCU Occasional Papers on Ghannouchi's critique of political Islam after Arab Uprisings and the consequence economic and political change in Tunisia based on Nouredine Jebnoun's recent interviews with Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi (Apr 25, 2014), John L. Esposito remarks that "Ghannouchi is pivotal to understanding Ennahda's growth and development as an Islamic movement and to its return and success in elections and role in rebuilding a new Tunisia" (Jebnoun, 2014), "Al-Ghannouchi's importance though extends beyond Tunisia for his widely regarded as a major activist-intellectual, a creative reformer who has contributed to the issues of Islamic renewal and reform from the relationship of Islam to secularism, democracy, civil society and women's rights" (Esposito & Voll, 2011).

The article thus aims to analyze critical aspects of Ghannouchi's classic ideas in the context of modernity and his intellectual response to contemporary issues (Sofi, 2018), particularly on the question of Islam and democracy, delineating his political theories on its compatibility and significance, and the need for power sharing, in post-Arab Spring context that was achieved through compromise.

A comprehensive review conducted on past literature has alluded to significant works that substantively expounded on Ghannouchi's political struggle and activism. In their study of democratic process in Tunisia post-Jasmine revolution, M. Zaidi A. Rahman, Makmor Tumin and Azmil Z. Abidin (2023) highlighted Ghannouchi's defining role as a key ideology in the mass protest leading to the unprecedented uprising of the Arab Spring. It looks into his impact as Muslim thinker, theologian, and philosopher of the political party Ennahda and the democratic transition he led that significantly impacted Tunisian society inspiring remarkable revolt and protest against local authorities (Zaidi & Makmor, 2023).

In his compelling biography of Ghannouchi's political career *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, Azzam Tamimi (2001) examines the development of political Islam in the Arab world, focusing on Ghannouchi's chequered history as

representing the path of political Islam in modern period. It traces the nuances of his religious ideas and its impact in public realm and his early tendencies toward socialist, Islamist, pan-Arabism, salafist and Marxist ideology, taking the inspiration of Nasserism, Baathism, Nasir al-din al-Albani and Muslim Brothers (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*). In pursuing his political aims, it highlighted his universal views on the issue of secularism, authoritarian, populist and Islamic state showing the strength of his political struggle and viewpoints that were inclusive, perceptive and moderate in finding common ground with the context and changing process (Tamimi, 2001).

His thought evolved with the political narrative in post-colonial times as reflected in the revolutionary aspect of his activism in *Harakah al-Ittijah al-Islami* or MTI (Islamic Tendency Movement) founded in the 1980s, and later became *Harakah En-Nahdah* showing significant political introspection and forward-looking trajectory in his political actions. Ghannouchi's experiences was inspired by the spirited struggle of Tunisian freedom fighters, thinkers and intellectuals such as Khayr al-din al-Tunisi, al-Tahtawi, al-Tha'labi, al-Fasi, Malek Bennabi, Ibn Taimiyah, Ibn 'Ashur (1879-1973) and Muhammad Abduh. However, the discussion was limited to his formative years without informing contemporary post-Jasmine revolution underlying the formation of current political entities in realizing the legitimate aspiration of Tunisian people.

The question of the legitimacy of Islamist politics in the age of post-Islamism makes an important theme in Islamic political thought, argued from the basis of *siyasa shar'iyyah*, *fiqh waqi'* and the foundation of *maqasid*. Ennahda, which was systematically banned for almost twenty-three years by Ben Ali, has made a decision to replace the autocratic regime with its transition from 'Political Islam' to 'Muslim Democrat' as a democratic regime. This was reflected by Maszlee Malik, describing its meaningful implication in Ennahda moderate perspective and their rejection of radical and extremist approaches associated with political Islam and instead promotes a civil state based on *maqasid-maslahah* (utility) principles. The government was established on democratic foundation, deriving its inspiration from Ghannouchi's principal work that articulates its universal and philosophical argument (Malik, 2016) which embraces the principle of freedom, human rights, justice and plurality and advocate basic concepts of *shura*, *ijtihad*, *maslahah* as well as modern values that characterize the dynamic and responsive ethos and experience of Islam in modern history (Rahman, 2021).

The parallel and compatible aspect of Islam and democracy have been intensely discussed in wide theoretical discussion that outline the central perspective on Ghannouchi's political doctrine and philosophy of its values and principle, encapsulating his ideas on the fundamental concept of freedom, inalienable right of human being, justice, plurality and modern values (Alisakun, 2020; Kamis et al., 2021; Muhammad Rusdi, 2021).

Other critical works that discussed significant aspect of al-Nahdah were articulated in various studies, as well as in the collected works (*Maqalat*) of Ghannouchi that substantively expounded the underlying ideas of *shura*, *ijtihad*, *maslahah*, and *maqasid shariah* such as *Minal-Fikr al-Islami Fi-Tunis* (Facets of Islamic Thought in Tunisia), *Al-Mar'ah al-Muslimah Fi Tunis Bayna Tawjihat al-Qur'an Wa Waqi' al-Mujtama' at-Tunisi* (Muslim Women in Tunisia between Qur'anic ideal and reality

of Tunisian society), *Ath-Thawrah al-Iraniyah Thawrah Islamiyah*, *Al-Islam Yuwli 'Inayatan Kubra Lil-Mujtama' al-Madani* (Islamic recognition of civil society), *al-Dimuqratiyah wa Huquq al-Insan fi al-Islam* and *al-Hurriyat al-'Ammah fi al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah* (Public Liberties in Islamic State) which was developed from Bennabi's ideas. It complemented his work in envisioning and representing the widely-held democratic spirit of the Algerian thinker which constituted the unprecedented spirit of Tunisian constitution (Jebnoun, 2014; Sofi, 2018; Wolf, 2017).

Thus this paper aims to analyze Ghannouchi's political theory that informed his ideological basis in the context of the major transition that took place in 2011 Tunisia. It presents his classic role as Muslim democrat and activist and its philosophical appeal that emphasizes democratic values. It considers the implication of his theological and metaphysical ideas in the intellectual and religious discussion of shariah and the reinterpretation of its legal doctrine. The ensuing phenomenon of Islamic resurgence was consequential to his global impact thanks to the participation of his Islamist political party Ennahda in the global process of religious resurgence and democratization that promoted Islamic democracy in contemporary Tunisia.

## **Research Methodology**

The study is of qualitative (narrative) type designed based on Hans George Gadamer's hermeneutical and inferential framework (Darmalaksana, 2020) and Habermas concept of public sphere. It conducted extensive documentary surveys and content analysis using scientific, historical, descriptive and analytical approaches (Barlian, 2018; Yusuf, 2016) to analyze the data. Material were derived from primary (Ghannouchi's original works) and secondary (other authors' analysis of his work) sources and instruments that were collected mainly from archival sources, including manuscripts, theses, books, articles, magazines and journals to conclude the finding and conclusions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **1. Ghannouchi's Political Journey and Tunisia's Democratic Crisis**

Rachid Ghannouchi was an influential proponent of the new political Islam (Karagiannis, 2018) and leader of Tunisian Ennahda Islamist party. Highly reputed for his political role serving as its intellectual leader, and leading ideologue. The political movement he led in the momentous and thriving countrywide movement and resistance of Arab Awakening has changed the identity and landscape of the country since pre-colonial times from authoritarian-totalitarian systems to consolidated democracy (Argenti, 2014).

Ghannouchi was twice imprisoned under the autocratic regime of Habib Bourgiba, and has resided in exile in London since 1989 before making his political comeback in 2011 after 22 years. Recognized as 100 most influential person in the world (Time, 2012), recipient of the 2012 Chatham House prestigious award from Prince Andrew, Duke of York along with Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, for the "successful compromises each achieved during Tunisia's democratic transition", and listed as one of the defining figures and ideologues of contemporary Islamic world in the *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Esposito & Voll, 2011) and among 100 most

prominent Islamic leaders of the 20th century (Mohd, 2006), Ghannouchi was seen as global hope to realize the aspirations of Muslim democrats around the world.

Born on June 22, 1941 in South Tunisia, Ghannouchi attended his secondary school at the Zaytouna madrasah. His traditional studies focused on “issues that no longer concern us which have been imposed upon us by colonialism and which have become the status quo” (Tamimi, 2001). After completing his studies, he was temporarily admitted to the Faculty of Theology, Zaytuna University (known as the world's first Islamic university founded in 737 M). However, divided between traditionalism and new Western-oriented society in which he lived, he left Zaytouna, studied briefly in Cairo and later in Damascus, where he obtained his first diploma (Jebnoun, 2014) and subsequently continued his post-graduate studies at Sorbonne University, Paris (Rahman, 2021).

His time at the University of Damascus (1964-1968) marked a major turning point in his life. The impact of the Arab defeat (combined forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan against the Israeli military) in the Six-Day War in 1967 disgraced Arab nationalism. Like many young Arabs, al-Ghannoushi turned to Islam, but to a more progressive vision of Islam “a living Islam” (Esposito & Voll, 2011) in contrast to Zaytouna and other conservative Islamic universities that he regarded as “museums”. In 1970, Ghannouchi returned to his homeland and taught philosophy in high school and began preaching in mosques, and formed his small circle of grassroot movement which later became a major force in the Islamic resurgence in the secularized Tunisian atmosphere (Jones, 1988).

Since the middle of 2021, with an escalating political and institutional crisis, and the threat of the secularist party, Tunisia entered into a deteriorating phase with a series of protests leading to the suspension of parliament and the constitutional coup by President Kais Saied on July 25, 2021 (Megerisi, 2021). He issued a presidential order on September 22, 2021 giving him exclusive power to assume the executive authority, and move to freeze and dissolve the parliament and enact the state of emergency. This was followed by the arrest of Ghannouchi on April 17, 2023, the highest-profile figure, as former Speaker of Tunisian House of Representatives and leader of Ennahda Islamic democratic party, the largest force in Tunisian parliament, who accused Kais of usurping power and move against the democratic path.

The opposition leaders were sentenced in dubious and politically-motivated charges by the court in a blatant political trial and their main accounts and assets were frozen. Ghannouchi faced charges of incitement, bribery, money laundering, terrorism and conspiring against state security and “work to change the form of the state and commit hostilities against the president” (Eye, 2025) and was sentenced to one year in prison on May 15, 2023. In a different trial, he was sentenced to three years in prison over allegations of lobbying and receiving external funds on February 1, 2024, and his party Ennahda was fined \$1.1 m. (\$1,170,000). In February 2025 he was further charged with additional 22 years in prison sentences along with other Tunisian political leaders and lawmakers for violating and “plotting against state security” (Aljazeera, 2025). Since his own coup of power in July 2021, authoritarianism has intensified, silencing of critics has increased, other presidential candidates have been arrested, and democratic institutions have been suspended. Saied's highhanded authoritarian

moves and aggressive crackdown on opposition were seen as an unmaturing attempt to solidify his hold on power and continued the corruption designed to silence critical voices in his increasingly chaotic and threatened political survival (Hasan, 2013).

## **2. Democratic Transition and the Rise of New Political Landscape in Tunisia**

Tunisia's democratic transition was achieved after the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's on January 14, 2011 who fled the country after the popular protests that triggered the 2011 Arab Spring. Sparked by the most dramatic social and political uprising since 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, due to rising food and high fuel prices, endemic corruption, unemployment, and democratic deficit, the Tunisian Revolution or Jasmine Revolution has witnessed the rise of a new dawn of a multiparty system, democratic government and free elections in the Republic after 23 years of autocratic rule: "Today, we can assure you that it will not turn into a fundamentalist "religious" or "secular" winter but into a democratic spring where all have a place" (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

Tracing its roots to the Islamic activist trend and sentiment as an "Islamic party", Ennahda has declared a historic shift from its adherence to political Islam to Muslim democrats. The proposal was made known in the party's referendum, showing their belief in democratic process and social change through participating in elections: "We are leaving political Islam and embracing democratic Islam. We are Muslim democrats who no longer claim to represent political Islam" (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

In projecting a democratic and inclusive religious society it decided to separate politics from religion and proclaimed that there is no room left for political Islam within the country's democratic constitution. Ennahda's political comeback and their dominating struggle shows the maturity of the Islamists to embrace liberal democracy, multiculturalism and pluralism to become Muslim democrats (Hamza, 2019). Allying with secular force, it has categorically rejected Islamic state in favour of parliamentary democracy, committed to social justice, multiparty democracy and religious pluralism (Ghannouchi, 2016).

Despite winning in the country's first free elections in 2011 with large mandate, Ennahda insisted on sharing power within a coalition government comprising of secular social democratic parties, and forming a political alliance (the "Troika") with *al-Muktamar* or *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) party led by Moncef Marzouq (who was later elected as Tunisia's first post-revolutionary president on December 12, 2011) and the *al-Takattol* or *démocratique pour le travail et les libertés* (FTDL) party led by Mustapha Ben Jaafar. Ennahda's willingness to sharing power and choose to compromise rather than monopolize power, was to avoid any possibility of power manipulation and arrogance of power through checks and balances process and reaching collective decisions: "By sharing power with the opposition, we protect ourselves from the temptation of monopolizing power and arrogance of power. At the same time, power-sharing protects us from the threat of being subjected in the future to exclusion, marginalization, and torture" (Jebnoun, 2014).

Ghannouchi maintains that democracy is not a philosophy or ideology, but a tool for electing, checking, and dismissing or replacing a system of government and for protecting and safeguarding the state (Alisakun, 2020; Ghannouchi, 2012b; Tamimi,

2001). The concept of democracy formulated by Bennabi explains Islamic polity as a psycho-sociological approach and an educational path for the whole people. Democracy, as Bennabi understands it, is not simply a political process but a sentiment of society towards collective issues that begins with cultivating the democratic spirit in individuals along with the collective spirit and ethics before implementing it as a political process (Bennabi, 1991). With this, authority can be transferred to the people, and the constitution of a nation becomes sovereign.

### **3. Transforming Political Islam and Democratic Values in Tunisia**

In his prolific writings on political Islam and the ideas of democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ghannouchi, emphasized on the basic principles of Islamic state (Ghannouchi, 1994) and its function to safeguard public liberty, and minority rights (Thaib et al., 2016). The Ennahda campaigns advocate to uphold Tunisian Islamist political path based on democracy and electoral mechanism and aspiring to defend the principle of freedom and universal aspirations of human rights. The power sharing concept of Tunisian Ennahda reflects widespread consensus of democratic Islamist to promulgate their conviction of new political Islam and its religious objectives and values in protecting national interest and independence of state institution in spearheading extensive reform that cut across religious and political divide (Oliveira Alencar, 2022).

A Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois, Asef Bayat termed this shift as post-Islamism. There was a clear shift from the age-old slogan of *al-Islam huwa al-hal* - Islam is the solution to all problems - to a more practical approach and solution. Bayat also emphasizes that post-Islamism is not just a condition but also a project, a conscious attempt to frame concepts and strategies in terms of policies and methods to penetrate Islamism in the social, political and intellectual fields (Bayat, 2007).

Post-Islamism represents an attempt to combine religion with rights, beliefs and freedoms, Islam and civil liberties and focuses on rights instead of duties, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. To many sociologists, this new phenomenon is termed "post-Islamism". Whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility; *post-Islamism* emphasizes on religiosity and rights. And while the association of Islamism has always been with exclusivity and authoritarianism, post-Islamism is more concerned with inclusivity and democracy (Bayat, 2007).

Ghannouchi's religious influence has witnessed a religious awakening that consciously advocated for institutional reform and the need for structural and collective *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). It advocates basic constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and conscience, and the formation of a civil state that espouses liberal cause and political pluralism. In this, it reflects diverse religious principle of *maslahah* and *maqasid sharia* that inspired his dynamic understanding of practical and realistic demands of societal nuance and context (*fiqh al-waqui'*): "We want a party that talks about everyday problems, and not one that talks about the Last Judgment and Paradise. We want religious activity to be completely independent of political activity" (Ghannouchi, 2016).



Without including shariah provisions in the basic constitution, Ennahda was characterized as a “political, democratic and civic party”, that defends liberal aspirations and democratic principles of civil society, “The state should not have anything to do with imposing or telling people what to wear, what to eat and drink, what they believe in, what they should believe in” (Ghannouchi, 2016).

State neutrality is necessary for true conviction to be the driving force of religious and social practice, without fear of those who control the state (Abdullah, 2008), for there is no value to any religious practice that stems from coercion. And there is no significance to belief based on coercion, and the Islamic community is in no need of hypocrites who inwardly hold unbelief and outwardly profess belief and Islam. Whoever declares the two testaments (*kalimah shahadah*) expresses a voluntary and individual decision based on recognition and conviction (Ghannouchi, 2012b).

This represents a significant political turn of Islamism, as articulated by Bobby S. Sayyid (2003) in his book “*A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*” about his political project: “Islamism is a project that attempts to transform Islam from a nodal point in the discourse of Muslim communities to a master signifier. In particular, the Islamist project is an attempt to make Islam the master signifier of the political order.” (Sayyid, 2003).

However, this project of political Islam has taken a new turn after what is known as the Arab Spring or the Arab Awakening. The discourse now is not about establishing an Islamic state or implementing *hudud* laws. The aspiration now is to nurture pious Muslims within a democratic polity. Ghannouchi, has categorically rejected an Islamic state in favour of parliamentary democracy, that commits to social justice, multiparty democracy and religious pluralism (Zulkarnain et al., 2022).

Ghannouchi emphasizes that there was no fundamental conflict between Islam and secularism. He maintains a degree of separation between political and religious realm in what is known as *as-siyasi* (political or worldly) and *ad-deeni* (religious or sacred). Addressing the relationship between Islam and secularism, he maintained its harmonious and reciprocal framework, demonstrating that secularism is not an atheist philosophy, but a set of procedures and arrangements intended to procure freedom of belief and thought (Abdelsalam, 1988).

The idea was put forward by Ghannouchi in interpreting the compacts of the Sahifa of Medina, on the differentiation between the religious and the political scope, “if his Companions were unclear about whether a matter was an obligation mandated by revelation or by opinion and deliberation, the Prophet would so indicate if it was part of revelation, and likewise when it was part of politics, he would say that it pertained to the domain of opinion and consultation.” (Ghannouchi, 2016).

This distinction was evident to the first Muslims who separated that which belongs to revelation from what belongs to politics, as in the saying of the Prophet (pbuh): “You are the best people to know what is beneficial for you in your worldly affairs”. It clearly indicates that it is not the duty of religion to teach agriculture, industrial or even governing techniques. Reason is qualified to teach this truth through the accumulation of experiences. The role of religion, however, is to answer questions relating to our existence, origins, destiny and the purpose for which we were created. It is to provide us with a system of values and principles that would

guide our thinking, behaviour and the regulation of the state to which we aspire (Ghannouchi, 2016).

#### **4. Civic State and Islamic Democratic Principles**

Ghannouchi seeks to establish the idea of freedom and civil state (*Daulah Madaniyyah*) based on mutual consensus and *ijtihad*. Faced with the challenges of *realpolitik*, he emphasized on recognition for a people (*sha'b*) and community (*umma*) as source of power (*Al-sha'b masdar al-sultah* - the people are the source of sovereignty). The principle was inspired from Islamic intellectual tradition and its epistemological framework that upholds the principles of *tawhid* (the unicity of God), *ummat 'aqidah* (one creedal community), justice (*al-'adl*), equality (*musawah*), consultation (*musyawarah*), the freedom of human reasoning (*hurriyyat al-ijtihad*) and its varied deliberations (*ijtihadat*), and human rights. It seeks to establish this through collective mechanism in the representatives of the people, in that "the only manifestation of the divine will is in the people, who express it through their solidarity, and not through the monopoly of a leader, a party or a state" (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

The significance of such moral and ideological vision and its universal impact in Islamic movements and modern political concepts. *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism* (2001) laying out the essential foundation of Ghannouchi's religious and political ideal characterizing his political philosophy: "The significance of Ghannouchi also emanates from the facts that, unlike other Islamic thinkers who espouse the democratic cause, he is both a thinker and a leader of an Islamic movement. He is a credible authority within Islamic circles at the global level. His thoughts are in no way restricted to an intellectual debate at a time when the Islamic movement has emerged as a major political power in the Muslim world, and when power-sharing or power taking experiments are in process. Ghannouchi is unprecedented within Islamic intellectual circles in his theory that civil society is an Islamic concept and that religion consolidates civil society whereas secularism, especially the model imported to the Muslim world under the guise of modernization, weakens it." (Tamimi, 2001).

#### **5. The Principle of Freedom in Ghannouchi's Political Thought**

Ghannouchi's distinct ideas of religion and the principle of freedom were rooted in significant values and principles that were elaborated in depth in his works such as *Al-dini wal-siyasi fil-Islam* (The religious and the political in Islam); *Al-'ilmaniyyah wa al-'ilaqah al-din bi ad-daulah min manzur harakah al-nahdah* (Secularism and the relationship between religion and politics from the perspective of al-Nahdah); *Visions for a new Tunisia: how Islam and democracy can support each other*.

In order to establish freedom as the greatest value of religion and influencing public life with comprehensive reform, Ghannouchi proposed the neutrality of state, that is, state is the guarantor of freedom whether religious, or political and it should not intervene in favor of one or another: "This is good for politicians because they would no longer be accused of manipulating religion for political means and good for religion because it would not be held hostage to politics" (Ghannouchi, 2016).

This represents the instructive value of freedom and its conception within the context of the post-revolutionary period that marked its democratic transition, "Tunisia is now a democracy. The 2014 constitution has imposed limits on extreme secularism and extreme religion" (Ghannouchi, 2016), and prompted by an attempt to navigate the uneasy transition and meeting the demand of the country's community members, which raises a pragmatic consideration "to recognize the principle of citizenship and the fact that this country does not belong to one person or another, or to this or that party. Rather, it belongs to all its citizens – to all of them, irrespective of their belief, ethnicity, or sexual orientation" (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

These equal rights and respect were emphasized in the recently concluded Ennahda congress in its slogan "Abandoning political Islam and separating politics from the practice of preaching". It moved beyond its origin as an Islamist party by adopting Islamic democracy, and embracing a new identity of Muslim democrats, designed to achieve social harmony, plurality and tolerance and seeking a balance that will guarantee the freedoms of the people and their rights, where "to achieve this balance, we must turn to the issue of distinguishing between religion and politics and separating the sphere of social interaction (*mu'amalat*) to that of belief (*'aqa'id*), and religious practice (worship - *'ibadat*), i.e., what is considered as fixed in religion (*al-thawabit*) and obligatory and what is changeable and concern of common good (*al-baht 'an al-maslahah*)" (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

Therefore, throughout Islamic history, the state was influenced by Islam in one way or another, and laws were established by humans in the light of Islamic values, as they understood them (Ghannouchi, 2012a). Ghannouchi considers that "a state is more Muslim, more Islamic, the more it has justice in it" (Ghannouchi, 1993). Great legal scholars, from al-Shatibi (d. 1388) to Ibn 'Ashūr have established that the loftiest objective of revelation is procuring justice and the common good (*maslahah*), which is realized through the application of reason in light of the guidance, objectives, principles and values of religion (Ghannouchi, 2012a).

## **6. Moral Reform and Political Change in Tunisia**

The popular uprising that erupted in 2010-2011 has created new political facets in Tunisian history after years of hardship and economic crisis. It has triggered pivotal transformation in the country's post-revolution political landscape, aspiring for unprecedented economic and political change following the downfall of authoritarianism and corporate state, to restore fundamental freedom and dignity of the people. The Tunisian revolution has strengthened the nation around the state (Murphy, 1999), giving birth to economic liberalization and unprecedented spirit of unity and solidarity, "In achieving it, Tunisians must come together and thus, the national unity should be our main priority in maintaining the revolution" (Ghannouchi, 2016).

However, the demand of political revolution for consequential change was only a small part of the larger revolutionary struggle – for the real revolution is unmistakably the internal change, as Ghannouchi delineated, "political revolution is only part of the process; however, the real revolution that must take place is the revolution within every people's life and their attitude. The change of the country's

system is not enough without the change in people's attitude and their way of thinking. The real revolution must uphold the people's change within to ensure human dignity (*al-karamah al-insaniyah*) as the cardinal principle of the society" (Malik, 2014).

These being the cornerstone of the struggle that envisioned to project an entrenched civilized and moral principle in society. In fact, the Islamist idea and its existential struggle amount to support Qur'anic principle that conferred and exalted human being with absolute freedom, that "God Most High created humankind as free, and while it is possible to control their outward behaviour (*zawahir al-nās*), it is impossible to control their inner selves (*bawatinuhum*)" (Ghannouchi, 2012b).

It integrates the moral and rational framework of civic reason in political structure, by reasserting the exemplary moral ideal of religion. The moral paradigm it espoused has made an impact toward meaningful and enriching experience of political transformation, in the case of Ennahda, the national Muslim democratic party, motivated by its decidedly Islamic nature as key contenders in parliamentary elections that brings the party's brand of 'soft Islamism' (Ebony, 2012).

In its enlightening political manifesto, Ennahda has outlined a coherence philosophy of reform that symbolizes universal values of Islamic idealism inextricably linked with its moral prospects in the context of Tunisia's multi-cultural and richly diverse society. The articulation of such moral vision was consistent with Ennahda's gradual and accommodative approaches to rebuild its legitimacy and bring stability to the region, inspired by the strength of Ghannouchi's political ideal in pursuit of higher ideal of shariah, by introducing inclusive and plural values in support of its Islamist ambitions, as reflected by Anas Altikriti, chief executive of the Cordoba Foundation and British Islamic intellectual "His vision for the model of an Islamic nation is built heavily on the idea of values" (Mukul, 2012).

## **7. Economic Recovery and Social Reform under Ennahda's Leadership in Tunisia**

A significant challenge after achieving power is restoring people's confidence in the economy. The struggle to achieve economic development in the newly independent state and to consolidate its political status has forced it to resort to certain economic strategies and alternatives (Murphy, 1999) that lead to important change in national policies.

Governing in a coalition, Ennahda has radically built a positive party's image as a driver of socioeconomic change. It has come out with basic priorities that draws on a new and complex principle to steer the economic growth and sustain its future possibilities of economic transition, with a strategic blueprint responsible to rebuild the unrepairable scale of economic grievances.

In fact, the real spark for the Tunisian Revolution was due to two main factors: economic deprivation and political repression in the region, which was parallel with the case of Egypt. These were driven by similar economic woes that exacerbated the crisis as demonstrated by the *Arab Institute for Human Rights* and the *Arab NGO Network for Development* (2011) report that further illuminate in their report of this duality of motivation.

The report noted that the desire to build a socio-economic system based on 'dignity, liberty and equality... was the main aspiration of the demonstrators in the entire region and what led them to this profound change'. The protesters had placed high hopes for change for those deprived by inequality and the oppressive systems, demanding an end to systemic corruption, abject poverty, cronyism, economic hardship, insecurity and regional turmoil and, ultimately, for improved economic conditions.

*Ennahda* has been given a chance to rectify these problems, especially persistent unemployment that deprived the potential young Tunisians of hope and dignity. Pursuing this, *Ennahda* has called for comprehensive national economic dialogue with an all-inclusive approach to change based on a vision of "compassionate capitalism" - an approach that balances corporate freedom with ideals of social justice and equal opportunity (Ghannouchi, 2016). *Ennahda's* neoliberal policy framework represents a more equal and just economic system that is capable of managing and yielding the largest number of people and not just a few selected-group, and aims to reduce the social gap and economic disparity between rich and poor.

In this regard, *Ennahda* has successfully pushed for increased governmental aid to small businessmen and the farming classes, in addition to improving Tunisia's trade relations and its export levels to neighboring countries (Ghannouchi, 2016). The government with its long-term national planning has embarked on a path forward to ensure sustainable growth and structural reform of the economy, empowering market value and trust and its continued dynamism, competency, stability and transparency. It works to ensure unprecedented growth of the economy with higher value of product sustained by broad socio-cultural mechanism to eliminate poverty and corruption as a prerequisite leap to a liberalized economy in a stable and emerging market, in addition to opening up new trade opportunities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and advancing comprehensive negotiation and partnership in free trade agreement with the European Union.

The worsening economic breakdown was being addressed by an initiative to improve living standards of the population and ensure economic growth and resources. In overcoming dependency on state, *Ennahda* calls for a transition by creating a productive and vibrant culture of entrepreneurship among young people. Minister of Vocational Training and Employment of *Ennahda's* member Zied Ladhari has introduced an ambitious and instructive reform, i.e., a new program launched to train over 60,000 unemployed Tunisians, by renovating vocational training centers and establishing local authorities as career guides.

This new program is expected to transform national political landscape in meeting contemporary needs in diverse traditional sectors of education, commerce, entrepreneurship, women and public-private relations through regulating new approaches that focus on numerous economic challenge and empowering its full potential to combat corruption, improving living standards and elevating the socio-economic status of the people.

In this way it is hoped that *Ennahda's* efficient economic agenda could cater to the benefit of the people at large and not only to a selected few. However, the economic inequality index or known as the *Gini Coefficient* is still high at 0.43 for this

country. *Gini Coefficient* measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy. This high index is alarming even if compared to Thailand at 0.4, Indonesia at 0.37 and India at 0.33. A poll conducted in Tunisia and Egypt by the *International Republican Institute* (IRI) showed that economic grievances rated highest in people's minds. For example, 63 percent of the people cited 'unemployment' and 30 percent cited 'poverty' as the biggest problem facing Tunisia and Egypt. And instead, lack of 'democracy' and 'free elections' were only cited by 6 percent each (Webb, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi's political activism and his rising popularity and influence was consequential in mobilizing supporters to carry out the ideological philosophy of Ennahda, and its constitutional projection for a new framework of political Islam. It set forth to reform the decadence and corrupt precedent of the dying secular and autocratic rule and restore stability to the region. Under the new democratic regime, it has contributed to sustainable growth and political stability through the drafting of an unprecedented constitutional framework that governed its progressive and liberal policy and values aspiring toward distributive justice, transparency and fairness in the redistribution of the economy.

Ghannouchi's leadership, notwithstanding its exceptional skill, has been criticized for its patriarchal tendencies to endorse and maximise power. This without denying his contributions to democratic process, in inspiring a functioning democracy and the ideal of reform and its liberal prospect, that adhered to the principle of non-interference in personal boundaries such as the prohibition of the consumption of alcohol or the imposition of hijab, considering the global secularity of Tunisian heartland, higher objective and universal values of shariah and Islamic political philosophy (*siyasah shar'iyyah*) and its secular identity.

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of the compatibility between Islam and democracy, particularly through Ghannouchi's vision of a civil state and post-Islamism. Practically, it offers a model for integrating Islamic values within democratic governance, providing guidance for Islamic movements and policymakers in Muslim-majority societies seeking democratic reforms. However, this research is limited by its primary focus on Ghannouchi and Ennahda, underrepresenting the broader spectrum of actors in Tunisia's political transition and lacking empirical field data.

Future research should expand to comparative analyses with other moderate Islamic movements, incorporate empirical studies such as field interviews and surveys, and explore the role of civil society and other political forces. Longitudinal studies examining the resilience of Ghannouchi's political ideas amidst Tunisia's recent democratic setbacks would also provide valuable insights.

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