

Nothing to fear

PROFILE OF RACHID AL GHANNOUCHI

HEAD OF THE ENNAHDA PARTY

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In the elections held in October 2011, 41 per cent of Tunisians voted for moderate Islamic party Ennahda. The result puzzled and disappointed some observers and politicians in Europe and the United States. How could a religious party emerge the winner from a popular uprising that seemed to have been overwhelmingly secular?

Ennahda’s leader, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, answers that question with another: Why does the West still believe that Islam and democracy are incompatible?

“I dream of a free, democratic, peaceful Tunisia, a country that can protect its developing identity,” Mr Ghannouchi said during a visit to Turkey this year. “We all have a responsibility to respect different opinions and choices, even if they are not the same as ours,” he added. Mr Ghannouchi sees Turkey as a potential role model for his country: “one that merges Islam with modernity,” and compares Ennahda to Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Islamist Justice and Democracy party.

Born near the small town of El Hamma, in southern Tunisia in 1941, Mr Ghannouchi studied briefly at Cairo University, but following Nasser’s expulsion of Tunisians from Egypt, he went to Syria, where he changed from agriculture to philosophy, graduating in 1968.

Ennahda began as an apolitical cultural society, but by 1978 Tunisia’s first President, Habib Bourguiba used the military to crush protesters associated with the group. Repression led Mr Ghannouchi to develop the concept of a “living Islam” concerned with wages, poverty, workers’ rights and national and cultural identity.



Mr Ghannouchi was repeatedly arrested, eventually choosing voluntary exile in 1989. In 1992, a Tunisian court sentenced him in absentia to life imprisonment.

Mr Ghannouchi was given political asylum in Britain in 1993. For the next two decades he kept out of active politics, instead writing and lecturing extensively about his vision of a democratic Islam.

Writing in 2002, the Middle East Quarterly reviewed a biography of Mr Ghannouchi, noting: “barring some unforeseen and highly unlikely developments in Tunisia, he is unlikely to play a major role in his home country’s politics again.”

Mr Ghannouchi had remained closely connected to Ennahda in Tunisia where it is as much a social movement as a political party. Ennahda had worked hard for two decades to reach across economic and social classes to build support. In poor rural areas, where the mosque is often the only meeting place, Ennahda had used Islam to provide an easy-to-understand political message.

This gave Ennahda a substantial advantage when it came to organising volunteers to rally voters. The relatively short period of time between the opening of the democratic process in early 2011 – when Mr Ghannouchi returned home to a hero’s welcome – and the elections in October that year increased that advantage.

Tunisians were faced with an unprecedented democratic experience with few clear reference points and dozens of parties. Right up to the eve of the elections, around 40 per cent of voters were undecided. In the event, many were won over by Ennahda members’ reputation for honesty, their refusal to compromise with the former regime, and the party’s message of respect for Tunisia’s long-standing tradition of equal rights for women.

Ennahda’s blend of pragmatism and principle may still not be fully understood by the US and Europe, but in the meantime Tunisia goes to the polls next June, when Tunisians themselves will deliver their verdict; one that will be based as much on the country’s economic outlook as its adherence to democratic values.

Asked recently if he expected the United States and European governments to accept Ennahda’s legitimacy. “I think they have to accept this reality, not only in Tunisia but everywhere,” Mr Ghannouchi replied: “Political Islam cannot be avoided. It is part of the change... They have nothing to fear.”

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