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Islamist Parties in North Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt

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**ISLAMIST PARTIES IN NORTH AFRICA:
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TUNISIA AND EGYPT**

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Adel Abdel Ghafar & Bill Hess
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across North Africa, popular uprisings created an unprecedented opening for opposition groups from across the political spectrum to finally take part in governing their respective countries. Of all these actors, Islamist parties were best able to capitalize on the opening, with the Justice and Development Party (PJD), Ennahda, and the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) winning significant electoral victories in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, respectively.

In the decades preceding 2011, the parties and the movements they emerged from, would experience varying levels of both government repression and cooptation. They were able to gain representation in their countries' parliaments—although never a plurality or any significant power. When the 2010–11 uprisings started, the MB, PJD, and Ennahda did not initially join for fear of repression, though many Islamists, including members of these groups, did so. However, as the uprisings gained momentum in each country, the MB and Ennahda (as well as some additional members of the PJD), joined the fray.

When the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents were ousted from power, and Morocco's monarchy embraced reforms, the three Islamist groups all decided to seek increased political power through the ballot box. The MB formed the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), mobilized its grassroots support throughout Egypt, and won 37 percent of the vote in the 2011 parliamentary elections. The PJD claimed 107 out of 395 seats in Morocco's 2011 parliamentary elections, firmly entrenching itself as the country's leading party. Ennahda won a plurality of 89 out of 217 seats in Tunisia's transitional government.

Seven years later, the PJD has again won a plurality in Morocco's parliament, Ennahda is a junior partner in Tunisia's governing coalition, and the Muslim Brotherhood, removed from power by Egypt's military, is enduring a severe crackdown. While their actions and fates greatly differed, all three groups' time in government since 2011 shed light on the parties' stances in various areas. These "gray zones" include their ideologies, commitment to pluralism, and respect for women's and minority rights.

There was a great deal of uncertainty—and consternation—about how each group’s Islamist ideology would manifest. Ultimately, however, none of the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB declared the establishment of Islamic states or the strict application of Sharia following their acquisition of power. It is also notable that neither the PJD nor Ennahda made a serious push to review existing legislation or revise lawmaking processes on religious grounds. All three groups, now recast as leading political parties, still emphasized the importance of adhering to an Islamic frame of reference. However, they demonstrated that they are not fundamentally maximalist when it comes to their political pursuit of more Muslim states and societies.

Another open question about Islamist parties was how willing they would be, once they had power, to engage with political actors of other ideological bents. Similarly, there were concerns about Islamist parties’ willingness to cede power, should they lose subsequent elections. The cases under study demonstrate that Islamist parties’ behavior in these areas depend a great deal on their national context.

The PJD and Ennahda demonstrate that not all Islamist parties are intent on ruling unilaterally, or permanently. The PJD has forged multiple coalitions, and Ennahda turned power over to a technocratic government, compromised on constitutional issues, did not seek the presidency in 2014, and embraced its second-place finish in that year’s parliamentary elections. Even the FJP, which took the most domineering approach of any of the three parties, did not move to delay or cancel subsequent elections. On the other hand, the FJP pursued a zero-sum approach that brought it into conflict with several actors in the Egyptian political system and ultimately led to its downfall.

On women’s rights, there were fears that the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB might seek to limit women’s public roles and discriminate on personal status matters. All three parties managed to anger advocates for women’s rights and gender equality, with the PJD and FJP espousing very conservative rhetoric about gender roles, and Ennahda balking at endorsing full gender equality. Nonetheless, Ennahda did support greater equality for women, and neither the PJD nor FJP sought to place restrictions on women’s dress or freedom of movement.

Similarly, religious or other minorities probably do not need to fear extra taxation or other forms of formal discrimination. Yet it appears that some Islamists are not exactly on the forefront of respecting citizenship and civil rights. In Morocco, this manifests when it comes to the PJD’s treatment of an ethnic minority, the Amazigh. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s behavior toward the Coptic Christian population left a lot to be desired.

The actions each party took should be viewed in their national contexts, and that of the region. It is possible, for instance, that the PJD and Ennahda would have pursued more conservative policies given a larger share of domestic political power. It is also quite possible that the FJP being overthrown in a coup heavily influenced the decisions of the PJD and Ennahda to take conciliatory approaches during the second half of 2013. The military plays a much larger political role in Egypt than in Morocco or Tunisia, which was a key factor in how events unfolded there.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2017, Saadeddine El Othmani of Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) announced the formation of a coalition government, ending a five-month political crisis. Othmani's efforts ensured that the Islamist PJD, which won a plurality in Morocco's 2016 parliamentary elections, would continue to head up the government, as it had since its breakthrough electoral victory in 2011. The PJD was not the only Islamist party to rise to power in 2011. Across North Africa, popular uprisings created an unprecedented opening for opposition groups from across the political spectrum to finally take part in governing their respective countries. Of all these actors, Islamist parties were best able to capitalize on the opening, with Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) winning significant electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively.

Seven years after those triumphs, only the PJD has been able to win a subsequent national election. In Tunisia and Egypt, political opponents and large segments of each population were intensely suspicious of the ascendant Islamists, concerned that they may try to implement a "one man, one vote, one time" version of democracy or impose stricter Islamic policies. As a result, Ennahda and the FJP clashed with established political actors and faced significant popular resistance. Ennahda, under heavy pressure, agreed to step aside in favor of a technocratic unity government in early 2014. Ennahda was then defeated in the parliamentary elections later that year, though it subsequently partnered with the winners as part of a ruling coalition. The FJP, which built on its 2011 parliamentary victory by claiming the presidency and pushing through a new constitution in 2012, became the target of massive protests. In July 2013, the army removed President Mohamed Morsi from power and launched a severe crackdown on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) that continues to this day.

While the FJP's fall from grace was certainly a blow to Islamist political movements in the Arab world, it was hardly a death sentence. Islamist movements are deeply embedded in Arab societies and are likely to remain politically active and influential. It is therefore important to understand how such movements are likely to act when they are able to obtain political power. This analysis paper

compares how the PJD, Ennahda, and the FJP behaved during their inaugural experiences in power and aims to assess why they succeeded or failed in governing effectively. The authors argue that the PJD and Ennahda's pragmatism, flexibility, and ability to collaborate with other political forces enabled them to participate and survive politically in the post-2011 era. In contrast, the FJP frequently acted unilaterally and aggressively sought to remake Egypt's political system, ultimately resulting in the MB's ejection from it. The national context each party operated within, and the inherent challenges of massive political transitions, were also major factors.

To be clear, this paper does not seek to return to the debate on the compatibility of Islamism and democracy. Rather, it seeks to further understanding of how Islamist actors can be expected to govern, given the chance. To that end, the paper examines the PJD, Ennahda, and the FJP within the context of the "Gray Zones" paper published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2005.¹ It identified persistent ambiguities in the discourse of Islamists in key areas that were likely to impact how they governed if they reached power, including Islamic law, pluralism, civil and political rights, women's rights, and religious minorities. Three Islamist parties coming to power for the first time in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings provided a new body of evidence that enables a revisiting of these identified gray zones. Accordingly, this paper analyzes what the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB revealed about their ideologies, their commitment to pluralism, and their respect for women's and minority rights.

The paper starts with an overview of the Islamist parties' overlapping historical and ideological roots, their pre-2011 forays into politics, and their participation and victories in elections since 2011. Drawing on more than two dozen interviews with Islamist and secular politicians and activists, the authors then assess how the parties governed, and how they interacted with other parties and stakeholders. The authors go on to examine the stances the parties took on issues that Islamist groups have often been reluctant to stake out explicit positions on, including political pluralism, civil liberties, and women, as well as their evolving ideologies. The paper concludes with a discussion of what the PJD and Ennahda are likely to do going forward, and recommendations for how regional governments and their international partners can constructively engage with Islamists.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For decades, Islamist movements in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere have been using “da’wa,” roughly translated as religious education and preaching, along with social work, in an attempt to engage and influence their respective societies. Three such movements—the MB and the predecessors of Ennahda and the PJD—were all founded with the hope of seeing their countries become Islamic states governed by some form of “Sharia,” or Islamic law. In pursuing their goals, these three movements all decided to become politically active in their countries. Subsequently, the movements rotated between modes of cooperation, cooptation, and confrontation with their countries’ respective regimes, at times winning seats in parliament and at others being banned and repressed.

EGYPT AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The most prominent Islamist movement is arguably the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Over more than eight decades, the MB has had a tumultuous relationship with successive regimes, aptly described as a struggle between a “cobra and a mongoose.”² The MB was part of Egypt’s anti-colonial movement and collaborated with the Free Officer Movement led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. After King Farouk was overthrown in 1952, the MB advocated for some form of Islamist government, putting it at odds with the Free Officers, who banned the group in 1954.³ Nasser took power later that year, and after an MB member allegedly attempted to assassinate him, he sought to crush the group, executing leaders and imprisoning thousands of its members.⁴ The harsh repression lasted until Nasser died in 1970.

Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, freed many members of the MB and sought to leverage the group as a bulwark against Nasserites and socialists. However, the MB broke with Sadat over his 1977 visit to Jerusalem and subsequent peace deal with Israel, actions that led to his assassination in 1981.⁵ Hosni Mubarak initially took a conciliatory approach to the MB, releasing several members Sadat had jailed.⁶ The MB wasted no time in boosting its activism, most notably by penetrating Egypt’s professional syndicates, which it came to dominate by the early 1990s. The group also began to seek formal political power. It first ran

candidates for parliament in 1984, winning a modest 8 of 454 seats. For the 1987 parliamentary elections, the MB formed the Islamic Alliance with two other parties and debuted the slogan “Islam is the Solution.” The MB claimed 36 of the 60 seats the alliance won.

The MB’s political fortunes suffered a downturn by the mid-1990s. It had boycotted the 1990 elections in protest of Mubarak dissolving parliament.⁷ Then, during a period of state repression in 1995, it won only one seat despite running 150 candidates.⁸ This weak showing came as the Mubarak regime restricted MB activities amid a crackdown on militant Islamist groups, but it also coincided with internal tensions within the MB.

Carrie Rosefsky Wickham highlights that the MB has gone through a gradual and uneven ideological transformation, and that the movement is not monolithic.⁹ A central aspect of its organizational evolution has been the tension between its roles as a da’wa movement and as a political organization. In the mid-1990s, many younger members advocated for greater engagement in Egypt’s political process. Moreover, this younger generation of MB activists transitioned from calling for an explicitly Islamic state that fully applies Sharia to aspiring to become a civil state with an Islamic point of reference.¹⁰ Some even proposed that the MB create a formal political party with a specific platform, and when they were rejected by the group’s leaders, they left to form the Wasat Party.

During the Mubarak era, members of the MB’s “old guard,” many of whom had lived through the repression of the Nasser and Sadat eras, had generally adopted a cautious and defensive stance. They advocated for a bottom-up approach, in which the MB would continue to work to make society more “Muslim” before attempting to acquire power through politics. The group nonetheless continued participating in Egypt’s elections, and in 2000 its candidates won 17 seats as independents.¹¹ Under Mehdi Akef’s leadership, starting from 2004, the MB devoted more attention and resources to electoral competition and parliamentary work. In 2005, it was able to capitalize on a partial liberalization of the political sphere and won 88 seats, a full 20 percent of parliament, in its biggest electoral victory of the pre-2011 era.¹²

MOROCCO’S JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY

The MB inspired the formation of similar organizations across the Middle East, including the precursors of the PJD and Ennahda. In Morocco, one such organization was the militant Islamic Youth Association, which emerged in the early 1970s. Due to its active opposition to the regime, the organization was banned in 1976 and subsequently fractured. Former members including

Abdelilah Benkirane then founded The Islamic Group in 1981, which opted for a conciliatory approach toward the regime. Over the course of the 1980s, the Group condemned the use of violence, accepted the monarchy's political and religious legitimacy, and became intent on entering formal politics.¹³

In 1992, the Group changed its name to the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR) and sought to establish a political party, but the authorities rejected its application. The regime did not object, however, when the MUR partnered in 1996 with the Popular, Democratic, and Constitutional Movement (MPCD), a moribund party that it quickly came to dominate. The MPCD won 9 out of 325 seats in Morocco's 1997 parliamentary elections, and in 1998 it rebranded as the Justice and Development Party. The PJD would go on to cautiously expand its electoral participation and increase its independence from the MUR, which remained dedicated to *da'wa* and education.¹⁴

In the 2002 parliamentary elections, the PJD placed third with 42 seats, and in 2007 it became the second largest party, winning 46 seats. Importantly, it did not seek to dominate Morocco's political landscape, deliberately limiting the number of seats it contested. Described as the "party that did not want to win,"¹⁵ the PJD's gradualist approach helped it build trust with the electorate and, more importantly, the palace.¹⁶

The PJD also gained the support and trust of the palace by positioning itself as a moderate alternative to the anti-establishment, non-violent Islamist association, Al Adl wa-Ihssan (AWI), or Justice and Spirituality. AWI and the Moroccan regime have maintained an intense rivalry since the group started in 1986. It is one of the most popular and radical opposition groups in the country because it has historically questioned and rejected the rule of Morocco's king.

Some members have openly called for the foundation of a republic, crossing one of the major red lines of discourse in Morocco: the King, Islam, and the Western Sahara.¹⁷ The group remains illegal, though somewhat tolerated by the regime. It has boycotted every election in protest of what they view as a completely illegitimate political system.¹⁸ The strategic choices of AWI often play a role in the PJD decision-making processes and the balance it attempts to strike between compromise and confrontation in politics. However, since the PJD entered formal politics, it has mostly erred on the side of submission to the primary rule governing Moroccan politics: the undisputed power of the monarchy.

ENNAHDA

Ennahda evolved in parallel to the PJD. In 1972, Rachid Ghannouchi co-founded an informal movement called The Islamic Group that was heavily influenced

by the MB. The Group initially focused predominantly on social and religious issues, but its student members steadily became more politically active, especially after President Habib Bourguiba's regime violently repressed a general strike in 1978 amid nationwide tensions. The following year the Group covertly held a founding congress and dubbed itself the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI).¹⁹

After police discovered the MTI in 1980, it decided to go public and to adopt a confrontational stance to Bourguiba's ruling party. In June 1981, the MTI introduced itself at a press conference, unveiled its leadership and platform, and sought recognition as a political party. The regime rejected the MTI's request, and within two months authorities had jailed most of its leaders. After a respite in the mid-1980s, the regime cracked down again in 1987, with Bourguiba even seeking to execute Ghannouchi and other leaders shortly before he was deposed by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.²⁰

The MTI's fortunes changed briefly when Ben Ali took power. The new president initially relaxed restrictions on opposition parties in general and sought to placate the Islamists specifically. For example, he allowed the MTI to participate in the country's political dialogue and Islamic high council. The MTI responded to the apparent opening by engaging in electoral politics. In late 1988, it changed its name to "Harakat Ennahda," or the Renaissance Movement, applied for recognition as a party, and decided to run candidates as independents in the snap 1989 parliamentary elections. Ennahda-backed candidates claimed at least 14.5 percent of the vote to lead all opposition parties, but Ben Ali refused to grant them any seats. Relations with the regime deteriorated from there. The government denied Ennahda's party application and promptly resumed repressing the movement, which plotted against the regime. Tensions rose until early 1991, when activists associated with Ennahda burned down an office of Ben Ali's ruling party, killing one and giving the regime the pretext to launch an unprecedented crackdown on the Islamists. Ennahda's leaders, and many of its members, would spend the next 20 years exiled, imprisoned, or in hiding.²¹

ISLAMISTS RISE TO POWER: THE UPRISINGS AND THE 2011 ELECTIONS

When the 2010–11 uprisings started, they were not led by Islamists, but rather predominantly by youth chafing under increasing political, economic, and social marginalization. As the protests unfolded, the Islamist groups exercised extreme caution and did not initially join for fear of repression. In Egypt, the leader of the MB directed its members not to join the January 25th protests.²² The PJD's leadership did the same in Morocco, where Benkirane asked the rank and file not to join the demonstrations.²³ In Tunisia, Ennahda was not a factor in the initial wave of protests that forced Ben Ali to flee. Many Islamists, including members

of these groups, did indeed join the protests in their early days, but only in their individual capacity.²⁴ However, as the uprisings gained momentum in each country, the MB and Ennahda (as well as some additional members of the PJD), in opportunistic moves, joined the fray.

When the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes fell, and Morocco's monarchy embraced reforms, the MB, the PJD, and Ennahda all decided to seek increased political power through the ballot box. The MB formed an official political party for the first time, the FJP, and mobilized its grassroots support throughout Egypt. It won 37 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections held that year, which translated to 235 seats. Together with their allies at the time, the Salafi Nour party, which won 28 percent of the vote, the FJP effectively controlled the parliament. In Morocco, the PJD did not hold back as it had in prior elections, and as a result received 23 percent of the vote and 107 out of 395 seats, firmly entrenching itself as the country's leading party. Ennahda won a plurality of 89 out of 217 seats in Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly, the governing body that was to oversee the country's political transition and constitutional process. After decades of marginalization and repression, North Africa's leading Islamist actors would suddenly have the opportunity to govern.

RHETORIC VS. ACTION: ISLAMISTS GET THEIR CHANCE

As noted, the political situations in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt changed quickly and significantly in 2011, allowing Islamist parties to govern in varying capacities. Their experiences in power have provided a new body of evidence that enables a revisiting of the gray zones framework. Accordingly, this section of the paper analyzes what the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB revealed about their ideologies, their commitment to pluralism, and their respect for women's and minority rights.

IDEOLOGY

When the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB won their respective elections, they did not declare the establishment of Islamic states or the strict application of Sharia. Each actor's experience and national context contributed to the development of distinct visions, yet all three actors had softened some of their stances and seemingly became more accepting of democratic norms in the decades that preceded the Arab uprisings.²⁵ In the cases of the PJD and MB, these changes coincided with their participation in elections and parliament, lending credence to the so-called inclusion-moderation hypothesis.²⁶ Ennahda, meanwhile, steadily moderated during its exclusion from politics as its leaders' thinking evolved and the movement sought to become more palatable to Tunisia's distinct society.²⁷

Nonetheless, as of 2011, all three groups, now recast as leading political parties, still emphasized the importance of adhering to an Islamic "marji'iyya," or frame of reference. Accordingly, there was a great deal of uncertainty—and consternation—about how each group's Islamist ideology would manifest. Key indicators would include how the parties approached their countries' constitutions and governing systems, specifically in regard to Sharia; the parties' policy priorities; and whether the parties would function independently of their parent movements or merely serve as political pawns.

MOROCCO: AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE PALACE AND ISLAMISTS

In the case of the PJD, an important emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the Moroccan experience in terms of its political system, cultural heritage,

and values. Ali Hamid, a member of the PJD's General Secretariat, argues that Moroccan society is more open than other Arab countries, and thus the PJD has become more open.²⁸ He postulates that the party's platform espouses values that are similar to those found in secular and liberal party platforms, with a focus on social justice and equality.

An important aspect of the PJD's ideology and approach is the acceptance of the role of the king in society and the Kingdom of Morocco's political foundations.²⁹ King Mohammed VI and his royal cabinet are the ultimate executive authority in the country, and thus the PJD's power to govern has always been limited by the centrality of monarchical power. Parliamentary power remains secondary to the power of the palace.³⁰

In addition, the PJD does not advocate for the creation of an Islamic state because it argues that Morocco is already an Islamic state.³¹ The role of the king as "commander of the faithful" and regulator of religious life in Morocco is unquestioned by the PJD. The party has sought to acquiesce and frame its ideology and reformist goals within the broader frame of the monarchy to escape exclusion, repression, and harassment.³²

A key moment in the PJD's history was its separation from the MUR, as discussed above. Over the years, the party has continued to crystalize its ideology to become more practical and less focused on its Islamic point of reference. In the PJD's 1997 and 2002 campaign platforms, respectively 34 and 55 percent of the associated documents focused on the need to return to Morocco's Islamic identity. By the 2007 parliamentary elections, only 21 percent of the PJD's policy platform and rhetoric focused on Muslim identity issues.³³

Disagreement remains to this day, however, over how real, or clear, the PJD's distancing from its proselytizing past was and is. To its supporters, the PJD has made a clean break. To its detractors, this is all a ruse. Illias el Omari, the previous head of the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM)³⁴ and a major rival of Benkirane, said, "The separation of the PJD from the MUR was a *taqiya* (deception) on the part of the PJD. They remain deeply committed to an Islamic state but are playing the long game."³⁵ Such criticism is common, not only among opponents of the PJD, but also among opponents of Ennahda and the MB.

This issue of how distinct the PJD really is from the MUR came up in the 2011 elections, in which the party had to modify its approach. In campaigning, the PJD supposedly gave up one of its biggest mobilizing assets: the mosques. The party abided by government rules that forbade political parties from using places of worship.³⁶ The PAM has often accused the PJD of using mosques, through

the MUR, as a political tool, an accusation that the PJD denies. However, Hamid argued that Moroccan “zawyas,” or small corner mosques, tend to be overwhelmingly pro-palace.³⁷

Meanwhile, due to the PJD’s acceptance and indeed embrace of the monarchy, some have argued that it has always been a coopted party.³⁸ However, it could also be argued that the PJD, even though it did not formally join the 2011 protests, used them as leverage to their advantage.

The PJD opted to stay away from major involvement in the February 20th protest movement. In contrast to this, AWI was directly involved in the leadership of February 20th for several months until they quit the group in December 2011. Viewed as the major opposition force against the monarchy, the participation of AWI in the February 20th movement created much controversy and conversation over the reform agenda, and whether it should directly target the palace. Though leaderless, February 20th took direction for the first few months from a combination of AWI’s youth wing; small leftist parties and activists; and a diverse array of young people.³⁹

The PJD was pragmatic enough to understand that if it wanted to do well in elections and build a stronger partnership with the palace to govern after 2011, it needed to keep a relative distance from the February 20th movement and support the king’s control over the reform process. However, the participation of AWI did put pressure on the PJD to take a more active role in the protests. It was clear from the king’s speech in March 2011 that the monarchy would be tightly managing the reform process. Once the king’s reforms were implemented, a new constitution was approved by referendum in the summer of 2011, and elections were held that November, the PJD felt vindicated in their cautious and pragmatic strategy.⁴⁰

Finally, it is worth noting that the PJD, like other Islamist parties, does not agree on everything internally. In Morocco, political parties in power are circumscribed and largely coopted by the palace, and the various factions within the PJD were forced to deal with this reality. Generally, there are two camps within the PJD: the hawks, led by Mustapha Ramid, and the moderates, led by Benkirane and Othmani. The hawks have been more critical of the “Makhzen,” meaning the palace and Moroccan establishment. The moderates have sought over the years to be more accommodating of the monarchy. Among the moderates, however, there have been differences on how much to accommodate the palace. A very clear example of this was the debate over how high to go in the anticorruption campaign, with Ramid taking a more anti-establishment line than Benkirane. The palace originally opposed Benkirane’s pick of Mustapha Ramid as justice

minister in 2011, but in the end, they allowed him to assume this role while technocrats close to the king were given posts in the most powerful ministries, including interior, finance, foreign affairs, and religious affairs. These sorts of “compromises” did take place, but they always occur in the context of an extremely unequal balance of power between the parliament and the monarchy.⁴¹

Tensions with the palace boiled over publicly after the 2016 election as Benkirane attempted to form a governing coalition. In the end, he was cornered into resigning and his number two, Othmani, was asked by the king to form a government. He successfully did so within a month of Benkirane’s resignation. Othmani’s acceptance of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) in government was viewed as a capitulation to the palace, especially considering that Benkirane did not accept the party when he was attempting to form a government.⁴² Benkirane, whose growing popularity had alarmed the palace, faced many roadblocks from the palace and its close allies, such as billionaire businessman and friend of Mohammed VI, Aziz Akhannouch. Soon after the PJD won the 2016 elections, winning 32 percent of the vote—the highest amount of any political party in Moroccan history⁴³—Aziz Akhannouch became the leader of a palace party known as the National Rally of Independents (RNI). This party, acting as a proxy for the palace, derailed Benkirane’s coalition negotiations, leading to the PJD leader’s resignation. Ultimately, Othmani was chosen as the new head of government, and he formed a coalition government that satisfied the palace and ended the political stalemate.⁴⁴

ENNAHDA IN TUNISIA: BECOMING MUSLIM DEMOCRATS?

One of the reasons Ennahda’s 2011 electoral victory was so jarring for observers and Tunisians alike is Tunisia’s long history of secularism, or *laïcité*, as adopted from its French colonizers. The last time Ennahda had participated in elections, in 1989, it openly called for involving religion in politics and marginalizing women’s rights, provoking public backlash.⁴⁵ Ennahda then disappeared from view, and when it reemerged in 2011 it garnered sympathy for its long battle against state repression. When Ennahda won a plurality in the 2011 elections, however, many Tunisians feared what type of ideology the movement might try to impose on the country.

Ennahda itself was also uncertain in that regard. It had regularly revised and updated its political platform between 1989 and 2011, but it did so as an exiled opposition group that knew it was very unlikely to have the opportunity to implement its policy preferences. Suddenly, within the course of a year, Ennahda went from being completely excluded to winning a popular election. As a member of the movement’s executive bureau put it, Ennahda had to both rebuild itself and develop a clear platform.⁴⁶

Both processes are ongoing, but the party's rhetoric, key decisions, and even the way it now defines itself have provided glimpses of its evolving ideology. Overall, Ghannouchi and other leaders heeded the lessons of their own experience in 1989 and that of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front party, which won elections in 1991, only for the military to seize power and launch an anti-Islamist crackdown. This sparked the country's brutal civil war. Two decades later, Ennahda's leadership decided that a "politics of pragmatism—one that placed participation and long-term survival ahead of potentially fleeting victories—represented the wisest path."⁴⁷

In its rhetoric, this meant emphasizing its commitment to democracy over its Islamist roots. The Ennahda members interviewed for this paper all identified the movement's chief goal or accomplishment of its time leading the National Constituent Assembly as establishing, consolidating, or sustaining democracy and Tunisia's democratic transition.⁴⁸ Some observers think the rhetoric is genuine. For example, a judge who worked as a close advisor to all three presidents of Tunisia's transitional period argued that Ennahda was the most democratic party in Tunisia, and maybe the only one.⁴⁹ Internally, Ennahda holds elections for its leadership councils, which make major party decisions through votes.⁵⁰

In its actions, Ennahda's pragmatic choice came to mean conceding its Islamism, to borrow Shadi Hamid's phrasing.⁵¹ As the party heading the transitional government, it led the drafting of Tunisia's 2014 constitution. While Ennahda had stopped emphasizing the need to create an Islamic state by the late 1980s, during the constitutional process the movement nonetheless had a protracted internal debate on whether Sharia should be explicitly incorporated, raising alarm among secularists. Ultimately, however, Ghannouchi and other leaders' interpretation of Sharia as being more of a philosophy and way of life than a legal code won out. The movement decided not to push for a reference to it in the constitution. Ennahda did initially advocate for criminalizing certain types of speech and art as blasphemy in what became an impassioned debate. However, under pressure from NGOs and other states, and after extensive consultations with external legal and constitutional experts, Ennahda withdrew the pivotal language. That Ennahda took an overall conciliatory approach is proven by Tunisia's 2014 constitution, which was hailed as the most progressive and modern in the Arab world.⁵²

Ennahda continued to shy away from its identity as an Islamist movement during the 2014 parliamentary campaign, despite being Tunisia's largest and best-organized party. Following its win in 2011, Tunisian politics polarized largely along Islamist/non-Islamist lines, making Ennahda a target for increasingly

uncompromising opposition. Ennahda, with its goal of long-term survival, responded by having its candidates present themselves as polished (and often clean-shaven) technocrats. They campaigned hard on the issues, especially economic ones, rather than making emotional appeals to their base. Interestingly, when Ennahda lost the election, finishing second to Nida Tounes, it celebrated, and leaders expressed relief.⁵³

Ennahda's compromises turned out to be not merely pragmatic, but also indicative of its internal evolution. In 2016, Ennahda held its 10th congress—its first since the constitution was ratified and the 2014 parliamentary elections. The most notable outcome was Ennahda's decision to focus exclusively on its political activities and eschew its religious activism and social work. Accordingly, the movement dubbed itself Muslim democrats, citing Germany's Christian Democrats. Ennahda was also attempting to distance itself from the increasingly negative connotations of the term Islamist. Ennahda MPs conceded that this meant that their organization was no longer really a movement, but a conventional political party that is committed to Islamic practices and values. As for how the shift would manifest, an MP explained that Ennahda members who preferred to continue focusing on da'wa, for instance, would be welcome to do so, just not under Ennahda's banner.⁵⁴

It remains to be seen whether Ennahda will make a cleaner break from its past religious and social activities than the PJD has in Morocco or the MB has in Egypt. An MP from Nida Tounes was skeptical.⁵⁵ Reorienting the organization is, however, compatible with the approach Ennahda ended up taking to the constitution. Overall, rather than seeking to impose more religiosity on Tunisians through laws and policies, Ennahda, as a political party, seems to be content to pursue the practical outcomes it believes an Islamic renewal would bring about, such as social justice and equality.

EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS: SHEIKHS OR POLITICIANS?

One day after Mubarak was deposed, the MB announced the establishment of the Freedom and Justice Party, which was to be its formal political arm. MB members had been participating in electoral politics for decades, and the connections and dialogue it had established with other political forces had moderated much of its discourse. However, it was unclear what bearing that would have in this entirely different context.

The FJP was formally founded in April 2011 and its leadership included Mohammed Morsi, Muhammad al-Beltagi, Saad Katatni, and Essam el-Erian. Katatni and el-Erian left the MB's Guidance Bureau to head up the new party.

This cast serious doubt on FJP members' claims that their party was independent from the Bureau, which continued to exercise strong influence on its members in parliament. This, in turn, perpetuated concerns among secular and liberal Egyptians that the FJP would simply try to impose the MB's vision, rather than taking a broader view of what policies might be best for the country. Tellingly, during November 2012 demonstrations, protestors called for an end to the rule of Mohamed Badie, the MB's general guide, rather than that of Morsi.

The FJP, especially once Morsi won the presidency in June 2012, enjoyed significantly more power than either the PJD or Ennahda ever have. As discussed below, the FJP used this power to position itself to dominate Egypt's constitutional and legislative processes. This resulted in a constitution, ratified by referendum in December 2012, with increased Islamic references. Article 2, a holdover from the 1980 constitution, maintained that the principles of Islamic law were to be the main source of legislation. Article 4 added that Al-Azhar should be consulted on related matters. Those provisions were not uncommon for Arab constitutions, but a later article defined the principles of Islamic law to include "its comprehensive evidence, its jurisprudential and fundamental bases, and its recognized sources in Sunni sects."⁵⁶ This language seemed to broaden the purview of how Islamic law might be applied in the new Egypt, a glaring red flag for secular opponents of the MB. Prohibitions of insults, even merely implied ones, of prophets raised concerns about freedom of speech. Nonetheless, it is notable that the MB did not seize the opportunity to attempt to impose further elements inspired by Islamic law.⁵⁷

When it came to legislation, the MB was exposed as being unprepared to govern. It struggled to promote or pursue a clear, ideologically informed set of policies. Ashraf el-Sherif argues,

The Brotherhood's overall ideological hollowness therefore seemed particularly acute when viewed in the context of its policymaking. It was easy for the Brotherhood, while in opposition, to disseminate general principles that could garner public support on religious and cultural bases. But it was far more difficult for the group's leaders to express specific viewpoints on divisive policy issues, including the economy and social welfare. When confronting these issues, it became clear that the Brotherhood could not reconcile its Islamist roots with its behavior in power.⁵⁸

As a result, the FJP took criticism from both fellow Islamists and other parties in parliament. It did not accomplish much legislatively amid Egypt's repeated political crises and the limited windows during which parliament was actually functional.

PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS—AND BY THE RULES

Another open question about Islamist parties was how willing they would be, once they had power, to engage with political actors of other ideological bents. Would they view secular parties as legitimate actors and continue to be open to working with them? Skeptics were concerned that Islamist parties might exaggerate their electoral mandate and impose their preferences in an uncompromising manner. Similarly, there were concerns about Islamist parties' willingness to cede power, should they lose subsequent elections. The experiences of the PJD, Ennahda, and the FJP show that the answers to these questions and concerns are not uniform but depend greatly on the individual party and their national context.

BALANCING PRAGMATISM AND PRINCIPLES

In Morocco, the PJD, according to Amr Hamzawy, found the balance between the pragmatic demands of participation, the executive dominance of the monarchy, and the principles “dictated by its Islamic frame of reference.”⁵⁹ This pragmatism has been clearly exhibited in the coalitions the PJD formed after winning the 2011 and 2016 elections. After 2011, the PJD initially formed a coalition with the powerful Istiqlal party, the conservative, rural-based Popular Movement (MP), and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). The PJD exhibited flexibility in the allocation of portfolios, allowing its junior coalition partners to be overrepresented in the cabinet. For example, the PPS, which had only won 18 seats in parliament, received four portfolios, and the Istiqlal party received the coveted speaker of parliament position.⁶⁰ However, palace-allied technocrats always maintain the most important ministries of interior, foreign affairs, finance, and religious affairs, to ensure that no political party can dominate the cabinet. This allows the palace to maintain tight control over the government.⁶¹

Eventually, the PAM rose to prominence through palace support and its leadership of the opposition coalition. Due to its founding by royal adviser Fouad Ali El Himma in 2008, the PAM was perceived as being particularly close to the palace. Meanwhile, the PJD's governing coalition changed as the Istiqlal party pulled out—to be replaced by another major palace ally, the National Rally of Independents (RNI). As party coalitions realigned throughout Benkirane's 2011–2016 term, his powers became increasingly limited.

The relationship between the palace and the PJD was not always smooth in the 2011–2013 period, despite the PJD's attempts to be accommodating. The PJD was able to thwart some provisions supported by secularists in the drafting of the new constitution in 2011. Even though a parliamentary monarchy was

not established, the updated constitution included a provision that the prime minister would come from the party that wins the most seats in parliament.⁶²

Maati Monjib, a prominent Moroccan academic and activist, argues that during the 2011–2013 period pressure from the street was strong, especially from AWI. This led the palace to act cautiously with the PJD and to temporarily empower them relative to other political parties and associations. By forming an opportunistic partnership with the PJD, other more threatening opposition groups like AWI and the February 20th movement were eventually sidelined in the 2011 reform process.⁶³ However, 2013 proved to be a turning point locally and regionally. The coup in Egypt, and internal opposition to the PJD, meant that the party had to recalibrate its approach.

THE OUTCASTS TRY TO MAKE FRIENDS

Ennahda's experience in power was also very much shaped by its relationships with Tunisia's other stakeholders, especially other parties, former regime figures, institutions, and civil society organizations. Its approach has been marked by two priorities: avoiding confrontation and building productive partnerships.

To some extent, Ennahda was starting from scratch without allies in 2011. As Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone pointed out, Ennahda had not only been repressed by the regime, but from the 1970s into the 1990s it had also been rejected by the aforementioned stakeholders.⁶⁴ The movement did participate in the broad alliance Tunisia's opposition parties formed in 2005, but those ties did not endure beyond the revolution. Since 2011, however, Ennahda has quickly developed a complicated and evolving web of relationships as it learned to play politics in real time.

In forming the transitional government after the 2011 elections, Ennahda worked hard to partner with other parties. From Ghannouchi on down, Ennahda members emphasized how important it was for Tunisia's transition to be carried out in a consensual manner. While Ennahda maintains that stance today, in 2011 it was probably at least partially motivated by a desire to insulate itself from intense scrutiny during what was sure to be a complicated period. Ennahda aimed, therefore, to put together a large and diverse coalition. However, it quickly found that many parties were unwilling to engage with it. It had to settle for establishing what became known as the "troika" with the center-left Congress for the Republic Party (CPR) and Ettakatol, a social democratic party. One Ennahda MP expressed regret that his party did not try even harder to expand the coalition.⁶⁵

Despite this apparent desire to work with more parties, within the troika itself, Ennahda sometimes left its partners feeling marginalized. A leading member of

the CPR said Ennahda often acted as though it could rule “by itself, and that the other troika members would just be decorations, or facilitators or helpers, without considering them as partners. This created big problems between the president, the prime minister, and the president of the assembly.”⁶⁶ When Tunisia faced a severe political crisis in 2013, and the opposition boycotted the assembly, even Ettakatol called for forming a new government, increasing the pressure on Ennahda to compromise.

More influential than the political opposition, however, was civil society, led by the powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). As one MP argued, it was civil society that served as the primary counterbalance to Ennahda, checking some of the group’s more controversial moves.⁶⁷ That an unelected body would take such an activist role frustrated Ennahda. A member of Ennahda’s executive council specifically cited the contentious relationship between Ennahda and the UGTT as a reason for Tunisia’s instability during the transition period.⁶⁸ When Tunisia’s political crisis came to a head in 2013, to avoid a potentially violent confrontation, Ennahda ultimately had little choice but to agree to participate in the national dialogue the labor union proposed and then facilitated. The coup in Egypt loomed large here, having shown Ennahda that stubbornly clinging to power could derail an already fragile transition, and even have deadly consequences.

In 2016 and 2017, Ennahda ran afoul of a different category of civil society organizations, namely those seeking to hold past regime figures accountable for their crimes. Despite being among the past regime’s worst-suffering victims, Ennahda’s leadership has abandoned much of its initial pursuit of transitional justice measures. The biggest example was Ennahda’s support of a law that pardoned those who committed economic crimes. Ennahda claimed this was necessary because of Tunisia’s dire economic situation, but skeptics argued the party’s position had more to do with its partnership with Nida Tounes, the party that contains former regime elements. Salwa El Gantri of the International Center for Transitional Justice put it bluntly: “They became politicians.”⁶⁹

Ennahda has also had to grapple with Tunisia’s institutions. Under Ben Ali, nobody thought to have the slightest tendency to sympathize with Islamists would have been permitted to work in the public sector. It is little surprise, then, that Tunisia’s ministries have not exactly embraced the influx of Ennahda members, much less Ennahda’s leadership. One Ennahda leader also highlighted discrimination as an issue, arguing that many of Tunisia’s urban and political elites look down on much of the movement’s membership, which tends to be more rural, southern, and of a lower socio-economic class.⁷⁰

BROKEN PROMISES AND OPEN CONFLICT

The MB also came into conflict with a variety of key stakeholders. Whereas Ennahda initially enjoyed sympathy from many Tunisians, the MB's obvious potential to rally political support concerned many Egyptians. The MB recognized and sought to allay those concerns by pledging to limit its pursuit of power and to act cooperatively. In what became a familiar pattern, however, the FJP would later expand the power it sought and claimed for itself; they then frequently wielded that power unilaterally.

The first notable example of this pattern was the MB promising to run for no more than half of the parliamentary seats in the 2011 parliamentary election and helping to create a broad electoral coalition, the National Democratic Alliance, which included 43 parties at its peak.⁷¹ By October, however, most of the other notable parties had left the coalition, in part because the FJP sought to dominate its electoral lists. When the elections arrived, the FJP contested over 70 percent of the available seats, enabling it to secure 46 percent, or 235, out of 508 seats.⁷²

In contrast to the PJD and Ennahda, the FJP used its plurality aggressively. This began immediately in February 2012 when FJP nominees sought and gained control of 13 of 19 parliamentary committees, including the most influential ones, over objections and even boycotts by opposing parties and MPs.⁷³ Next, in March, the FJP used its parliamentary strength to secure Islamists a majority in the Constituent Assembly, the body tasked with drafting Egypt's new constitution. This move sparked resistance from most actors. Secular, Coptic, and Al Azhar representatives resigned, and prominent lawyers challenged the constitutionality of the assembly. The MB responded with defiance and continued down this unilateral path.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the MB decided to run a presidential candidate in March 2012, breaking its promise not to do so. After MB financier and Bureau member Khairat el-Shater was disqualified, Mohammed Morsi became the organization's presidential candidate. Campaigning on a platform promising unity, he narrowly defeated Ahmed Shafiq, a former regime figure, in a June run-off election that many Egyptians boycotted. Morsi quickly set about continuing the FJP's quest to consolidate power. Despite promises to be inclusive, the cabinet that Morsi and his appointed prime minister, Hisham Qandil, put together did not contain many politicians from other parties beyond the FJP and its allies, as well as a number of technocrats. Hoping to avoid criticism, the FJP also aimed to control the media and restrict civil society through some key appointments.⁷⁵

The MB also clashed with the judiciary. The Supreme Administrative Court dissolved the Constituent Assembly in April 2012 because half of it was

compromised of elected MPs, while article 60 of the Constitutional Declaration stated that Parliament should not elect the Constituent Assembly. According to the Administrative Court, the word “elect” meant that MPs cannot elect themselves and members of the assembly must be from outside Parliament.⁷⁶

Undeterred, parliament voted in a new Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly in June, which also included MPs. While a judicial review of this body’s legality was repeatedly postponed and delayed, the assembly drafted a constitution. In late November, as a completed draft and court ruling both drew near, Morsi granted himself sweeping powers in a constitutional declaration that also decreed that the judiciary could not dissolve the assembly. The declaration was denounced by the judiciary, and when the Supreme Constitutional Court sought to issue its ruling on the assembly anyway, Islamists physically prevented the judges from entering their courthouse.⁷⁷

Morsi’s declaration—though he later suspended it and initiated a national dialogue—led the FJP into its final series of confrontations. It sparked heightened political and popular opposition to the FJP and MB, manifesting in the formation of an opposition coalition called the National Salvation Front and the “Tamarod,” or rebellion, campaign. The coalition and campaign led a wave of mass protests and petitions against Morsi and the MB that continued for months, which was secretly backed by the security services.⁷⁸

The campaign culminated with a massive demonstration that started on June 30, 2013, at which point the Egyptian military stepped in. In the military’s view, in addition to his failure to govern effectively, Morsi had crossed a red line when he attended a public rally on June 15, 2013 and called for a holy war in Syria to remove Bashar Assad. This led to a veiled rebuke from the military, which issued a statement the next day stressing that its only role is to protect Egypt’s border.⁷⁹ Allegedly, there was already a plan in place to remove Morsi.⁸⁰ Yet, he was given an ultimatum to step aside and hold early presidential elections, which he declined, and the military removed him from power in a popularly-backed coup on July 3.⁸¹

In stark contrast to the PJD and Ennahda, the MB prioritized short-term power grabs over trying to build up good will by making constructive contributions to a consensual transition period. Due to that approach, as Sharif aptly put it, “Other factions saw nothing in the Brotherhood’s actions except arrogance, self-serving behavior, and ideologically driven bids for exclusive domination. The end result was the alienation of all possible allies and mounting hostility toward the Brotherhood from all corners.”⁸²

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women's rights remain an issue throughout the Arab world. Whether Islamist parties would respect those rights was high among many skeptics' concerns in the wake of the 2011 elections in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. Indeed, there were fears that the PJD, Ennahda, and the MB might seek to limit women's roles in public life, perpetuate discrimination on personal status matters, and perhaps even force women to don head scarves. While none of the three parties confirmed the worst fears of those concerned, all three managed to anger advocates for women's rights and gender equality.

"THERE IS A PROBLEM"

In Morocco, the PJD's approach to women's equality continues to be conservative, and the role of the woman in the household remains key. In a speech to parliament in 2014, Benkirane said that Moroccan women would be better off at home than in the work place. When asked about the government's position on women's rights, he said, "Today, there is a problem with women's role in modern society. Women don't even find time to get married, to be mothers or to educate their children. Why don't we embrace this sacred status that God gave to women?"⁸³ His comments sparked a wave of backlash that included a pots and pans protest in front of parliament and the trending hashtag #anamachitria (I am not a chandelier) on Twitter.⁸⁴

At the forefront of the fight for gender equality in Morocco is its family code and associated laws. Activists have been campaigning for years to get the family code updated, as it governs the interaction of women with their families, husbands, and children. The family code was changed in 2004, a shift that Mohammed VI publicly supported even in the face of conservative opposition. The modified code enacted various provisions such as raising the legal age of marriage to 18 and easing the divorce process, but there remain various problems, especially in terms of implementation. The code represents an area of contention between the PJD and activists. Ironically, the political opening that occurred in 2011 has given voice not only to women, but also to Islamist actors who seek to limit women's rights.⁸⁵ The PJD has pushed back on attempts to further reform the family code and has opposed signing international treaties on women's rights.⁸⁶

Most recently, the public debate over inheritance rights for women and domestic violence legislation has displayed the more conservative side of the PJD platform on gender. Comments from two PJD members, former Justice Minister and current Minister of Human Rights Mustapha Ramid, and Minister of Family, Solidarity, Equality, and Social Development Bassima Hakkaoui,⁸⁷ have been met

with much consternation from civil society groups. In discussions on addressing domestic violence, and especially the issue of marital rape, Ramid told a French news outlet: “I do not see how intimate acts between men and women that cannot be defined or proven can be penalized. Violence is already penalized in the current law. If a woman does not accept the desire of her husband, it’s easier for her to divorce than to file a complaint to the police. A woman should accept her husband or leave.”⁸⁸

Nonetheless domestic violence legislation was passed in February 2018, which Hakkaoui praised. She described how the law defines “all kinds of violence against women, offers preventive and protection measures and increases penalties for people who commit violent acts against women.” However, women’s rights groups lobbied hard to amend, and even defeat, this law because it did not go far enough in meeting their demands, defining domestic violence, and supporting victims. Human Rights Watch argues that the law, in fact, “leaves women at risk of being abused in a marriage.”⁸⁹

ONE STEP BACK; TWO STEPS FORWARD?

In Tunisia, Ennahda has also stirred controversy on women’s issues. Much like its secularity, Tunisia is known for having greater gender equality than most other Arab or Muslim states. That is one of the reasons why many secular and liberal Tunisians were concerned when an Islamist party rose to power. It did not help that Ennahda had called for women’s rights to be marginalized back in 1989.

These concerns were exacerbated several times during Tunisia’s transitional period. In 2011, Ennahda representatives spoke separately of seeking to decriminalize polygamy and eliminate laws that protect single mothers. Both statements were criticized, and Ennahda was compelled to distance itself from them.⁹⁰ Then, in August 2012, the first draft of Tunisia’s new constitution referred to women as partners whose roles complemented those of men. This provoked significant backlash, with thousands of Tunisians, both women and men, taking to the streets.⁹¹ An MP and longtime activist recalled feeling that “at that moment there was a serious threat to women’s gains, that’s why the reaction was very strong and hard from society.”⁹² Ennahda quickly revised the article to emphasize equality, saying the earlier language was not meant to contradict that principle and was an honest misunderstanding.⁹³

These missteps confirmed the fears of those who were suspicious of Ennahda’s stance on women’s issues. Ultimately, however, Ennahda’s actions have not borne those fears out and have often been very positive toward women. In the 2011 elections, it was the only major party to fully adhere to the

requirement to alternate male and female candidates on their lists.⁹⁴ Secular parties thought Ennahda would either oppose the rule or have difficulty fielding a significant number of female candidates, but quite the opposite happened. Ennahda embraced the system and had no shortage of female members interested in becoming parliamentarians. Meanwhile, some of the secular and liberal parties suddenly found that they had done a poor job incorporating women into their ranks.⁹⁵ As a result, 42 of the 49 women elected to the NCA were Ennahda members.

Many of these women have taken on major roles, chairing committees and commissions, and collaborating extensively with other parties, including on women's issues. MP Bochra Belhaj Hmida credited a female Ennahda member with leading the charge for gender parity in Tunisia's election laws.⁹⁶ More recently, Ennahda was a major proponent of Tunisia's landmark law "to end violence against women," which passed in July 2017.

Meanwhile, Ennahda has not taken any steps to revise Tunisia's relatively progressive personal status code or family laws. It does, however, appear to have a limit when it comes to supporting gender equality. Some Ennahda members did come out in opposition to a recent push, led by President Beji Caid Essebsi, to grant Muslim women the right to marry outside their faith and to receive equal inheritance.⁹⁷ In spite of the pushback, the restriction on whom Muslim Tunisian women can marry was lifted in September 2017.

THE BROTHERHOOD REMAINS A MEN'S CLUB

The MB's attitude toward women has tended to be conservative; however, it has evolved over the past decade. A pamphlet published by the MB in 2006 titled "The Position of Women in an Islamic Society" states that women can hold any public office except head of state.⁹⁸ Even that restriction, which Ennahda's Ghannouchi publicly criticized, was still open for further debate.⁹⁹ Yet the MB's social views on women are still conservative, viewing a woman's primary role in society as that of a mother, who should only work or run for office when her main family obligations are completed—in other words, when her children grow up.¹⁰⁰

This attitude carried over into the MB's behavior during its time in power. When elected, Mohammed Morsi promised that he would appoint a woman as a vice president, but he did not follow through.¹⁰¹ Instead, Egyptian women, who had been at the forefront of the 2011 uprising, were now being advised to stay home by Islamists. When a series of horrific gang rapes and sexual harassment incidents occurred during protests in Tahrir Square in 2013, some FJP members blamed

the victims, not the perpetrators. An Islamist parliamentarian Morsi appointed to the Shura Council commented that women who took part in protests bore the responsibility of being sexually harassed and even accused them of prostitution.¹⁰²

Unlike Ennahda, the MB did not walk back such inflammatory statements. Instead, at the height of its power in March 2013, the MB denounced a U.N. declaration that called for granting equal status, including sexual and reproductive rights, to women and homosexuals. It argued that some articles “undermine Islamic ethics and destroy the family,” and that ratifying the declaration “would lead to complete disintegration of society [sic].”¹⁰³ Moreover, the MB strongly supported female genital mutilation, and the FJP even advertised and organized medical convoys to circumcise women.¹⁰⁴

MINORITIES

Just as with the issue of women’s rights, Islamist groups’ rhetoric and actions toward minorities have raised questions about their commitment to respecting civil rights and equality for all citizens. In Morocco, these questions manifest when it comes to the PJD’s treatment of an ethnic minority, the Amazigh. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s behavior toward the Coptic Christian population has come under scrutiny. This particular issue is not as relevant to Ennahda, as Tunisia is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and its ethnic groups are not as distinct.

DISCRIMINATION AND PROGRESS

Morocco’s most notable minority is its sizable ethnic Amazigh population, also known as Berbers. An historically marginalized Amazigh community spreads across North Africa, and they consider themselves the original inhabitants of Morocco. However, a strong post-independence wave of Arabization resulted in Morocco’s 1962 and 1996 constitutions dismissing the Amazigh identity.¹⁰⁵ After decades of struggle, the Amazigh community in Morocco won a landmark victory in 2011: official recognition of their language and culture in the new constitution. Amazigh activists had been a strong component of the February 20th Movement that was calling for change in Morocco.

The Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM), created by King Mohammed VI in 2001, is working on writing textbooks and implementing the teaching of Tamazight, the standardized language of the Amazigh, in primary schools. This institution was set up to preserve the Amazigh language and culture, but many view it as another example of the king’s attempt at controlling and dividing the Amazigh movement. IRCAM is heavily criticized among activists who perceive it as “an effort at cooptation designed to re-suture national hegemony in the face of Berber regional and transnational aspirations.”¹⁰⁶

Activists are dissatisfied because the new reforms were supposed to lead to the teaching of Tamazight in schools throughout Morocco. The language was first introduced into some Moroccan primary schools in 2003, and with the official recognition of the language in 2011, the goal of teaching Tamazight was supposed to become a significant priority. While there are over 5,000 teachers in schools that have been trained to teach Tamazight by IRCAM, it is only taught to around 12 percent of students.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, the Amazigh still argue that their language and culture are yet to be fully recognized and integrated into Moroccan public life. More broadly, they have been socio-economically marginalized for decades. The 2017 demonstrations in the Moroccan Rif, a predominantly Amazigh region, were protesting the lack of inclusive growth and economic opportunities for the Amazigh community.

Overall, the PJD has not had a conciliatory approach towards the Amazigh. During his tenure as prime minister, Benkirane once described the Amazigh as “a simple people who eat little and spend their time dancing and singing,” and compared the Amazigh alphabet to Chinese.¹⁰⁸ However, Othmani, the current head of government and leader of the PJD, is Amazigh himself—breaking with the traditional Arab and Fessi (originated from Fes) dominance of the Islamist currents. He originates from the Souss region and has addressed media outlets in his native Tamazight dialect. He is the first Amazigh politician to hold such a high office in Morocco.¹⁰⁹

While this represents an important shift in terms of the PJD leadership, and political heads of states in general, it is largely symbolic and has not led to the PJD taking a more active role in the reform process or the teaching of Tamazight in schools. This domain, like any major reform process in Morocco, remains largely in the hands of the palace. Since 2011, the Amazigh community has pressed the palace and the PJD for further recognition. In particular, Amazigh women have been at the forefront of this fight, as they perceive that patriarchal aspects flowing from Islamic and Arab culture have lowered their status. In cases of domestic abuse, language barriers continue to deprive Amazigh women from seeking justice, as the official language of the courts is Arabic.¹¹⁰

COPTS AND BROTHERS

There is not a major ethnic minority in Egypt, but there are millions of Coptic Christians who were certainly concerned about what the rise of the MB might mean for them. While the MB has cooperated politically with Copts at times, its position toward non-Muslims has tended to be discriminatory on many levels. Until the 1990s, the MB used the word *dhimmi* to refer to non-Muslims, using the historical Islamic term to emphasize their difference

in status. Accordingly, in 1997, the then Supreme Guide of the MB Mustafa Mashhour stated that Copts should pay the *jizya* tax (imposed on non-Muslims in earlier times in lieu of military service) to the state and could not be trusted to serve in the armed forces.¹¹¹

Since then, the MB has changed and modernized its discourse regarding non-Muslims. For example, in his response to the “Gray Zones” paper, Abdel-Moneim Aboul Fottouh, an ex-MB leader, suggested that “*jizya* and *dhimma* are historical terms only, which have been replaced by the concept of citizenship-based democracy in a nation of justice and law.”¹¹² However, the Copts understandably remained suspicious as the MB took power in 2011 and 2012.

During its time in power, the MB did not impose a religion-based tax, but it did perpetuate the government’s treatment of Egypt’s Copts and other religious minorities as less than equal citizens. As under Mubarak, Christians were underrepresented in the government, and Morsi did not appoint a Coptic vice president, as promised. He did appoint Samir Morcos, a well-known Christian, as his assistant for democratic transition, but Morcos was not included in the administration’s decision making and resigned after a few months over the FJP’s autocratic behavior.¹¹³ More broadly, Christians continued to suffer discrimination at the hands of the public sector, security services, courts, and fellow Egyptians. The Morsi administration “routinely failed to condemn incendiary speech, including anti-Semitic and anti-Christian speech in mosque sermons and during broadcasts by Islamic ‘televangelists,’” and there was an increase in prosecutions and convictions over statements considered blasphemous or denigrating to Islam.¹¹⁴

Overall, tensions between the MB and Egypt’s Christians worsened during the FJP’s time in power, with the groups opposing each other politically. Displays of solidarity during the revolution and positive overtures from Morsi gave way to ugly sectarian rhetoric and incidents. For example, MB and FJP leaders sought to discredit protests against Morsi’s constitutional declaration of November 2012 by claiming that they were dominated by Copts.¹¹⁵ In April 2013, a deadly sectarian dispute led to clashes after a funeral at Cairo’s Coptic cathedral, and responding riot police appeared to join in against the Christians. While Morsi quickly condemned the violence and pledged to protect the cathedral and Christians, many Copts, and even their pope, Tawadros II, criticized the government for once again failing to protect them.¹¹⁶

As pressure on Morsi mounted in mid-2013, Islamists close to the MB ominously warned Copts not to get involved. After the massive demonstrations and coup, which the Coptic Church endorsed, Islamist leaders highlighted the

Copts' role in Morsi's ouster.¹¹⁷ In the days following the regime's massacre of MB members and supporters in Cairo on August 14, 2013, dozens of churches and other Christian facilities across Egypt were attacked, looted, and burned. Christian and civil society leaders viewed the wave of violence as the result of MB retaliation and incitement.¹¹⁸

CONCLUSIONS: SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE GRAY ZONES

The actions of the PJD, Ennahda, and the FJP while in power give observers new examples of how Islamists would act as they move from opposition to government. Overall, Ennahda and the PJD exhibited pragmatism and flexibility that helped them become a more integrated component of their states' political systems. On the other hand, the FJP pursued a zero-sum approach that brought it into conflict with several actors in the Egyptian political system and ultimately led to its downfall. Along the way, each party provided evidence of the specific stances Islamist organizations might take as governing parties, specifically in the areas of ideology, pluralism, and women's and minority rights.

Firstly, it appears that concerns over Islamist parties seeking to explicitly impose some form of Sharia law are probably overblown. Not even the MB, which is the most conservative group under study, the one that enjoyed the most power, and the one least sensitive to pushback, attempted to enshrine Sharia. It is also notable that neither the PJD nor Ennahda made a serious push to review existing legislation or revise lawmaking processes on religious grounds. While the parties would surely prefer that certain practices be prohibited—like blasphemy, in the case of Ennahda—they demonstrated that they are not fundamentally maximalist when it comes to their political pursuit of more Muslim states and societies.

When it comes to pluralism, the PJD and Ennahda make clear that not all Islamist parties are intent on ruling unilaterally, or permanently. While Ennahda's opponents criticized it for extending its transitional term beyond the agreed upon one-year period, this was not unreasonable given the circumstances. The fact remains that Ennahda eventually made way for a technocratic government, repeatedly compromised on constitutional issues, did not run a presidential candidate in 2014, and did not dispute its second-place finish in the 2014 parliamentary elections. This should placate fears about Islamist parties exploiting democracy in one man, one vote, one-time scenarios. Even the FJP, domineering as it was, did not move to delay or cancel subsequent elections.

As for how Islamist-led governments would treat women and minorities, it appears that concerns are legitimate. Indeed, considering the stances and actions of the PJD and FJP toward women, it is difficult to envision an Islamist party

genuinely endorsing full gender equality. Nonetheless, it is also clear that an Islamist party coming to power by no means guarantees that Saudi or Iranian style restrictions on women's dress and freedom of movement will follow. In fact, Ennahda has demonstrated that it is possible for an Islamist party to embrace and endorse greater, although perhaps not complete, equality for women. Similarly, religious or other minorities probably do not need to fear extra taxation or other forms of formal discrimination. Yet it appears that some Islamists are not exactly on the forefront of respecting citizenship and civil rights.

Of course, a necessary caveat is that the actions each party took should be viewed in their national contexts, and that of the region. The PJD and Ennahda, for instance, enjoyed pluralities, but they did not reach the levels of power the FJP was able to secure. It is possible they would have pursued more conservative policies given a different balance of domestic political power. It is also quite possible that the conciliatory approaches the PJD and Ennahda took during the second half of 2013 were heavily influenced by the FJP's precipitous fall from power. Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, the military in Egypt plays a large political role which was a key factor in how events unfolded there.

Therefore, due to these and other confounding factors, gray zones persist, and very likely always will, barring a series of Islamist parties enjoying periods of sustained, unopposed rule. Consequently, how Islamist parties will behave in power going forward is as much dependent on the surrounding context and their willingness and ability to adapt to it, as on their true political aspirations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above analysis of the behavior of the PJD, Ennahda, and FJP during their periods in power lends itself to several important lessons for policymakers both inside the MENA region and beyond.

JUDGE ISLAMISTS BY THEIR ACTIONS, NOT THEIR WORDS

Like plenty of other political actors, Islamist parties vary their rhetoric depending on factors such as the context and audience. It can be tempting to latch onto and draw conclusions from particular sound bites, whether positive or negative. Yet policymakers attempting to determine whether to engage with specific Islamist parties and permit them to participate in a country's politics should withhold final judgment until such parties begin to take concrete action. Among the most important actions are coalition building and ceding power peacefully.

Before the 2012 parliamentary elections, the MB's Supreme Guide, Mohammed Badie coined the slogan, "musharakah la mughalabah," or participation not domination. However, as discussed above, the MB repeatedly betrayed that slogan, executing multiple power grabs and power plays. Ennahda, in contrast, followed through on its rhetoric of putting Tunisia and its transition above all else when it made way for a technocratic government and then accepted defeat in the 2014 parliamentary elections. The PJD, despite its sometimes acerbic language regarding opponents, has now formed three coalition governments, each one including political forces that they are not fully aligned with, clearly demonstrating their willingness to cooperate and compromise. Middle Eastern and Western governments risk making miscalculations if they do not let Islamist parties' actions speak louder than their words.

EXCLUSION SHOULD BE A LAST RESORT

Incumbent regimes in the MENA region frequently ban opposition forces, denying legitimate actors access to the political process and even applying terrorism labels to their own advantage. These exclusionary tactics are often applied to Islamist groups, sometimes solely because they are Islamist. Yet excluding them does not ensure that such groups—which are often

hugely influential—will never pose a challenge to existing regimes or gain political power.

Banning Islamist groups from politics does, however, make it more likely that should their fortunes change, they will be underprepared to govern consensually and effectively, to the detriment of their countries. Moreover, denying political openings to Islamist actors strengthens the arguments of extremists who point to violence as the only way to effect change.¹¹⁹ In future transitional settings, the exclusion of Islamists from the political process would put the legitimacy and durability of any new framework and government into question. As many Islamist groups are more democratic and inclusionary than their secular counterparts, excluding them would perpetuate a double standard.

Therefore, regional and Western policymakers should only exclude or sanction Islamist parties when it is necessitated by their use of violence or systematic violations of basic human rights. Similarly, regional states should not use, and Western governments should not tolerate, repression or crackdowns against Islamist groups unless they are behaving in a violent or criminal manner.

STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY, FROM INSIDE AND OUT

Policymakers who want to see Islamist parties successfully integrated into their countries' political systems should invest in those countries' civil societies. A vibrant domestic civil society can serve two important functions in scenarios where Islamist parties are entering governing structures. First, as in Tunisia and Egypt, civil society organizations can serve as counterbalances to Islamist parties that attempt to overreach. It was lawyers in Egypt who successfully challenged the first Constituent Assembly's legality, getting it disbanded. In Tunisia, the prominent labor union was able to stand up to Ennahda when the country's other political parties were too fragmented and disorganized to do so effectively.

Second, international civil society organizations can contribute to parties governing more effectively and more pluralistic political scenes. For example, they can help political parties in these countries, Islamist or otherwise, professionalize. The National Democratic Institute's (NDI) engagement with the PJD in Morocco is a case in point. Over the past decade, the NDI has engaged with reform-minded PJD members through seminars and workshops, lending its assistance and expertise to help the party learn how to better operate within democratic institutions.¹²⁰ In Tunisia, where Ennahda has outpaced its competition in terms of organization and campaigning, NDI is helping other parties get their houses in order. In the future, they should be more effective in representing other segments of Tunisia's population, to the country's benefit.

Additionally, as alluded to above, it is partially because of international civil society actors that Tunisia does not have a blasphemy law that risks curtailing free speech. Such actors have also been essential to Tunisia's transitional justice efforts. Transitional governments should welcome these organizations, and Western policymakers should encourage them to do so.

ENDNOTES

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