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### **Ennahda rebrands itself in a changing political landscape**

On the 19th of May Rachid Gannouchi announced Ennahda's departure from political Islam. In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde*, the president of the Ennahda outlined the need to distinguish between political activities and religious preaching, preventing imams to become political leaders or even party members. Rejecting the concept of political Islam itself, defined as a Western creation and corrupted by jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Gannouchi presented Ennahda as a civil movement, whose member are democratic Muslims.

The 10th Congress of Ennahda, held on the outskirts of Tunis from the 20th to the 22nd May, adopted the new political platform. On that occasion, Gannouchi was confirmed president of the party obtaining the support of 75% of the party's delegates and reaffirming his undisputed leadership.

Gannouchi's remarks over the changing political orientation of the party represent a major development not only for Ennahda but also for political Islam in general. Considered an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda's considerable success during the early years after the Arab Spring was followed by an increasing marginalisation, as the Tunisian transition protracted considerably. The turning point represented by the Egyptian coup in July 2013 and the subsequent military crackdown on the Brotherhood had direct and predictable consequences for the politics of the entire region.

Like other Islamist parties during times of repression, Ennahda adopted a low-profile strategy. It avoided direct confrontations with secular forces, going underground to regroup and wait for better

times. Nevertheless, Ennahda took advantage of Tunisia's success story, joining the majority party Nidaa Tounes, the Union Patriotique Libre (UPL) and Afek Tounes in the national unity government

The changing political landscape in Tunisia offered new opportunities. The Tunisian government suffered four major terrorist attacks during the last year. The blowback on the tourism industry triggered a series of events that posed serious challenges to the government of Habib Essid. In January the death of an unemployed man in Kasserine during a protest highlighted the persistent economic crisis. Major demonstrations affected the entire country: a déjà vu of the 2011 revolution, which caused the fall of the ancien régime.

The social unrest reflects the crisis of the current political coalition. In early 2016 an internal feud in Nidaa Tounes forced 22 lawmakers, including one of its founders Mohsen Marzouk, to quit and to create a new bloc. As a result, Nidaa Tounes' representation in the Parliament shrunk to 64 lawmakers, making Ennahda the largest party with 69 deputies.

Considering Nidaa Tounes' difficulties, it is likely that Gannouchi's decision to abandon political Islam represents a calculated political strategy. Ennahda is positioning itself as the dominant force of the country, approaching the 2017 municipal elections and the 2019 presidential elections. However, the passage from an Islamist to an Islamic party was welcomed with scepticism in Tunisia where many argue that the secularisation of Ennahda is a mere window dressing; a pragmatic shift that raises doubts about the real intention of Gannouchi in the long run.

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