

Harmonising Islam and democracy

INTERVIEW WITH RACHID GHANNOUCHI

HEAD OF THE ENNAHDA PARTY, TUNISIA



RACHID GHANNOUCHI was educated at Zaytuna University in Tunis, and then at Cairo University and the University of Damascus. Sent into exile as a dissident, he lived in Britain for two decades before returning to Tunisia after the 2011 Revolution as co-founder and leader of the Ennahda Party. He has written many books on politics and Islam which have been translated into several languages.

After 20 years of struggle, how does it feel coming back to Tunisia and leading the most popular party in the country?

The Tunisian Revolution has not just given me the ability to come back to my country, but it has given the Tunisian people freedom and pride in themselves and their achievement. It has also given the people back their self-respect and given hope to the rest of the Arab World. The Revolution has given us our freedom and our dignity; and life without these two values is worthless. Dictatorships have resulted in the region not having any influence or any importance in the world, apart from producing or exporting negative things like terrorism. Now the Revolution will enable us to have a positive influence in the world. This Revolution has given us a new life and has ushered the whole region back into history; whereas it's been out of history for the last few centuries. Now history can be written by free men.

Much of your time in exile was spent in Britain. How had this period impacted your movement and influenced your thought?

We are grateful to European societies for hosting around 2,000 of our activists for the last 20 years. These activists were able to keep the Ennahda Movement in existence, because it was facing an extermination campaign inside Tunisia. The dictatorial regime of Ben Ali failed in its attempt to link Ennahda to extremism and terrorism. My family and I are grateful to the UK for giving us asylum for 20 years when most other doors were closed to us. My children have received their education from the greatest of institutions in the UK. I myself have enjoyed the freedom to travel, the freedom to write, the freedom to speak, the freedom to attend conferences and seminars, for which I am also very grateful. In 20 years of living in the UK I never felt that I was followed by anyone and I was never approached by the security services. In fact it was the British justice system has enabled me to defend my name when some British newspapers and Arab media in the UK made false allegations about me. The British justice system has enabled me to take these issues to court and clear my name. So I am grateful for the freedoms that I enjoyed. My conviction and belief in democracy was strengthened when it moved from the theoretical level to seeing it in practice in the UK. My own convictions

in the importance of the parliamentary system as a political system in a democracy was strengthened through witnessing this system in action in the UK, particularly from my participation in different seminars that took place in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

There has been much speculation about what the Ennahda Party stands for. Can you clarify what your ideology as a party is?

The main idea that underpins our ideology is the belief that ultimately there is no contradiction between what is rational and what is religious. This belief is deep-rooted in Islamic civilisation and not something new. Averroes, the famous thirteenth century Andalusian Muslim philosopher said in one of his treatises that if reason is created by God and scripture comes also from God there should not be any contradiction between reason and scripture. If there is any apparent contradiction between reason and religious text, then the religious text should be interpreted in a way that fits with reason. In the 19th century in Tunisia another school of thought called the reformist movement propagated the idea that Islam and modernity can both be compatible. The main ideas within modernity such as freedom and scientific progress are both compatible with the values of Islam. This movement also argued that one of the reasons behind the progress of the West is that the powers of the ruler are not absolute and that their power should be restricted or regulated by the law. One of the reasons for the decline of Muslim civilisation is that that the rulers in Muslim countries had begun to exercise absolute power. In Tunisia you had the Prime Minister, for example, who followed this school of thought – his name is Khairuddin – he wrote a book about these issues. But this reformist movement was not able to flourish because it was halted by French imperialism. The problem was that the post-independence regimes did not adopt the reformist ideas, but instead reverted to the dictatorship that preceded the reformist movement. And this is why we see failure in the development and modernisation efforts that the post-independence regimes tried to put in place. Because a modernity without freedom is a false modernity; and it was because of this failure that the Revolution came about.

Why are you so popular in Tunisia? What appeals to the masses in what you're saying?

I think we're popular because our ideas reflect Tunisian identity. Tunisians are linked to their history and their geography. Through history they're linked to their Islamic heritage and to the Arab world. In geography they are linked to Europe and to the rest of the world. The previous regimes have sacrificed history for the geography. Some of the movements, like the Salafists, sacrificed geography for the history. Ennahda brings these two together – the history and the geography – so we're true to our heritage and proud of it, and we are inspired by it, but at the same time we are open to the rest of the world. And that is why Ennahda is successful and is popular. We are inspired and proud of who we are, but we're open to dealing and to working in partnership with the rest of the world.

Tunisia was a thriving economic, cultural and intellectual hub during the times of the great Ibn Khaldun some 700 years ago. How do you plan to revive that glory for Tunisia?

Ibn Khaldun is a son of Tunisia. The Reformist Movement, in the 19th century, took the ideas of Ibn Khaldun and other Andalusian scholars as its starting point. The core idea was that Islam came about to achieve what is beneficial to the people. So everything that is beneficial to the people is part of Islam. And vice versa, everything that is not to the benefit of the people is not part of Islam. These ideas are some of the main ideas within the Reformist Movement. These ideas

provided the intellectual bedrock for Ennahda. Tunisia does not have that many national resources. We believe that the main wealth that we have is this cultural and intellectual heritage. This country has had a big name in, and made a significant contribution to, Muslim history as a cultural centre and educational hub through the Institute of Zaytuna Mosque, similar to the Azhar Mosque in Egypt. Zaytuna University is actually much older, and for long periods of history it produced great knowledge, not just for Tunisia but for many other countries in Africa. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun himself was a graduate of Zaytuna. So, we believe that Tunisia's prosperity and Tunisia's future lies in it being a centre of knowledge and culture, and a country that is built on a knowledge-based economy. We have the potential in Tunisia to have universities that attract hundreds of thousands of students, especially from African countries; and to be a publishing centre in the region. Tunisia can also be a hub or a centre for health treatment; not just for Africa but also Europe as well. Hundreds of thousands of foreign patients come to Tunisia's clinics to receive medical treatment. We have millions of tourists coming to the country, and we want them not just to enjoy the beautiful beaches we have, but also to dip into the history and the civilisations that have passed through Tunisia. Tunisia is like a big museum of civilisations: the Romans; Carthage; the Berbers and Islamic history. You find many historical sites throughout Tunisia that belong to these different civilisations and different eras. So, we want this to be a centre for people to know the history of the region and to get to know each other.

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Sheikh Ghannouchi is a revered scholar of Islam and politics

The new Constitution will be based on the main idea that the source of its legitimacy is its people

Waqās Ahmed, Head of Special Project at FIRST with Shiekh Rachid Ghannouchi, Head of the Ennahda Party

How do you plan to balance good relations with the West while remaining loyal to the Muslim world?

As I said, we have an intellectual belief or paradigm that combines both history and geography. And this paradigm brings together our openness to the rest of the world, openness to our region, and at the same time loyalty or pride in who we are as a nation. We count on our belief that it is possible to combine and to bring together both Islam and modernity. Also we count on our belief that Islam and democracy are compatible and that democracy and social justice are compatible. We believe also that Islam encourages world peace. We believe that this model is most needed in the Arab World to serve as a bridge for good relationships between the Muslim world and the West and the rest of the world. This model is in contradiction to the others that try to link Islam with extremism and terrorism and believe that there should be a clash of civilisations.

How do you intend to persuade your previous trading partners and investors to come back to Tunisia after the Revolution and to continue to do business?

The costs of the Tunisian revolution are minimal when you look at the other revolutions that have taken place in the Arab world. Even though it has barely been two years since the Revolution took place, the country now is moving towards stability and economic recovery. Politically we're moving towards democracy, so we have conducted our first free and fair elections ever in our history, and now we're preparing ourselves for the next elections which will be in a few months. For the

first time in our history we have an elected assembly. And this assembly brings together the different groups in the country; including women who are veiled and women who are not veiled, even those who represent Ennahda itself. From amongst 52 women members of parliament, 42 are from Ennahda, some of whom wear the hijab and some don't. This assembly, as well as holding the existing government to account, has also managed to produce the first draft of the new Constitution for the country. The new Constitution will be based on the main idea that the source of its legitimacy is its people; that political pluralism is one of the pillars of the system; and the freedom of religion, the separation of powers, freedom of the press, and equality between the sexes are all pillars of the new system. As for the philosophy that underpins this Constitution, this is again the compatibility between modernity and Islam. Today in Tunisia there are no political prisoners and there are no newspapers that are banned because of their political views. We don't have any political party that is banned. The judiciary is independent and we're fighting corruption. So because of these political steps we are seeing the government opening its doors towards foreign and domestic investment and we're seeing a general increase in investment. When this government took over, we had a negative growth rate of minus 1.8 per cent. Now, according to the Institute of National Statistics and the Central Bank, we're experiencing a positive growth rate of 3.5 per cent. The Governor of the Central Bank assures us that Tunisia has managed to get through the bottleneck and is on the road to recovery.

You will receive this year's Chatham House Prize, together with President Marzouki. What does this prize mean to you?

This is not just a prize for myself and President Marzouki – this is a prize for the Tunisian people. It also sends a message or a signal to the Muslim world regarding what some proponents claim; that there is a conflict between the West and the Muslim world. It is clear through this Prize that this is simply not true. It sends the message that it is possible to have good relationships with both the Muslim world and the West. It also declares to all people in the Muslim world that we have friends in the West, those people who are a force for good and who are calling for partnerships and good relationships built on mutual respect.

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