



PROJECT MUSE®

Islam and Democracy in Tunisia

Rached Ghannouchi

Journal of Democracy, Volume 29, Number 3, July 2018, pp. 5-8 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0040>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698913>

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN TUNISIA

Rached Ghannouchi

Rached Ghannouchi is cofounder and president of the Ennahdha party in Tunisia. A leading political theorist on Islam, pluralism, and democracy, he spent twenty-two years in exile before returning to Tunisia in 2011 to take part in the country's historic democratic elections. The text that follows is his keynote address to the Ninth Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in Dakar, Senegal. It was delivered on his behalf on May 9 by his advisor on U.S.-Tunisian relations Radwan Masmoudi, president of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID).

Dear Participants in the World Movement for Democracy Ninth Global Assembly, and Members of the Steering Committee of the Movement . . .

I send you all my best greetings and salutations. I have the utmost love, respect, and admiration for all the work you do for the promotion, defense, and strengthening of democratic culture and institutions around the globe.

I really wanted to be with you today, but our recent municipal elections and our still fragile democratic transition in Tunisia have unfortunately forced me to cancel my plans and to stay here in Tunisia.

As you all know, we had our first democratic local and municipal elections on Sunday, and the official preliminary results will be announced tomorrow. It is predicted that our party, Ennahdha, will come in first and that our ally Nidaa Tounes will come in second.

We can claim victory, however, only for the Tunisian people and our nascent Tunisian democracy. The task of building coalitions at the local level begins now in earnest, and this is vital for the success of democracy. Ennahdha cannot govern alone, and neither can Nidaa or anyone else. We must all work together and govern together.

Our main lesson from seven years of transitioning from dictatorship to democracy is that elections are not enough to sustain democracy. Especially in a country that is still a nascent democracy, where the culture of democracy and the institutions of democracy are still weak, we must all

learn the art of governing by compromise, negotiation, and consensus. In a real democracy, there are no winners and losers. There are only winners.

These elections are another milestone in the democratic transition in Tunisia, and it is the first time in the Arab world that citizens will experience decentralization. Even though the turnout of 33.4 percent was lower than what we hoped for, especially among young people, I believe that decentralization will pave the way for deepening the roots of democracy in Tunisia and for much greater involvement of citizens in decision making at the local and regional levels. We are, after all, in the process of electing 7,200 new local-council members from among more than 50,000 candidates. Of these, more than half are women, and more than half are under the age of 35.

This turnout can even be considered impressive when viewed in the context of the ongoing economic and political crisis that has shaken Tunisia's political life since 2014. Our economy is not worse than before, but it is not faring any better either; unemployment remains high at about 15 or 16 percent overall, and more than 35 percent among young people, most of whom are university graduates.

For us, these municipal elections are a landmark moment in Tunisia's history and the realization of the promise of the Arab Spring.

The creation and strengthening of local authorities will allow the local and central government to respond to the vital needs and huge differences that exist across the country, from the coast to the interior.

Our experience has also taught us that there is full compatibility between Islam and democracy. In Islam, there is no organized religious hierarchy and no official spokesman for the religion. There is therefore no theocracy in Islam. The state is civil and the people are free to choose their own government and rulers and to hold them accountable. The government is and must be of the people, by the people, and for the people—not in the name of God, who is sovereign and watching over all of us.

The freedom of citizens to think, speak, and organize freely is also vital in Islam, which teaches that there is and there should be no compulsion in religion. Human beings must be free to believe what they want and to practice what they want, as long as they also respect the rights of others in the public sphere. There is no real democracy without freedom and human rights, including and especially women's rights and minority rights.

That is why in Tunisia we are very proud of our new constitution, which mandates equal rights for women, including parity between men and women on all electoral lists; this will get us very close to having nearly 50 percent women on all elected bodies. Our goal is not to follow but to surpass all other democratic countries in the area of women's participation. Also, our new constitution was the first in the Arab and Islamic world to mandate freedom of religion and freedom of conscience,

thereby requiring the state to respect every citizen's right to believe what he or she wants and to practice the religion of his or her choice—or not to practice a religion at all.

Similarly, we are very happy with our progress in the fight against violence and extremism in Tunisia, where we have had more than three years of peace and tranquility, with no terrorist act of any kind. Training and involving religious leaders, actors, and organizations that believe in democracy and human rights is also vital to convincing our young people that violence is not the answer and is against the values of Islam.

Those who think that we can achieve stability and security without democracy are wrong. In order for state institutions to be strong, they must enjoy legitimacy, which means they must reflect the society they serve. Tunisians have managed to preserve their democratic transition, despite all the challenges and threats, by insisting on constant dialogue between all parties, NGOs, and religious leaders and institutions.

The threat of terrorism, which has touched Tunisia, its citizens, its armed forces, and also its visitors and guests, is a threat we are united in confronting, hand-in-hand, as a global phenomenon.

To succeed in facing this problem, we need to address all its aspects. Groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda have exploited the Arab world's economic and social problems to present themselves as an alternative.

They exploit grievances to attract young people: In Iraq, they exploit Sunni resentment against political exclusion. In Tunisia, they exploit resentment by young people at economic exclusion and poverty.

We must understand that the sources of terrorism are dictatorship and bad governance. These criminals were brought up under dictatorships; they are not the product of Tunisia's revolution but of decades of repression.

The solution to extremism is more freedom (not less), more democracy (not less), more debate and dialogue, and more moderate religious teachings that confront this extremist ideology.

While the world's leaders focus on combatting the tide of violent extremism through heightened security and military acts, little more than lip service has been paid to the deradicalization or reintegration of the young people who comprise the greatest pool for terrorist recruitment.

If we look at all the verses of the Koran holistically to underline key themes, it becomes clear that the holy text emphasizes the idea that God created humankind with at least one distinguishing feature—the freedom of choice. The Koran makes clear that, if God so wished, He could have created all of humankind in the same mold, with similar likenesses and speaking a common language. Instead, the Koran stresses that God chose to introduce diversity to the human race, undercutting racial, ethnic, and religious groups, and to endow all of us with choice in crafting our lives and the value and belief systems on which to base them. Thus, pluralism and differences within Islam and between religions were in-

tended to be universal and natural laws of the human species that cannot be subverted or obliterated by any individual or group; any attempt to do so goes against the very nature of creation.

Why did the Prophet Muhammed include Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims as members of the first Muslim society of Medina and guarantee their protection, if pluralism is not accepted in Islam? Why is it that the oldest churches and synagogues in the world are found, to this day, in Muslim countries? If Islam did not protect pluralism and ensure the continued survival of these minorities and their places of worship, groups such as ISIS would not have found minorities to persecute nor churches and temples to destroy in the first place.

Imams, through their weekly sermons at Friday prayer services and other religious services throughout the week, are the first and most prominent spokesmen for religious thought and understanding in local communities. In Tunisia, for example, each of the 5,300 mosques in the country receives on average 1,500 persons for Friday prayer services (the largest weekly congregation), making this an optimal platform for promoting to a broad and religiously observant audience a compelling and tolerant religious vision, and for combatting extremist ideologies, as well as strengthening democratic values and respect for human rights.

Therefore, religion and democracy must work together to solve the problems of the world and of our society. I appeal to you, as leaders of democracy, to include religion and religious actors and institutions in all your efforts and programs.

Finally, we cannot forget the importance of economic development and growth—these are key to having a stable, and strong democratic state. Guaranteeing free elections and freedom is not sufficient.

A strong state must ensure economic and social inclusion, enabling people to enjoy opportunities, prosperity, and security. People must feel that the state protects their rights, serves their interests, protects their resources, and works for them.

The key and main challenge now, after we have built a system based on political inclusion, is solving our economic and social problems and achieving inclusive economic growth. This is critical for stability. No society can be stable and secure if entire regions are marginalized, or if 35 percent of young people cannot find a job.

Our second goal and priority is strengthening democratic culture and institutions; we are working on civic-education, voter-registration, and citizenship initiatives across the country. I hope we can work with you and count on your support in this critical area.

I sincerely apologize for not being with you, but I am sure you will understand when I tell you that the work of democracy requires me to be here in Tunis, rather than with you in Dakar.