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Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia

Summary

Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia is an Islamist group which emerged in the late 1970s as a branch of the international Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr movement, which had been established in Jerusalem in 1952 by the Palestinian Islamic scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī (1909-77). The group critiqued the Tunisian state as a colonial implant, and advocated the installation of an Islamic state. It was repressed during the 1980s, and remained largely underground until a popular uprising toppled the authoritarian regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. The party was legalized in July 2012, and continued to campaign for an Islamic state.

Key words: Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, Tunisia, Islamism, Arab Spring, caliphate, colonialism, repression

Article

Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia (The Liberation Party Tunisia) is an Islamist group which emerged in the late 1970s as a branch of the international Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr movement, which had been established in Jerusalem in 1952 by the Palestinian Islamic scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī (1909-77). The movement seeks to install an Islamic state under *sharī'a*, here meaning a legal system based on Islamic principles, in a three-stage process, from the training of a select vanguard, through interaction with society, to seizing power. The group was established by Tunisians who had encountered the movement while studying in Germany in the 1970s and who set up their own study circles within Tunisia upon their return. This was a time when several Islamic revivalist movements were emerging (Shahin 1997, 81). In its early years, Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia numbered at least 500 members (Pankhurst 2016, 201). Its founders were university professors, school teachers, and military officers (Shahin 1997, 81–82). However, it soon faced repression under the authoritarian regime of Habib Bourguiba (al-Ḥabīb Būrḡībah, r.1957-1987), with arrests and trials in 1983 and again in 1985, when

several dozen members of the movement, including some from the military, were sentenced to up to eight years in jail for membership of an unauthorized association. Pamphlets published by the group at the time described it as a political party which sought an Islamic *caliphate*, and which critiqued ‘all forms of colonization, political, cultural, economic, social and others’ (Burgat 1993, 203). Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia rejected the reformism of Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamist movements, including Tunisia’s largest Islamic movement, the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī*) which later became al-Nahḍa (*Ḥarakat al-Nahḍa*, Ennahda; Renaissance Movement, later Party).

Further court cases against the group followed in the early 1990s, at a time when the new regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (Zayn al-‘Abidīn bin ‘Alī, r.1987-2011) repressed many political opponents, including al-Nahḍa and the Tunisian Worker’s Communist Party (*Ḥizb al-‘Ummāl al-Shuyū‘ī al-Tūnsī*).

Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia was severely weakened for the next two decades, operating underground if at all, until the mass popular uprising against the Ben Ali regime, which began on 17 December 2010. During the protests, on 3 January 2011, the group issued a statement claiming the regime had ‘fallen into the arms of the colonial, infidel West’ and proposing instead an Islamic state under a *caliphate* (Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr wilāya Tūnis 2011).

After the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011 and the start of a democratic transition, the group sought legal authorisation to operate as a political party. It was initially refused until July 2012, when it became one of four minor Islamist groups to receive legal approval as a political party that year. However, Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr Tunisia remained a small political force, gathering at most several hundred supporters to its annual congress in Tunis. The party

frequently encountered difficulties with the authorities, not least because of its criticism of the 2014 constitution, which it saw as too secular. The party's 2016 congress was prevented for security reasons, and the party's activities were suspended briefly in August 2016 and again for a month in June 2017, for not recognising the civil character of the state. The party remained on the margins of the political process.

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