Re-thinking Secularism in post-Independence Tunisia

Rory McCarthy[*]

St Antony's College, University of Oxford, UK

The victory of a Tunisian Islamist party in the elections of October 2011 seems a paradox for a country long considered the most secular in the Arab world and raises questions about the nature and limited reach of secularist policies imposed by the state since independence. Drawing on a definition of secularism as a process of defining, managing, and intervening in religious life by the state, this paper identifies how under Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali the state sought to subordinate religion and to claim the sole right to interpret Islam for the public in an effort to win the monopoly over religious symbolism and with it, political control. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali relied on Islamic references for legitimacy, though this recourse to religion evolved to face changing contexts, and both sought to define Islam on their own terms. Bourguiba sought to place himself personally at the summit of power, while under Ben Ali the regime forged an authoritarian consensus of security, unity, and 'tolerance'. In both cases the state politicised Islam but failed to maintain a monopoly over religious symbolism, facing repeated religious challenges to its political authority.

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[*] Email: rory.mccarthy@sant.ox.ac.uk

In October 2011, the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahdha won the first elections since a popular

uprising toppled the regime of the dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali nine months earlier. The

party, though outlawed and heavily repressed for two decades, had quickly taken advantage of

the new political landscape to rebuild an organisational base, write a popular policy agenda,

and deliver a roster of candidates who won in all but one of the 33 constituencies, from urban

Tunis to rural Tataouine. However, in the light of many long-held assumptions about Tunisian

political culture their electoral success presents a paradox. Ben Ali was thought to have led

the most secular nation in the Arab region, but in the first free elections after his downfall it

was not secular opposition groups but an Islamist movement that won. It is now apparent that

large parts of the Tunisian population are more religious and socially conservative than Ben

Ali's secular facade suggested. One striking opinion poll in September 2013 noted that the

vast majority of Tunisians wanted their laws either to strictly follow the Qurʾan or to be

guided by the principles of Islam.[1] Nor is Tunisia as homogenous as it has usually been

portrayed: the post-uprising period was marked by a sharp polarisation between Islamists and

secularists, particularly among the political elite and in the print and broadcast media. This

raises fresh questions about the nature and limited reach of the secularist policies the Tunisian

state sought to impose in the half-century since independence in 1956.

Tunisia has often been perceived as the product of a remarkable cultural shift in the

years immediately following independence, what Charles Micaud called a 'true social and

psychological revolution' that transformed attitudes and values across society (Micaud,

Brown, and Moore 1964, 131). Habib Bourguiba, the first president, was portrayed as the

most radical cultural moderniser of the Arab world (Moore 1965; Zghal 1991; Alexander

2010), who opposed any revival of religion and sought 'to shape Tunisia along the lines of

nineteenth-century positivist ideals and of triumphant laicity' (Hermassi 1991, 196). But his

approach began to lose legitimacy by the early 1970s, facing growing disaffection among

young Tunisians who sought a renewal of Arab-Muslim values, not the radical break with past that the regime had championed (Entelis 1974). By the 1980s, the emergent Islamist movement was seen as offering a diametrically opposed cultural sub-system: Islamism versus secularism with their two different projects for society (Ware 1985; Zartman 1991). Under Ben Ali, who ousted the infirm Bourguiba in 1987, Tunisia was depicted as modern, open to the West, a model of stability and reform in which Islamism had little popular support, and a country where the regime, though authoritarian, enjoyed 'the grudging support of a majority of the population' (Alexander 2010, 116).

Some cast the Tunisian state and the religious sphere in a political contest. Abdelkader Zghal (1973) argued that Bourguiba was more modernist than secularist, while others noted that Bourguiba used Islam both during the nationalist struggle for independence and in the years afterwards as a way to legitimate his reforms (Perkins 2004; Hajji 2004). Malika Zeghal (1999) painted an image of the constant tension and competition between the religious and secular worlds, describing Bourguiba as a great manipulator of religious symbols . She saw the Islamists as competing sellers in a marketplace for religious discourses, symbols and actions.

Tunisia under presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali was not secular if we mean to define secularism as the separation of religious from state institutions or the separation of religion from politics. But rather than ask the normative question of whether or how much Tunisia was a triumph of secularism or to accept a binary Islamist versus secularist clash, it seems more useful to explore the processes at work when these regimes sought to intervene in religious matters. This paper, then, draws on those approaches that understand secularism as a process of defining, managing, and intervening in religious life by the state. Talal Asad has argued secularism pre-supposes new concepts of religion, ethics, and politics and highlighted

the reforming ambitions of a modern secular state, through which it seeks to regulate all aspects of individual life:

> The nation-state requires clearly demarcated spaces that it can classify and regulate: religion, education, health, leisure, work, income, justice and war. The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space. (Asad 2003, 200)

Similarly, Hussein Ali Agrama explained secularism as an expression of the state's sovereign power, which rather than separating religion from politics instead 'hopelessly blurs them' (Agrama 2010, 521). So too in Tunisia the state sought, in different ways at different times, to regulate religious affairs so as to assert the state's control over religious symbols in order to monopolise political activity.

This paper draws on the idea of competition between the state and the religious world to map the actions, symbols, and rhetoric of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes as they sought not to separate religion and politics but to intervene in religious life in a political struggle fought through an Islamic repertoire. This research is based on political speeches, memoirs, and interviews with Tunisian Islamists and secularists conducted during field trips between 2011 and 2013, as well as press articles from the national newspaper archives in Tunis (*markaz al-tawthīq al-watanī*), which offer insights into the construction of regime publicity as well as frequent revelations of popular debate and political dissent. These sources are used to explain the processes by which the post-independence Tunisian regimes sought to reform and control both religious institutions and religious discourse. Under presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the state sought to subordinate religion and to claim the sole right to interpret Islam for the public in an effort to win the monopoly over religious symbolism. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali relied on Islamic references for political legitimacy, often very similar references to those used by their Islamist opponents. But this recourse to religion waxed and waned over time. Bourguiba sought repeatedly to place himself personally at the pinnacle of

power, while Ben Ali's regime sought instead to construct an authoritarian consensus of security, unity, and 'tolerance'. Yet in both cases the state politicised Islam and in so doing inadvertently opened the door for religious challenges to its political authority. When the Islamists first emerged as a political force, in the early 1980s, it was not as a notional return to Islam in direct opposition to a secular regime, but as a reaction against a state that had sought to monopolise the definition of Islam.

The history of Bourguiba and Ben Ali's reforms, far from forming an agreed narrative, remains an ambiguous and contested space in contemporary Tunisia. In March 2012, Rachid Ghannouchi, the founder-leader of Tunisia's Islamist movement Ennahdha, argued in a speech in Tunis that the challenge today was 'liberating religion from the state' and constructing a balance that prevented the state from dominating religion while not entirely removing religion from politics (Ghannouchi 2012). He likened Tunisian secularism to coercion and argued that the state's duty was to guarantee freedoms and provide services, while the 'primary orbit for religion is not the state's apparatuses, but rather personal/individual convictions'. On the other side of the divide, self-described secularists echo the deposed Ben Ali regime when they depict their Islamist opponents as obstacles to progress and argue instead that modernity depends on a secular state. As Beji Caid Essebsi, leader of the largest opposition party, Nidaa Tounes, said:

> We are for a modern state of the 21st century. They are for a society that has a religious connotation largely marked by imposing their ideas. We say a modern society needs a secular state where religion doesn't intervene. They want a state with Islamic colouring. We are moving in completely different directions. (Essebsi 2013)

Bourguiba's early reforms

The decrees introduced by Bourguiba and his ministers in the wake of independence on 20 March 1956 were bold, modernist, and unprecedented in the Arab world. They undermined the power of the clerics, but through a rhetoric laden with religious symbolism. This

instrumentalisation of religious symbols was deployed in surprising ways depending on the changing circumstances faced by the regime.

First, there was a distinct challenge to the power of the clerical elite. To Bourguiba's mind the ulama had failed to stand up to the French colonial power and failed to reinterpret Islam to adapt to modern necessities. In addition he sought to undermine his great rival within the nationalist Neo-Destour party, Salah Ben Youssef, who counted the religious establishment among his supporters (Anderson 1986, 234; Perkins 2004, 135; Charrad 1997). Habous land[2], which had amounted to a quarter of all arable land (Abun-Nasr 1987, 421), was confiscated and nationalised – public habous in 1956 and private habous a year later. The state absorbed into the judicial system the two Maliki and Hanafi shariʿa courts, in an effort to concentrate and unite judicial power under the new regime (Mestiri 2011). In April 1956 a moderate reformist, Mohamed Tahar Ben Achour, was appointed to lead the Zaytuna mosque-university in Tunis and the institution was stripped of its independence and placed under the Ministry of Education until, in 1961, it became the faculty of theology at the newly established, state-run University of Tunis (Moore 1965, 51). The effect was to force many Zaytuna graduates to become teachers of Arabic, civics, and religious education in secondary schools across the country. Bourguiba accompanied these legal innovations with repeated public criticisms of Islamic scholars and of religious traditions, including pilgrimage, the Ramadan fast, and the wearing of the veil. In a speech on 3 August 1956, which touched on the Personal Status Code and legal reforms, he was explicitly critical of the shariʿa courts as a 'decaying institution' in need of reform (Bourguiba 1974, 120). He accused the ulama of having 'closed the door of *ijtihād*' and, challenging the practice of polygamy, warned that the nation should not be held back by 'false taboos invented by false ulama' (Bourguiba 1974, 126).

Second, despite these attacks on the clergy Bourguiba employed a distinct religious symbolism throughout these reforms. The constitution, which we could read as an expression of the new regime's ideological intentions, defined the religion of Tunisia as Islam, though not quite explicitly identifying that as the religion of the state (Article One stated: 'Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam (*al-islām dīnhā*), its language is Arabic and its type of government is the Republic'). It also included the condition that the president must be a Muslim. Furthermore, many of the innovations and reforms introduced at this time came with an ostensibly religious justification and, to some degree, the reforms were limited by religious law. The Personal Status Code of 1956 banned polygamy, ended the male right of repudiation, gave women the right to divorce and to approve arranged marriages, expanded women's entitlements for child custody, and set the minimum age for a girl's marriage, and is today held up as a symbol of Tunisian secularism. However, it followed traditional Islamic law in some areas, including inheritance. It was a long way from the secular system based on the Swiss civil code introduced by Atatürk in Turkey 30 years earlier.[3] In addition it drew on some unusual Tunisian traditions, including the history of monogamy as a condition in the marriage contract in the city of Kairouan (Largueche 2011). Bourguiba explicitly rejected a secular model of Muslim statehood in which the state was 'ignorant' of religion and citizens followed their own conscience and forfeited national solidarity (Bourguiba 1976b, 251). Ahmed Mestiri, the justice minister at the time, argued that the newly independent government could not risk divorcing the reforms entirely from religious reference: 'Would it have been wise, while we were engaged in reforms and building the basis of a new society, to consider cutting the people off from their roots?' (Mestiri 2011, 121)

Third, Bourguiba deployed this religious symbolism in different ways and to different ends to suit changing circumstances. Before independence, when he was becoming

increasingly influential in the nationalist struggle, he spoke out in favour of Islamic traditions to mobilise support against the French colonial power, aligning the defence of Islam with the defence of the nation. In 1931, as the French celebrated the 50th anniversary of their colonial occupation, Bourguiba criticised French efforts to ban traditional dress, arguing it was an important sign of Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity, and supported protests against burials in Muslim cemeteries of Tunisian Muslims who had taken up French citizenship. He was trying to capture the public mood and to challenge traditional, conformist nationalist leaders, whom he felt had acquiesced in French domination (Perkins 2004).

After independence, however, Bourguiba emphasised the urgent need for development and modernisation of the newly independent nation. What was required was an injection of 'reflection' and 'reason' in order to adapt the life of the community to modern needs. Thus in his speech on 3 August 1956, about the Personal Status Code, he was careful to distinguish his concern about the shariʿa from the broader question of Islam itself. 'For us, Islam can in no way be held responsible for the impenetrable procedures of the shariʿa,' he said (Bourguiba 1974, 123). He argued his position from within the Islamic context. Islam, he said, instilled in mankind a profound sense of right and wrong, but this sense of justice must adapt with time. 'What was just a century ago appears today as unjust' (Bourguiba 1974, 124). In a speech the following Friday, 10 August, Bourguiba insisted his Personal Status Code did not infringe Islamic law . Some Islamic scholars had been consulted, he said, and they agreed the new Code conformed to the spirit and proper interpretation of religious law. So while critical of the clerics, he was also at pains to claim the authority of compliant ulama in his endeavour, even if it was only 'certain ulama' that he cited (Bourguiba 1974, 133).

On 5 February 1960, three weeks before the start of Ramadan, Bourguiba called on the Tunisian people to join him in tackling under-development and criticising the fast as an obstacle to much-needed development and modernisation. Again there was criticism of

religious tradition and a Bourguiban re-interpretation of that tradition. Again he turned to

certain ulama to support his case, this time Abdelaziz Jaït, a Zaytuna cleric and the mufti of

Tunisia, to whom he referred several times while making his case:

> During Ramadan, work stops. At the moment when we are doing the impossible to raise production how can we resign ourselves to seeing it collapse to almost nothing? We cannot do it. I dispute that religion can impose such a demand … It is an abusive interpretation of religion … Religion is for mitigating the difficulties of life, not increasing them. (Bourguiba 1976a, 128)

Bourguiba argued that religion adapted to the necessities of life's struggles. Thus if fasting

was excused for those travelling, it should also be excused for those engaged in such an

urgent project of lifting a Muslim people out of 'under-development' (Bourguiba 1976a, 129).

Yet, pre-empting his critics, he insisted he did not reject the fast outright and suggested

making it up at a later date, during holidays or even in retirement. Again he turned to Islamic

scholars to bolster his argument, saying both Jaït and Ben Achour, the reformist he had

appointed to run Zaytuna, understood there were times when even the Prophet himself broke

the fast. Bourguiba again insisted that Islam could adapt to time and circumstance:

> This country needs to work and struggle to survive. It is inconceivable that religion could be an obstacle to the well-being and progress of the Muslims. It is unthinkable that it could become a force of stagnation, weakness and decadence. (Bourguiba 1976a, 130)

In Ramadan that year, he said, working hours in the administration would not change for the

fast, cafes would stay open only until midnight as usual, 'indecent' evening events would not

be tolerated and the people would be expected to show 'discipline'. During Ramadan four

years later Bourguiba appeared on television during the daytime and drank a glass of orange

juice to underline his determination for change.

In this way Bourguiba presented his own reinterpretation of religious tradition and,

regardless of his lack of clerical education, he placed himself among a long line of notable

Islamic reformist scholars. His reinterpretation was designed to fit his goal of modernisation,

and so he prioritised the role of reason, the need for a modern version of Islam to fit the

demands of modern times. In a speech on 8 February 1961, again on the question of fasting in

Ramadan, he advocated an elevation of the role of reason in interpreting the holy texts and

emphasised that 'the Muslim religion is not a doctrine of intellectual asphyxia' (Bourguiba

1976b, 251). Nor must man be distracted by the promises of paradise and instead must work

for his happiness on this earth. He explicitly called for a 'jihad' against under-development

(Bourguiba 1976b, 258).

In these early years, Bourguiba's secularism was not to separate religion and state or

religion and politics, but to subordinate religion to the state and recast the symbols of that

religion to expedite national development and modernisation. Perhaps Bourguiba truly wanted

an evolution of Islam, as some have argued (Hajji 2004). But also he sought political

legitimacy. Controlling an official version of Islam was fundamental to this: it defined the

Tunisian nation and mobilised support.

Opposition

However, even in these early years Bourguiba did face opposition to his reformist project

from those who saw his acts as distinctly anti-religious. In September 1956, 13 members of

the two shariʿa courts published a fatwa denouncing the Personal Status Code as contrary to

the Qurʾan and Sunna. Many were dismissed or forced to retire (Moore 1965).[4] But

Bourguiba's position was strong and he found just enough acquiescent clerics to head off a

significant confrontation. There was also some popular opposition, including at least one

major protest. Foreign newspaper reports at the time suggested that while younger Tunisians,

students in particular, supported Bourguiba's changes, older Tunisians were reluctant to

embrace his reforms and many women continued to wear the veil ("Bourguiba contre le

Ramadan" 1960). The changes ran up against the 'incomprehension of the masses,' one

French paper said (Latour 1960). In 1960 religious leaders in Sfax and in Kairouan, home to

the Great Mosque, celebrated Ramadan one day later than the rest of Tunisia – a symbolic

rejection of Bourguiba's religious leadership. In January 1961, a month before Ramadan, there were riots outside the governor's house in Kairouan after an imam from the city was transferred because he had been delivering sermons critical of Bourguiba's religious policies. None of this was enough to shake the regime since Bourguiba had consolidated power in his own hands. However, it did indicate the limits of his official Islam.

Islam as a source of morality

The reformist stance taken by Bourguiba in these initial years did not last. From the 1970s there was a growing debate within Tunisian society about the place of religion and the nature of Tunisian identity and the Bourguiba regime acknowledged this and tried to adapt to and reflect the changing social conversation.

Following Bourguiba's sudden illness in 1967 and the failure of the co-operative project under Ahmad Ben Salah by 1969, the regime came under pressure and the question of succession arose. Challenges emerged from within the ruling party: Ahmed Mestiri was expelled in 1971 for advocating reforms, and went on to set up his own party, the *Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes* (MDS). From the late 1960s the regime again turned to a particular set of Islamic values as a way through this period of 'readjustment' and conceded ground to public expressions of religious commitment. In July 1967, for example, Chedli Klibi, the culture minister, met members of the new Association for the Preservation of the Qurʾan (*jamʿiyyat al-muḥāfaẓa ʿalā al-qurʾan*) and praised them for providing an important moral and spiritual basis for the country's economic, social and cultural renaissance ("*al-sayyid al-shadhlī*" 1967). The activists behind the Islamic Group (*al-Jamāʿa al-islāmiyya*), which later became the Mouvement de la tendance Islamique (*Ḥarakat al-ittijāh al-islāmī* or MTI) and then Ennahdha, were, for a time, members of this association. This new embrace of Islam as a moral guide appeared in official speeches and writings too. In May 1969, Bahi Ladgham, the prime minister, spoke of a newly-trained corps of preachers who had been sent

out across Tunisia to reinforce a sense of morality ("La Tunisie célèbre" 1969). In an editorial at the time of the Mawlid celebrations for the Prophet's birthday in 1970, the party newspaper *L'Action* called on the 'precepts of Islam' as a necessary support through this period of 'reflection and re-adjustment' ("Editorial: Fidélité à L'Islam" 1970). Ladgham, the prime minister, led these Mawlid celebrations at the Zaytuna mosque and described Islam as offering 'the preservation of morality' at a time when many young people were suffering in an 'ideological void' and he emphasised the regime's efforts to build new mosques and provide better education ("M. Bahi Ladgham a souligné" 1970). This political appropriation of Islamic values was accompanied by administrative changes to the management of religious affairs, which also gave more space for the public expression of religious belief. The working hours in the government administration and schools were adjusted during Ramadan to accommodate the fast, and cafes and restaurants were now authorised to close during the day. In schools, religious education became a subject of its own, where before it had been subsumed under a broad civics class (Frégosi 2004, 96).

New religious debates

Most striking in this period were a series of events that triggered a new and very public debate about the role of religion in Tunisian society and the question of Tunisian identity. During Ramadan in October 1975, Bourguiba appeared at a televised evening talk given by a veiled university lecturer, Hind Chelbi, who spoke about 'Women in Islam'. Her choice of clothing, her lecture, and her refusal to shake Bourguiba's hand offered an outright challenge to the president's earlier conception of a modern Tunisian identity and his mockery of the veil. She criticised those Tunisians who 'mimicked' other societies in the way they dressed and said the choice of clothing was as fundamental a component of a nation as its language. She dismissed interpretations of Islam as patriarchal and argued for equal civil rights and economic independence for women ("Hend Chelbi" 1975). Her appearance triggered a lively debate in

the letters pages of the Tunisian magazine *Dialogue* and, according to one magazine report

several months later, had encouraged young women to wear the veil on the streets of Tunis

("Reflets" 1976). In interviews after the 2011 uprising, several older members of Ennahdha

recalled Chelbi's appearance at that event and the striking affect it had in encouraging their

self-confidence to express their religious beliefs. Saida Akremi, an Islamist lawyer who

started wearing the veil in 1976, said: 'There was a big wave of women who began to wear

the hijab after this. It became a symbol of challenge against the system' (Akremi 2011).

Chelbi was invited to speak to the nascent and informal Islamist groups emerging in the 1970s.

In the same month another sharp debate arose over the serialisation in *Le Temps*

newspaper during Ramadan of a book by Slaheddine Kechrid, a pharmacist and author on

Islamic writings, entitled *The True Image of Islam*. Kechrid argued for a reassertion of

religion in daily life and gave detailed accounts of how a practising Muslim should live, pray,

and behave. He encouraged fasting during Ramadan, the pilgrimage, sobriety, and talked of

women's 'complementary' role to men in what was seen by some readers as a deeply

conservative presentation ("À propos du livre" 1975). *Le Temps* was dismissed by its French-

language rival *La Presse* for its 'commercial Machiavellianism' in seeking to attract scandal

by publishing Kechrid ("Qui est mauvais" 1975). However, the publication of his writings

reveals at the very least a widening of the debate about the nature of religion in Tunisian

society and suggests there was already a small but growing movement that sought to confront

Bourguiba's earlier Islamic reformism by proposing a model of daily behaviour founded in

religious faith and tradition. By this time future members of the MTI were already holding

such discussions in schools, universities, and in private groups and soon their presence was

publicly acknowledged. A long report in *Jeune Afrique* in early 1979 identified a community

of Tunisians, among them the future founders of the MTI Abdelfattah Morouh and Rachid

Ghannouchi, who were working for an 'Islamic renewal' and reading literature by Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (Belhassen 1979).

The regime responded awkwardly to this renewed religious debate. Bourguiba sought to reinforce his position as the ultimate authority, both temporal and spiritual. In March 1975 he insisted that as president he was an imam, the 'supreme commander,' who was due the loyalty of his people and who held the power to interpret their religion for current needs ("Le régime présidentiel" 1975). His regime tried to control religious practice, while at the same time moving swiftly to undermine the Islamist political challenge as soon as it emerged. In April 1979, the prime minister, Hedi Nouira, tried to claim it was the ruling party that had always been behind the re-awakening of Islam and the preservation of Tunisian 'islamité' (Belhassen and Dahmani 1979). In September 1980 the ruling party established a Commission of Islamic Reflection and Religious Orientation under the mufti of Tunisia, Mohamed Habib Belkhoja, to emphasise the 'sincere' attachment to Islam of both Bourguiba and his party ("M. Mongi Kooli préside" 1980). This was intended to ride the wave of what the regime now acknowledged was a growing 'Islamic awareness' and to insist that there was no difference between commitment to the party and to religion. In July 1981, just a month after the MTI gave its first public press conference seeking to operate as a legal political party, the interior ministry moved to undercut the movement's support by portraying the regime as enforcing public religiosity: the ministry announced new regulations for Ramadan including restricted working hours, the enforced closure of cafes and restaurants, a ban on the sale of alcohol, and an encouragement to shopkeepers to prevent passers-by from drinking or eating in public during the day ("Ramadan" 1981). It represented a striking reversal of Bourguiba's earlier effort to dismiss the fast as an impediment to national development. However, this new effort was a crude miscalculation. Criticism came from elite secular quarters: a group of academics, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and journalists warned of a 'rising intolerance' in Tunisian society

and insisted on the right to chose whether or not to fast ("177 intellectuels lancent un appel"
1981). The MTI, meanwhile, dismissed the regime's clumsy efforts as 'opportunism' ("Debat
sur la tolerance" 1981). Within days Bourguiba himself was forced to intervene to annul the
interior ministry circular. Far from cementing his position as an unchallengeable imam, it
showed the limited reach of a state seeking to intervene in the management of religious
practice.

Soon the regime's attitude towards the new MTI took on a familiar repressive approach.
Mohamed Mzali, the prime minister, while emphasising his government's 'tolerance',
criticised the Islamist movement for seeking to use religion for political ends. 'The
fundamentalists constitute a minority and they will be beaten because our party is a party of
the masses and all the Tunisians - whatever their political leanings - present a united front
against obscurantism and intolerance,' he said (UPI 1981), and warned also against those who
used mosques for 'intellectual terrorism' ("M. Mzali aux Imams" 1981). By the end of July
1981 police had arrested 61 'fundamentalists' linked to the MTI and accused of inciting
rebellion ("Conference de Presse" 1981). In September the government issued the first ban
on the veil, Circular 108, which prohibited *al-libās al-ṭāʾifī* (sectarian dress) in public office.
By late 1981 the MTI leadership was in jail.

The Tunisian sociologist Abdelkader Zghal identified this new period of religiosity as
early as 1973, describing it in terms of a power struggle among the party elite. With the party
in disarray after the fall of Ben Salah in the late 1960s, modernist intellectuals were using a
'reactivation of tradition' to capture the support of old party militants and peasants (Zghal
1973). It was a tactical move, he argued, intended to conserve the position of part of the ruling
elite. However, it was not merely the top-down party effort that Zghal portrays. It is also clear
that there was a renewed sense of religiosity among at least part of the Tunisian public. In
addition, though there may have been a new focus for some on the daily practice of religion

and the nature of a Muslim's correct ethical comportment, there is much about this religiosity that was not 'traditional'. Hend Chelbi's lecture was striking for its modern interpretation of a woman's role within Islam. The emerging Islamist movement, which by 1981 became the MTI, was also working hard to present a new understanding of Islam to fit the modern context, in the light of such important social ruptures as the 1978 demonstrations in Tunisia and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The movement, in its founding statement, explicitly challenged Bourguiba's one party state and committed to 'developing and embodying a contemporary image of an Islamic system of government' (*Ḥarakat al-ittijāh al-islāmī* 2012). The regime, meanwhile, tried to appear more outwardly religious than it had two decades earlier but still sought to intervene in the management of worship (this time imposing the fast rather than preventing it) and to define Tunisian Islam. In the official discourse, the state represented tolerance while the Islamist movement, with its religiously-inspired demands for political pluralism, represented dangerous dogmatism.

What did Bourguiba's secularism amount to? The anti-clerical reforms of the late 1950s seem very different to the new-found religiosity of the 1970s and 1980s. However, there is more than mere opportunism here. Fundamental to Bourguiba's approach to religion was control of and intervention in the management of worship. He sought to place himself in an unchallengeable position of authority and then to define as much as possible his nation's religious belief and practice for his ends. Initially he emphasised modernisation and development, but in later years, as his ideological project stumbled, he instead emphasised Islamic morals and public religiosity. His goal was a monopoly of religious symbolism in order to maintain his position at the pinnacle of the political system, hence his rapid repression of the newly-emerging Islamist political challenge. However, his efforts to oversee a profound change in Tunisian political culture met their limits: from the 1970s there were

very public discussions in society challenging his conception of Tunisian Islam and, from 1981 onwards, specifically challenging his grip on religious affairs.

Ben Ali and Islam as identity

Immediately after seizing the presidency in a coup on 7 November 1987, Ben Ali took a number of quick, public steps to re-position the state's use of religious symbols. He adapted the official interpretation of Islam for his own purposes: to consolidate his power, ease the confrontation with the Islamists, and establish legitimacy for his new rule. His new approach was evident in his first words in public. Introducing a speech announcing his takeover and his promise of a new era of pluralist politics, he began: 'In the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful,' a form of introduction Bourguiba had largely avoided. On 27 November, Ben Ali agreed to give back Zaytuna mosque-university its autonomy and the right to issue its own diplomas; to allow state radio and television to broadcast the call to prayer; and to train imams in co-operation with Zaytuna and a newly-enlarged Higher Islamic Council ("Nouvelles dispositions " 1987). In March 1988, Ben Ali went on a much-publicised pilgrimage to Mecca and Tunisian newspapers carried prominent photographs of the new president as a pilgrim dressed modestly in white cotton cloth. Ghannouchi, the MTI founder whom Bourguiba had tried to sentence to death, was freed from jail in May 1988 by presidential pardon. Other Islamists were among hundreds of prisoners released that year in two pardons in July and November. Some returned from exile, including in September, both Hamadi Jebali[5], a senior MTI activist sentenced to death a year earlier, and Abdelfattah Mourou, the co-founder of the MTI, who was soon appointed to the Higher Islamic Council ("*Taḥlīl fi al-tashkīla al-jadīda*" 1989).

Where Bourguiba had latterly tried to emphasise Islam as a source of morality, Ben Ali now presented religion as a source of national identity. On 7 November 1988 Ben Ali persuaded the political opposition, including the MTI, to sign his National Pact (*al-mīthāq al-*

waṭanī), an effort to exert his control over the new political pluralism he had promised after the coup. It outlined a new political system, the country's development needs and the shape of foreign relations. The most detailed section, entitled 'Identity', explicitly repositioned the official religious rhetoric. Tunisia's identity was now defined as 'a specific Arab-Islamic identity' with a state based on the 'noble Islamic values' whose national language, it stressed, was Arabic ("Le texte intégral du Pacte National" 1988). 'Islam is a source of inspiration and pride,' it said, and Tunisia was a centre of 'science and *ijtihād,*' highlighting the two religious centres of Kairouan and Zaytuna as well as Kheireddine Pasha al-Tunisi, the late 19th century reformer and chief minister. Finally, it mentioned the Personal Status Code, and adherence to this was evidently the compromise the Islamists had to make in order to be part of the pluralism apparently on offer. The Code, in an echo of Bourguiba's early speeches, was framed in the register of a reinterpretation of religious tradition:

> These reforms which seek to liberate and emancipate women conform to a strong, ancient aspiration in our country founded on the solid principle of *ijtihād* and the objectives of the shariʿa and constitute a proof of the vitality of Islam and its openness to the requirements of the time and of evolution. ("Le texte intégral du Pacte National" 1988)

It is worth recalling just how favourably at this point many of the Islamists viewed Ben Ali, which was remarkable given that within four years of the pact he had entirely repressed and dismantled their movement, jailed their members by the thousands and forced its leader into exile abroad. As Mourou, the co-founder of the MTI, put it: 'He put out his hand to say: We are for a change and for a political and democratic regime. Who could say no? … You would have had to be a clairvoyant to know if Mr Ben Ali was really a democrat or not. We are not clairvoyants' (Mourou 2011). Rare were the concerns of those like Slaheddine Jourchi, a moderate Islamist who had left the MTI in the late 1970s, who as early as March 1988 saw Ben Ali was intent on denying the Islamists a political party and on trying to engineer a split in their movement (Jourchi 1988).

After all, the point of the National Pact was to circumscribe the political field, to construct around the state a consensus, and to head off an Islamist political challenge. Thus even though Ghannouchi, the founder-leader of the MTI and later Ennahdha, repeated his desire to take part in a legal political process, the regime turned down the movement's application for recognition as a political party. By trying to demonstrate his own commitment to religion and religious traditions, Ben Ali was seeking to undermine any popular appeal the Islamists might be able to make. The Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD) newspaper, *Le Renouveau*, showed a photograph of Ben Ali sitting cross-legged at the Zaytuna in discussion with its sheikhs and emphasised his steps to 'establish the Arab-Muslim identity of Tunisia' and 'to exclude all exploitation of religion for political ends' ("Consacrer l'identité" 1988). Overall, this approach seemed cruder and less ambiguous than the religious re-interpretation Bourguiba had tried in the first decade of his regime. Ben Ali was instrumentalising religion, making concessions that appeared striking but which were in fact superficial, in order to undercut his opponents.

The state as 'defender' of Islam

The second element of Ben Ali's religious policy was for the state not merely to intervene in supervising religious life, but to assert itself as the ultimate protector of Islam. He presented the image of a religion under threat from extremists in order that he might save it. The 1989 elections, in which Ennahdha candidates running as independents had emerged as by far the largest opposition force, showed his efforts to undermine his Islamist challengers by appropriating the language of Islamic identity had not worked. Within months of the elections, Ben Ali began to paint the Islamists as a critical threat to Islam itself. It was the only the state that could defend against this threat. Thus in a speech to mark the second anniversary of his coup, he said: 'There is no other defender of the religion of the Tunisians than the State, the State of all Tunisians, which seeks to preserve and protect the faith, to manage religious

affairs, in faithfulness to its sublime teachings' ("Ben Ali s'adresse" 1989). The logical consequence of this was that in order to protect Islam the state should serve as its sole spokesman. In the same speech, he added: 'That is why we say to those who mix religion and politics that there is no place for a religious party.' By 1997, the regime had amended article eight of the constitution to ban parties based on religion.

This defence of Islam required the construction of a particular definition of that religion. This symbolic production, which emphasised tolerance, *ijtihād*, and unity, was intended to forge a consensus around the regime. Thus in the 1990s the party newspaper *Le Renouveau* ran repeated articles extolling the regime's definition of Islam. A decision by the regime to have a constant recitation of the Qurʾan at Zaytuna was, for example, a sign of an Islam that was 'authentic, unifying, a symbol of tolerance, and a force of progress' ("Au service de l'Islam" 1992). In another case Islam was depicted as a religion that brought the Tunisians 'unity and cohesion' and which again encouraged 'the triumph of the values of tolerance, *ijtihād*, and openness' and in the same breath Bourguiba was criticised for a process of development in which 'modernisation' had overshadowed the nation's religion, historical specificity, and cultural heritage (Dermech 1993). This was accompanied by frequent public conferences, such as one held in Tunis in February 1992 under the title 'Sheikh Thâalbi and the renewal of religious thought', which discussed the role of the early 20th century Zaytuna scholar who advocated a reformist, rationalist reading of the Qurʾan ("Conference Nationale" 1992). In another forum, organised by the ruling party in March 1995 the mufti of Tunisia, Sheikh Mokhtar Sallami, underlined the importance of '*ijtihād* and rationality' and 'the spirit of renewal in Islam' ("L'Ijtihad et l'esprit rénovateur" 1995). This was a construction of a symbolic facade: the definition was broad and ambiguous, and there was no sense that Islam was actually playing a greater role in government decision-making. A vague, consensual

definition was intended not to elevate the influence of religion on public life but to minimise it.

It was in the mosques, through state-trained imams under tightened regime control, that this vision was also propagated. In April 1991 control of religious affairs was moved from an office attached to the prime minister to a state secretariat, which in March 1992 became a Ministry for Religious Affairs. This took charge of running mosques, managing pilgrimages, and directing religious education. Imams became state officials appointed by the prime minister's office and were paid state salaries. New textbooks were introduced for primary and secondary public schools, emphasising a renewal of Islamic thought and a tradition of change. Textbooks for Zaytuna university were amended in 1995 to emphasise a tolerant, modern Islam. A government decree that year said Zaytuna was to be a school of religion 'based on perpetual tolerance' (Zeghal 2010, 118). By late 1994, the religious affairs minister, Ali Chebbi, boasted of having increased the number of mosques in Tunisia by around 1,000 to more than 3,400 and of having held more than 1,000 conferences to train imams for preaching (Hamrouni 1994). In mid-1995, the state created a Higher School for the Sharia, for training imams, which was to be run under the joint control of the religious affairs and education ministries and would teach a 'scientific evaluation' of the holy texts, the 'authentic religious faith', and the concepts of 'solidarity, mutual assistance, and tolerance' (Touati 1995). In October 1995, the religious affairs minister described how imams had been retrained for Friday prayers with a 'new vision' that

> aims at the establishment of an enlightened discourse drawing on the rich heritage of tolerance and moderation that characterizes the Islamic religion on the one hand, and on the need for that discourse to listen to the concerns of the national community on the other hand (Dermech 1995).

Defining a state-sanctioned Islam also meant isolating and ostracising those who proposed alternative interpretations of the religion. Thus, although the first months of Ben Ali's regime offered some concessions to the MTI leaders, it was also immediately clear that the regime

intended to isolate those deemed 'fundamentalist activists' who, as the state saw it, exploited

religious sentiment for political objectives and to ostracise them from political life (Maaoui

1987). This was achieved through an official propaganda effort to paint the Islamists as a

threat to society as a whole, not just the regime. This campaign of 'draining the sources of

religiosity' (*tajfīf manābiʿ al-tadaiyyun*) was described as a secret RCD plan involving lies,

rumours and infiltration of associations to emphasise the cultural dangers of the Islamists

(Beau and Tuquoi 2011, 70; Doulatli 2011). Several prominent secularists sided with the

regime on this front, notably Mohamed Charfi, president of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits*

de l'Homme (LTDH), who was named Minister of Education in April 1989. At first the

secular opposition had sided with Ennahdha against Ben Ali's lack of pluralism. Soon,

however, there were fewer and fewer voices speaking out for the Islamists and against the

regime. This was helped by financial support for opposition parties from the regime and

subsidies for their newspapers, and by some important political voices, notably the *Parti*

Communiste Tunisien, which in 1993 became the *Mouvement Ettajdid*, and which acted out

the part of a loyal opposition. As Ziad Doulatli, a senior Ennahdha leader who was jailed at

this time, said:

> After the election, Ben Ali was scared of Ennahdha's popularity and he didn't keep up
> his promise of legalising the movement. He adopted a new strategy of cracking down
> on the movement and he built an alliance with some parts of the left against Ennahdha.
> The campaign against Ennahdha was conducted on different fronts: the security front
> and the cultural front … The philosophy behind this was that they couldn't tackle the
> movement just by arresting people; they had to tackle the roots. (Doulatli 2011)

The point was to avoid genuine pluralism and to enforce a single identification on the nation

by constructing an authoritarian consensus, a monopoly of symbolism, neatly described as a

'technology of power' (Hibou 2011, 206).

This broad ideological approach was accompanied and bolstered by the state's

economic strength and its monopoly of force. These two additional pillars allowed the regime

to impose its set of religious values. First, economic stability reinforced Ben Ali's position.

Gross domestic product growth rose to a record 8.6% in 1992 (Sraieb 1992, 974). Second, the regime moved decisively against Ennahdha, with waves of arrests beginning within weeks of the April 1989 elections culminating in mass trials in July 1992, in which Ennahdha members were charged with acts of terrorism and threats to state security (Human Rights Watch 1992; Amnesty International 1992). As many as 30,000 were jailed (Jebali 2013). Some, including Ghannouchi, fled into exile abroad. Others were tortured to death. The movement was banned and almost completely dismantled. In addition, new laws were introduced as tools of regime control. A revision of the Press Code banned propaganda based on an undefined 'religious extremism' and changes to the Penal Code outlawed acts inciting 'religious fanaticism', including those committed by Tunisians living abroad ("Justice" 1994). Some actions by the Islamist movement played into this regime approach. In February 1991, some supporters of Ennahdha burnt down an RCD office in Bab Souika, in Tunis, killing one guard and injuring another. Three Ennahdha leaders suspended their membership in the movement, including Mourou. Ghannouchi made several highly critical statements against the regime, which he later admitted had been a 'provocative discourse' (Ghannouchi 2011). This 'instilled a deep fear of instability' and encouraged middle class Tunisians to side with the regime (Murphy 1999, 213). The initial success of the Algerian *Front Islamique du Salut* in the first round of Algeria's parliamentary elections and the subsequent military coup in January 1992 only added weight to Ben Ali's warnings about the Islamist threat. The regime effectively 'securitised' the Islamist threat, an approach familiar to authoritarian governments elsewhere in the region (Volpi 2013).

The ideological division between a regime that was secular, in that it controlled and minimised the religious sphere, and the Islamists, who challenged the state's political monopoly, was all too evident: there were clear differences on political, religious, and social freedoms, and on the extent to which Islam should shape policy. However, although both

sides had competing notions of the role Islam, it is striking how both called on the same symbolic references to make their case. It had been the MTI as early as 1981 which had first championed the Arab-Islamic identity that Ben Ali now sought to claim as his own. For the MTI, Islam was 'the axis of our cultural identity' and its first task was 'the awakening of the Islamic identity for Tunisia' (*Ḥarakat al-ittijāh al-islāmī* 2012). Likewise, both the MTI and Ben Ali claimed to offer an 'authentic' Islam updated for modern times through recourse to *ijtihād*, the concept once so favoured, at least rhetorically, by Bourguiba. Both sides also emphasised the role of the mosque as a mobilising force. In 1981, the MTI had advocated as one of its priorities the revival of the mosque as a centre of worship and mass mobilisation (*Ḥarakat al-ittijāh al-islāmī* 2012) and since the 1970s Islamic activists had successfully used the mosque space to rally support, hold discussion circles, and spread their message. Now Ben Ali used the mosques to impose his particular brand of Islam. Both sides highlighted their particular attachment to the Zaytuna mosque, the symbol of religious scholarship in Tunisia. Both the Islamists as well as both Bourguiba and Ben Ali claimed allegiance to the tradition of Tunisian reformers stretching back to Kheireddine Pasha al-Tunisi. Furthermore, the veil became a contested symbol: it could both signify resistance to the regime, as it did for the Islamists, or act as an object of control and definition, as it did for the state. In this sense then, the regime and the Islamists drew from a shared repertoire as they struggled against each other over the symbolic power of Islam and the right to use these symbols for political advantage.

The veil

As part of his 'protection' of religion Ben Ali enforced a crackdown against women wearing the veil. It was Bourguiba who had first introduced curbs on the veil, in his Circular 108 of 1981, which was widened in 1985. This was renewed under Ben Ali by circulars in December 1991; in February 1992, banning the wearing of a headscarf by civil servants and by staff in

educational institutions; and again in 2003 banning the headscarf for staff in the public health sector.

Having disappeared from the early 1990s, the veil began to reappear on the streets of Tunisia from around 2001, along with other outward signs of religiosity, including men wearing beards and dressed in Gulf-style *qamīṣ* shirts and even some women dressed in the *niqāb*, the full-face covering (Ghorbal 2003). This was not orchestrated by Ennahdha or any other opposition party, but rather represented a spontaneous movement from below following the US response to the September 2001 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Geisser and Gobe 2007). In 2006, on the 50th anniversary of the Personal Status Code, the regime launched a new effort to implement the ban on the veil, a garment that the Minister for Religious Affairs, Boubaker al-Akhzouri, described as 'un-Islamic', 'unpatriotic', and an 'imported' concept. This campaign took the form of speeches, conferences, and seminars, as well as harassment, such as at a meeting in October 2006 of the National Union of Tunisian Women, when union officials demanded all women present remove their veils and tugged at the veils of those who refused (US State Department 2006). Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe (2007) argued this effort was less about eradicating the hijab and more about using a secularist argument to divide the opposition, particularly in the light of a rare political alliance among opposition parties, ranging from leftists to Islamists, agreed in October 2005. That seems convincing, but it was also clear the regime was still trying to exert tight control over exactly what Islam meant and how it should be followed. The minister's explanation of the campaign against the veil was particularly revealing for what it showed of the regime's conception of its role as guardian of Islam. In his view, the veil was a symbol of a 'political ideology' that had nothing to do with Islamic societies. As al-Akhzouri said in early 2006:

> This does not mean at all that religion is isolated from society. We see religion, in terms of belief, ideas and civilisation, as the affair of the state alone, maintained by the laws, the highest of which of course is the country's constitution. Our religious discourse is dedicated to the fundamentals of Islam and proves its value is immune to political trends. No current has the right to exceed the legal limits by insulting Islam. We take every care to highlight the true, honourable image of Islam and to contribute to achieving the civilizational progress to which Muslims aspire. And it is no secret this does not come from sectarianism and division and loathsome disputes (*al-ṭāʾifiyya wa al-tashardhum wa al-khilāf al-maqīt*). ("Wazīr al-Shuʾūn al-Dīniyya" 2006)

In his view, it was the state that was charged with imposing the official interpretation of Islam, an interpretation that could not be challenged and an interpretation that fitted what the state decided was the Tunisian tradition. Only state control of Islam could lead to the progress of society. The tone here was qualitatively different from that used by Bourguiba half a century earlier. This was the regime not re-interpreting Islam but instrumentalising a religious discourse, and was indicative of a police state determined to enforce control over society.

However, just as with Bourguiba in the 1970s, this state monopoly over religious symbolism met its limits. The resurgence of the veil was a distinct challenge to the state's intervention in religious affairs. It began on university campuses and increasingly drew strength from civil society and the political opposition. In May 2006 a higher education union spoke out against 'criminal' behaviour by government officials who tried to stop veiled female students from entering the law and political science faculty in Tunis (Kéfi 2006). In October 2008, Saida Akremi, a veiled Tunisian Islamist and lawyer, won a rare legal case against the ban on the veil. She represented a female school teacher from Hammam Lif, near Tunis, who was suspended for three months for wearing the veil while teaching. Akremi pleaded the case arguing that the circular banning the veil was unconstitutional and remarkably both won the initial case and defeated the subsequent government appeal. However, although her client was allowed back to work, the precedent was not extended to other veiled women. As Akremi explained:

> According to the constitution you are free to wear what you want. The circular was against the law itself. There was no clause saying how you should dress and this law was not interpreted but added to in a way that was against the law and the constitution. For the government the veil was a battlefield for repressing the Islamists. (Akremi 2011)

Some organisations, of course, supported the regime's campaign against the veil, including the *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*, a small secular feminist group founded in 1989, and other secular activists who feared an alliance between the left and the Islamists. However, even here there were more nuanced responses. Bochra Belhaj Hamida, a feminist and former leader of the *Femmes Démocrates* and no ally of the Islamists, departed from her colleagues to argue that just as it was wrong to impose the veil so it was wrong to ban it. As she said in 2011: 'We have always thought the state under Bourguiba and Ben Ali had its grip on the question of women. For us that's a problem, that's paternalism' (Belhaj Hamida 2011). Others too distanced themselves from the regime's crackdown, among them the *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie* (PCOT) and Nejib Chebbi, founder of the *Parti Démocrate Progressiste* (PDP), who both opposed the campaign saying the veil was no longer the symbol of an Islamist party but was a cultural-religious form of resistance to the regime (Geisser and Gobe 2007).

Ben Ali, then, had sought to undermine the Islamist challenge immediately after his coup, capturing the issue of Arab-Islamic identity as the heart of his effort to present the state as the protector of Tunisian Islam. A monopoly of force and economic strength allowed his regime to propagate successfully the illusion of a state-sanctioned but vaguely-defined 'tolerant', consensus-building, security-conscious Islam while simultaneously repressing those who articulated an alternative, challenging interpretation of their religion. Ben Ali's secularism was an expression of the state's sovereign power, and one that exploited the clerics and their mosques as instruments of control. Yet, just as with Bourguiba decades earlier, Ben

Ali's secularising efforts also met their limits, and again the veil became a symbol of defiance against the state's monopolising articulation of appropriate religious behaviour.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on interviews, speeches, memoirs, and newspaper archives to map Tunisian secularism, in the sense of the repeated interventions by the state in religious life since independence. It has shown that Bourguiba in his first years in power challenged the clerical elite but used a distinct religious symbolism to do so and that he sought to subordinate religion to the state's priorities of modernisation and national development. In later years, his efforts to re-model religious culture reached their limits in the face of renewed popular debates about religious affairs and he reacted to this awkwardly, trying to use Islam as a source of morality and continuing to manage religious affairs, from the Ramadan fast to the wearing of the veil. Under Ben Ali state intervention deepened but deployed different symbols: Islam was now a signifier of national identity and was re-defined as 'tolerant' and unifying but also as vulnerable and in need of state protection. Control was exerted through the mosque and through both repression and economic prosperity. Throughout these decades, the state and their Islamist opponents drew on the same repertoire of religious symbols – identity, authenticity, *ijtihād*, the mosque, Zaytuna – to fight a political battle. The state had politicised Islam and in doing so had opened the door for religious challenges to its political authority.

This did not mean the nation's identity had been entirely recast, for a large part of the population remained conservative and religious. By the time of the 2011 uprising Tunisia was not the profoundly secular nation that was so often portrayed in the media, the 'myth of laïcité' had been exposed (Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012). Instead, in the months and years after the uprising the nature and role of Islam and of religious symbols remained deeply contested. Ennahdha had lost its monopoly as a spokesman for political Islam and faced new political

and intellectual challenges from emergent Salafist movements, with their rival visions for an Islamic state. Control over mosques again became a focal point. Salafist preachers took advantage of the political vacuum to take positions in hundreds of mosques across the country and the then-ruling Ennahdha movement found itself increasingly anxious at the rise of extremist Islamic movements but reluctant to enforce curbs on mosques as the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes had once done. A bitter Islamist-secularist polarisation shaped the political debate in the national media and in the elected Constituent Assembly, where arguments returned frequently to the very nature of the original reforms Bourguiba had sought to introduce half a century earlier. A growing divide emerged between the Francophone, Tunis elite and the broader population, who opinion polls showed to be religiously conservative and increasingly frustrated with the lack of deep socio-economic change in the wake of the uprising.

In this context, Ennahdha's rapid rise to power in 2011 was not as unexpected as it had first seemed. This is not to say the Islamist victory was exclusively explained by official state policy towards Islam. In fact the Islamists had discretely kept the movement alive in the Ben Ali years and after the 2011 uprising rapidly rebuilt an organisational base, emphasising their authenticity, non-violence, commitment to democracy, and socially conservative moral code. However, the movement also grew out of a political context of competition between the religious and political spheres as the state sought to impose its secularising visions. It represented the ultimate failure of the state to forge a monopoly of symbolic power and a uniformity of belief.

Note

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[1] The survey found 29% of Tunisians wanted laws to strictly follow the Qurʾan, while 59% wanted laws to follow the principles of Islam, but not strictly follow the Qurʾan (Pew Research Center 2013).

[2] Habous land is a religious endowment, known as waqf in the Mashreq. This land would have been administered by the ulama, or held by landowning families and Sufi brotherhoods. Rent would be levied to maintain habous land and properties thus providing the clerics with important financial resources.

[3] Some Tunisians today push for further reforms to the Personal Status Code, not only of inheritance, but also allowing Tunisian women to give their citizenship to non-Tunisian husbands, and for full legal equality between men and women in all domains.

[4] Like Abdelaziz Jaït, who Bourguiba appointed Mufti of Tunisia. He pressed Jaït for a fatwa denouncing the Ramadan fast but sacked him when his fatwa fell short of what had been demanded (Moore 1965, 57).

[5] Jebali went on to become Prime Minister after the October 2011 elections until he resigned in February 2013.

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