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AN ANALYSIS OF THE PLURALITY OF POLITICAL ISLAM. THE CASES OF TUNISIA, TURKEY AND MOROCCO

Abstract

In this paper, we will analyse Political Islam based on three cases in very different geographical locations, at varying stages of development and which have sought different solutions to problems and challenges. All with the aim of demonstrating, as the title suggests, the plurality or, if you like, the complexity or diversity of a political movement that is far from monolithic.

Keywords

Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Islam.

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PROLOGUE

When preparing this paper, we selected for analysis three Islamist parties in government. According to *The Economist*, the situation of these political parties in the Arab world in 2017 is as follows:

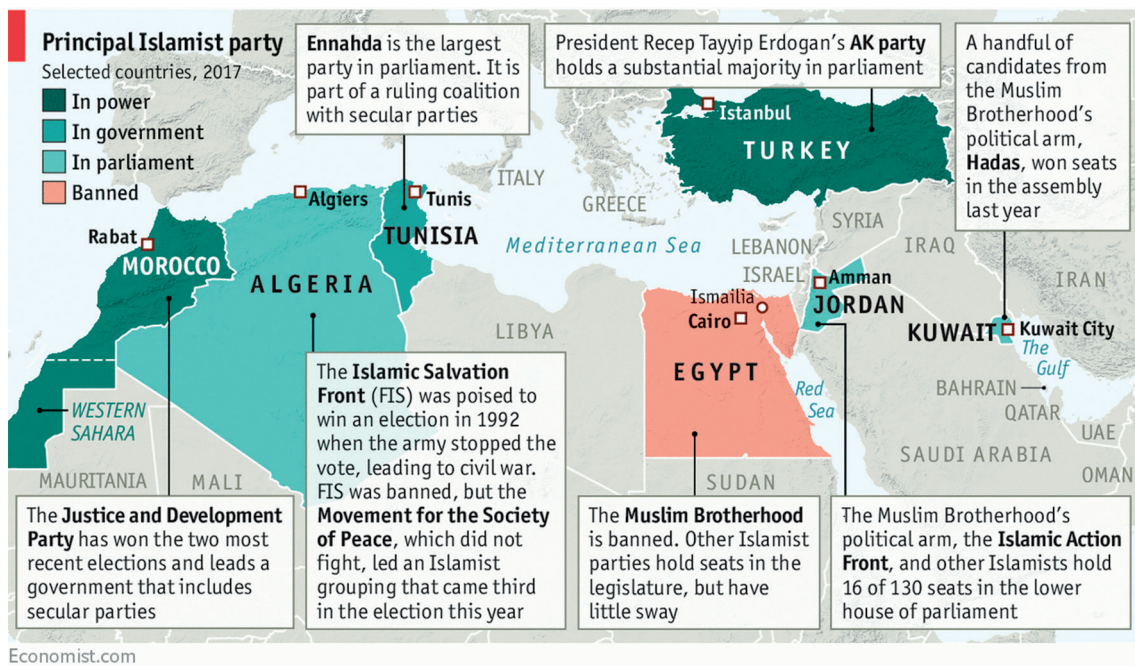


Image 1: *The Economist*, 28-08-2017¹

Let us begin with Tunisia: Ennahda is the largest party in parliament. It is part of a ruling coalition with secular parties.

Turkey: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AK party (Justice and Development Party) holds a substantial majority in parliament.

Morocco: The Justice and Development Party has won the two most recent elections and leads a government that includes secular parties.

The three parties are in government, but each is in a different situation, at a different stage, and have, on occasions, developed along different paths.

1 <https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21727061-auguries-are-mixed-can-political-islam-make-it-modern-world> Accessed on 02-09-2017.

2 The graphs used in the paper are Western ones, primarily sourced from the media.

Aside from the circumstances of political Islam in each country, we must highlight a fundamental difference in the form of government of each state: Tunisia and Turkey are republics, while Morocco is a constitutional monarchy.

INTRODUCTION

«Politics ruins religion and religion ruins politics». This was one of the slogans on the signs wielded by the thousands of protesters that took to the streets of Tunis in the January 2011 demonstrations that put an end to President Zine el-Abidine Ben Alique's regime, which later became known as «The Jasmine Revolution» and is regarded as the precursor of the so-called Arab Spring.

And yet today, almost six years later, the two, politics and religion, are still compelled to get along, at least in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, which encompass the scope of this article, even though in both regions this is done differently because, among other things, the rites are different³.

This article does not aim to explore in depth all aspects, factors and consequences of a subject that is as complex and diverse as the relationship between politics and Islam. Rather, it aims to highlight some data and actions that are relevant to the phenomenon of political Islam. When religion gets involved in politics, it must, for obvious reasons, play by the rules of politics, or at least do so if it is to have any degree of success (if attaining power or at least a degree of influence is not the goal, then why enter politics?). Therefore, the Islamist parties covered in this study play by the rules of the political system in their respective countries. And they do so with one essential and intrinsically political goal in mind: to rise to power and remain there for as long as possible.

Sometimes, as in the case of Tunisia, pragmatism must prevail and you must bide your time and play the cards you are dealt, not staking everything on an ideal that is difficult to reach for earthly actors. At other times, which would appear to be the case of Turkey, after a certain degree of success and political action have been achieved through pragmatism, you can reach for the sky and cling to it at all costs. The case of Morocco is a clear example of playing by the rules of the game to make it into government, even if this entails limited action, i.e. making certain concessions.

The relationship between religion and politics in Islam is different from the Western one. Therefore, it is logical to assume, as senior fellow at the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World in the Center for Middle East Policy, Shadi Hamid, does, that its evolution and its point of arrival can hardly be an exact replica of the Western

3 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/africa/21tunisia.html?_r=0 Accessed on 25-07-2016.

4 <http://www.pensamientocritico.org/charfio209.pdf> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

model. And this also applies to the term democracy. For example, in recent years, the Tunisian Islamists of Ennahda (Renaissance Party) have been calling themselves «Muslim democrats» and claim they are pursuing a «Muslim democracy».

And, moreover, in the Muslim world, each trend, movement and people chooses their own path, which further obscures the observer's view. For example, Ennahda rose to power after the Arab Spring in Tunisia. By then, Turkey's AKP party had been in government for several years. Meanwhile, Morocco experienced the closest it came to an Arab Spring in October 2016 with the protests in the Rif region. However, there is no clear link between political Islam and this revolt, even though the Moroccan Islamist Justice and Development Party is in government.

As Abdelmajid Charfi, professor emeritus of Arab civilisation and Islamic thought at the University of Tunis, has pointed out: «although there are core beliefs that distinguish Muslims from other religions and non-believers, Islam has never been monolithic. It is both one and many». The same obviously applies to political expression, which is also plural. And this can happen simultaneously or at different times because not all societies in the region are at the same stage of development.

A relevant example of this in terms of political activity, as pointed out by Monica Marks, an expert on politics and Islamist movements in Tunisia and Turkey and visiting researcher from the European Council on Foreign Relations, is that both Ennahda and its sister party and role model, Turkey's AKP (Justice and Development Party), took inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt. And yet, the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood during the few months it was in power in Egypt suggest that it is quite unlike the Turkish regime, Tunisia's Ennahda and Morocco's JDP, which was also inspired by its principles. Although the ideology is the same, or similar, political action varies significantly depending on the region and point in time.

Hammamet, Tunisia, late May 2016. The Ennahda Party concludes its congress with a dramatic announcement that stuns citizens, experts and onlookers, both within and outside this small North African country. In an unprecedented display of pragmatism, the party decides to separate its political and religious agendas. This decision had far less to do with Islam than it did with politics and sought to firmly establish the «not-so-Islamic» Tunisian Islamists as a political force in the country in the near future.

5 <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/islam-politics-exceptional/485801/> Accessed on 22-06-2016.

6 <http://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20160523/401976776921/tunez-movimiento-annahda-abandona-islamismo-politico.html> Accessed on 25-07-2016.

7 <http://www.pensamientocritico.org/charfi0209.pdf> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

8 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf Accessed on 22-06-2016.

9 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/07/the-mainstreaming-of-tunisia-islamists/> Accessed on 15-08-2016.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Mediterranean, in Turkey, Ennahda's sister party and role model, as mentioned previously, does what is expected at the AKP congress and elects Prime Minister Binali Yildirim as its new party leader. He is the only candidate for the post, a party man with no charisma whatsoever, but a committed and fervent supporter of the man who placed him at the highest echelons of the state and party: the undisputed and supreme leader of the party in the shadows (the latter by law, at least for the time being), i.e. the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose constitutional reforms to concentrate the power in the president have ensured his continuity¹⁰. Erdogan's version of democracy, which does not lack popular support even though it incorporates religion, has more to do with politics, the design of the regime and keeping the party in power than with Islam, unlike the case of Tunisia and, as we shall see later on, Morocco.

And both events took place just shy of three years after the coup led by General el-Sisi on 3 July 2013, which put an end to the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, the first member of the Muslim Brotherhood to occupy the post in Egypt. Ennahda, the AKP and the JDP in Morocco appear to have paid close attention to this lesson when considering their own political survival.

It should be pointed out that it was the Tunisian Islamists, in particular, who kept a close eye on Cairo. In principle, at least, the coup d'état in Turkey on 15 July 2016 appears to have been more a power struggle between President Erdogan (and his Islamist government/party) and fellow Islamist movement *Hizmet* led by cleric Fethullah Gulen¹¹ than a confrontation over wanting a secular or religious state, or public discontent with the government, as was the case in Egypt.

BACKGROUND

To analyse contemporary political Islam, we do not need to go back to the origins of Islam itself in the 7th century, when the Prophet Muhammad was a theologian, politician, warrior, preacher, merchant and a builder of a new state, all at once. Nor do we need to analyse in depth the ensuing 13th centuries with their different caliphates, the political expression of the spiritual unity of the Muslim community at the time. Perhaps it suffices to say, as Hamid¹² has pointed out, that these political entities are based on Islamic law and tradition.

The premise is that faith and good works are inextricably tied together in Islam. Faith is expressed through the observance of the law. The failure to follow Islamic law

¹⁰ <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2016/05/22/5741b5f6e2704e772d8b4593.html> Accessed on 27-07-2016.

¹¹ http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN10407W?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=Social Accessed on 24-07-2016.

¹² <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/islam-politics-exceptional/485801/> Accessed on 22-06-2016.

is a reflection of the believer's lack of faith and unwillingness to submit to God. Hence, salvation is impossible without law. This principle has implications for the Islamic state. If following the *sharia* is a precondition for salvation, then political leaders and clerics alike play a role in encouraging what Islam regards as the good and forbidding evil, a role they played, to various degrees, for the entirety of the pre-modern period.

Continuing with Hamid's view, since the Ottoman Caliphate was formally abolished in 1924, the struggle to establish a new political order has raged on in the Middle East. At its center is the problem of religion and its role in the new political order. And up to now, there has been no, or at least insufficient consensus on the most appropriate response to this problem.

In the 1920's, secular nationalist ideologies were beginning to be embraced by the region's elite. In their view, the old and outdated Islamic regime of the caliphate would only stand in the way of the modernisation of the nation (a new term for the region at the time). After the trauma of colonialism and hard-won independence, the new regimes offered a gleam of hope for a new and different future. But, throughout the 20th century, many of the young nation-states descended into dictatorship.

Secular nationalism was not the only response to modern challenges. Modern-day Islamists interpreted events quite differently, according to Hamid, viewing the deteriorating state of the region as yet more evidence of God's displeasure. To regain his pleasure would require returning to the unblemished purity of Islam's founding and the caliphate. These Islamic modernists were the precursors to modern-day Islamists.

From among them, a movement was born in Egypt in 1928 with the slogan: «Islam is the solution». It was the Muslim Brotherhood, which was to have a key influence on the origin and subsequent development of political Islam throughout the region¹³, including Salafists and jihadists. It was also the basis for the three parties analysed in this paper: Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party, Turkey's AKP and Morocco's JDP.

Hassan al-Banna founded an organisation based on a model of political activism combined with Islamic charity work. The movement initially aimed simply to spread Islamic morals and good works, but soon became involved in politics to create a state governed by Islamic law or *sharia*.

Throughout the years, the movement has supported or opposed Egypt's successive governments. Firstly, it supported the military coup d'état led by a group of young officers calling themselves the «Free Officers» in 1952 because it put an end to colonial rule, even though the new regime did not share its political objective of establishing an Islamic state.

Then, at the height of Nasser's Pan-Arab regime in 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned and persecuted. The group continued, however, to radicalise and grow

¹³ http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/09/130923_egipto_hermanos_musulmanes_mes
Accessed on 26-07-2016. Also available in English at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12313405>.

underground. During the 1980s, the movement attempted to rejoin the political mainstream and eventually became the main opposition force in Egypt. Seeing this as a major threat, President Hosni Mubarak launched a second wave of repression against the organisation. Following the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square and the fall of President Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood made it into government in 2012, only to be overthrown in 2013 following another coup, after which it was again banned and persecuted by a new military regime, that of General el-Sisi.

Political Islam is not the only thing uniting the Muslim Brotherhood with the JDP, Ennahda and the AKP. The leaders of the latter three had also been banned, persecuted and exiled for decades by secular nationalist regimes and dictatorships that were thoroughly corrupt and ineffective on various issues. The case of Morocco is different in that it is a constitutional monarchy and the JDP was pragmatically accepted before its counterparts in the other countries.

In some countries, protracted repression coupled with poor governance led to a wave of discontent that washed through the region and erupted with the Arab Spring; a movement that advocated the return of religion to politics, given that religion had by then become the refuge of all those who felt completely powerless at not being able to attain the level of economic, political and military development of other nations⁴.

At this point, it is worth highlighting the exception of Turkey, where the «democratisation» process (or «reform» process, if you prefer) that began in the late 1990s has been more or less peaceful. And we say «more or less» because it has not been entirely smooth; there was a coup in 1997 and apparently two other attempts in 2007 and 2010, known as *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer*.

The case of Morocco is also exceptional. The monarchy was able to curb a minor outbreak of the Arab Spring with a few timid and limited reforms spearheaded by the Royal Family. Indeed, it is only now, with the protests in the Rif that Morocco is facing a movement akin to an Arab Spring.

In some countries, expression of popular discontent in different places led to the door being opened to a type of opening-up process, «democratisation» being perhaps too optimistic a word (and using strictly Western terminology). A door through which religious freedom would enter, thus allowing the Muslim Brotherhood and subsequent political Islam movements in other countries to breathe. And, after breathing, to strive for political power, which is their ultimate goal. This is more the case of Morocco, as explained in the previous paragraph, although it has not reached the point of evolution of its neighbour Tunisia. Without leaving the Maghreb, the path followed by Ennahda is not unlike the one taken by Morocco's JDP years earlier.

Accordingly, within a decade and a half, sentiment in the region shifted from disillusionment with Pan-Arabism to the rise of Pan-Islamism (including jihadist groups

14 <http://www.pensamientocritico.org/charfio209.pdf> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

such as Daesh), and from Political Islam to «Muslim democracy». A paradigmatic example of the latter is Tunisia.

However, before moving on to Tunisia, it should be pointed out that, apart from the ones mentioned earlier, there are other types of regimes in Muslim majority countries, such as the Islamic theocratic monarchy in Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanon's sectarian-based political system. This map¹⁵ shows the diversity of the Muslim world:

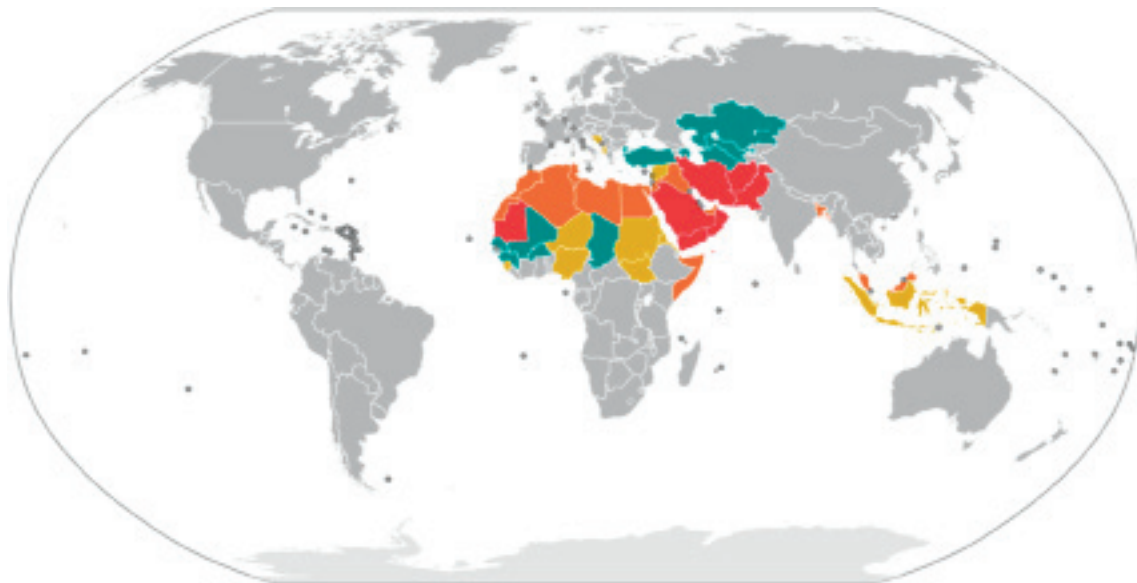


Image 2: muslim majority countries classified by the role of religion in the constitution. Islamic state State religion No declaration Secular state

While we should point out that the map was drawn up in 2009, before the Arab Spring revolts and the changes this brought in North Africa and the Middle East, it nevertheless serves to illustrate some of the different regimes created throughout the 20th century, depending on the relationship between religion and state in each country.

THE CASE OF ENNAHDA IN TUNISIA OR THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Founded in 1981 and originally inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt¹⁶, the movement changed its name to Ennahda, meaning «Renaissance», in 1989. Shortly afterwards, in 1992, it was banned and persecuted by President Ben Ali's regime because

15 Author: NuclearVacuum - File:BlankMap-World-Microstates.svg. This vector graphic was created with Inkscape, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7168943> Accessed on 27-07-2016.

16 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15442859> Accessed on 22-06-2016.

it advocated an Islamic identity and society in Tunisia. To avoid imprisonment, torture and even death, the organisation's leaders went into exile, mainly in the West.

From there, and no doubt influenced by the way of doing politics in the Northern Hemisphere, they returned to Tunisia in March 2011 when the party was legalised following the Jasmine Revolution and the fall of Ben Ali. The movement's co-founder and current president is Rachid al-Ghannouchi. Today, the party is the largest political force in the country with approximately 80,000 to 100,000 members and, with 67 seats, it is now the strongest parliamentary group following the break-up of Nidaa Tounes. Ennahda currently has one minister in the coalition government¹⁷.

After renewing his term of office, Ghannouchi, the long-time leader of the party, was responsible for announcing the new era the party had entering at Ennahda's tenth congress in Hammamet in May 2016. This was a watershed moment, the end of the beginning of the phase the party embarked on when the leaders returned to the country. It shed the more radical views that characterised its beginnings and resolved to separate politics and religion into two independent and different entities. The members proclaimed themselves «Muslim democrats», vowing, to quote Ghannouchi, to: «keep religion far from political struggles»¹⁸.



Image 3: Photo: Rachid al-Ghannouchi at the Ennahda congress. Fethi Belaid AFP/Getty Images

Ghannouchi made the announcement from a podium with a huge Tunisian flag as a backdrop (as can be seen in the photo) to symbolise the party's acceptance of

17 <https://en.qantara.de/content/10th-conference-of-the-tunisian-annahda-party-farewell-to-political-islam> Accessed on 22-06-2016.

18 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/turkey-tunisia-annahda-emulating-akp.html> Accessed on 06-08-2016.

«national» level or «local» specificity, if you like. The nation as a backdrop, as opposed to a Pan-Islamic caliphate. But, there is more.

To cite an example, which is paradigmatic for an Islamic organisation, Ennahda supports women's freedom. Ennahda has a number of active female members working next to their male counterparts. Some of them are unveiled¹⁹. Its use is optional.

In addition, Ennahda participated, along with other parties, in the constitutional reform process. The result was a text that is considered advanced for the Muslim world and which should serve as an example for other countries²⁰. Although the state defines itself as «the guardian of religion», it recognises freedom of conscience, religious belief and worship. It also prohibits polygamy, recognises the equality of citizens and pledges to protect the rights acquired by women in Tunisia, among other advances. The document constitutes a major step forward, not only for the country but also for an Islamic organisation, given that it accepts a secular constitution that places religion and secularity on an equal footing²¹.

But why? Why has Ennahda chosen this path when others have taken a different course? It would appear that pragmatism has guided the party's decisions and evolution since 2011. In a turbulent context, Ennahda is looking to carve out a niche for itself to ensure its survival. This seems to be somewhere between the repression of the old days and the fundamentalism of the present day²². The main reasons for Ennahda's actions can be explained by three aspects: internal, national and regional.

- Its own internal situation-evolution: as pointed out by professor of international relations at Qatar University, Larbi Sadiki²³, the congress in May, where the party separated its political and religious work, was a victory for Ennahda's reformists. This move was intended to make it a fully-fledged civic political party by «professionalisation» and «democratisation». Distinguishing between the «fixed» and the «mutable», with politics belonging to the sphere of the changing, Ennahda was sending the message to other political parties and the Tunisian public that it had left behind its original policy of forging an Islamic identity for Tunisia to instead focus on the reality of the country today.
- The national context: and it did so for the benefit of that ill-disposed part of the population that viewed it with hostility (such as the urban middle class)

19 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/elsy-melkonian/women%e2%80%99s-rights-in-tunisia-promising-future-or-religiopolitical-game> Accessed on 03-08-2016.

20 http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2014/DIEEEA23_2014_ConstitucionTunez_MJIA.pdf Accessed on 04-08-2016.

21 *Ibid.*

22 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context-pub-63746> Accessed on 25-06-2016.

23 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/tunisia-ennahda-ditching-political-islam-160524094550153.html> Accessed on 01-08-2016.

in a bid to convince them that the party was serious about modernisation and democratisation²⁴. The need for this and for separating politics from religion was one of the lessons Ennahda had learned from the failure of its government, known as the «Troika» because it was formed by three parties. It lasted from November 2011 to January 2014. As Anouar Boukhars²⁵, a non-resident scholar in Carnegie's Middle East Program, has pointed out, this government faced several problems, including the appointment of people with no experience in administrative or economic affairs, the resistance or confrontation with local elites linked to Ben Ali's regime and also regional governments and trade unions. All in addition to the distrust of the security forces and the Interior Ministry which maintained its autonomy during this period²⁶. These issues, coupled with the government's failure to boost economic growth and put an end to socio-economic inequalities and an escalation of violence and jihadist radicalism, put the government and party on the ropes and it lost support. Some blame the government for being too accommodating to the old order and too quick to capitulate on core Islamist principles²⁷. Furthermore, they had to distance themselves sufficiently from jihadism, as many were accusing them of «being too ambiguous» on this issue. In this predicament, Ennahda realised that traditionally «Islamic» issues, such as the relationship between Islam and state, were no longer a priority and that the main focus now was economic development, good governance, finding solutions to corruption²⁸ and the fight against terrorism, among other matters. The loss of support due to the government's inexperience and the distrust of the security sectors forced it to negotiate a compromise and collaborate with others, including parties that had previously supported Ben Ali's dictatorship. These pacts allowed the new regime to avoid confrontation and to focus on the huge challenges that lay ahead at the economic, social and security level. Indeed, over the past five years, transfers of power, talks, constitutional reform and major decisions in Tunisia have come about following debate, negotiation and consensus.

- The regional context: according to Monica Marks²⁹, in making the case to share power, Ghannouchi frequently invoked the example of Algeria in 1990 and

24 <http://atalayar.com/content/la-crisis-del-partido-nida-tounes-debilita-t%C3%BAnez> Accessed on 25-06-2016.

25 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/19/exclusion-and-despair-make-tunisia-s-border-regions-powder-keg-pub-64147> Accessed on 25-06-2016.

26 <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/tunisia/why-tunisia.html> Accessed on 25-06-2016.

27 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/19/exclusion-and-despair-make-tunisia-s-border-regions-powder-keg-pub-64147> Accessed on 25-06-2016.

28 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/ennahda-from-within-islamists-or-muslim-democrats-a-conversation/> Accessed on 01-08-2016.

29 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf Accessed on 22-06-2016.

1991, where the Islamist Salvation Front's victory in municipal and the first round of parliamentary elections spooked Algeria's military regime and sparked a civil war that claimed as many as 200,000 lives. In Marks' opinion, the lesson Ennahda leaders extracted from this experience was that a long-termist politics of gradualism was advisable, especially at moments of democratic transition. A closer example in time is that of the Muslim Brotherhood's presidency of Egypt from 2012 to 2013. It was a failure, a missed opportunity which prompted Tunisian Islamists to split from what was once their primary source of inspiration in order to ensure their own survival and also that of the fragile new regime born out of the Jasmine Revolution, which protected them, allowed them to develop politically and aim for government. In Ghannouchi's opinion, when there is a change of regime, what has been achieved can easily be lost, therefore inclusion and power-sharing is the best way to succeed. In Islamist terms, this means the triumph of strategic pragmatism over rigid principles. Therefore, Ennahda turned its back on the Egyptian model and embraced the more pragmatic, modern, prosperous, credible and long-term plan of Turkey's AKP. To use Ghannouchi's own words: «AK Parti will gradually make Turkey a more Muslim country through education, building the economy, and diversifying the media. That's our model – not law. Make people love Islam. Convince, don't coerce them»³⁰. Hence, Ennahda declared itself a follower of the Justice and Development Party, not the present-day one, but that of 15 years ago, of the era when it first came to power. This temporal nuance is important.

THE CASE OF THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP) IN TURKEY OR THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Yes, indeed, the temporal nuance is key because at the AKP congress in May 2016, like in Tunisia, the party took a step farther away from what had been its approach up to 2013. This marked the gradual beginning of the end of the first stage in Islamic power described as moderate in Turkey (and especially in the West), during which AKP's founders called themselves «conservative democrats»³¹.

A loyal follower of President Erdogan, at the May 2016 congress Binali Yildirim was appointed party leader and, as he was also prime minister at the time, he announced that he would implement a constitutional reform to change the parliamentary system to a «more presidential» one. This new move by the party, coupled with the vicious purge following the attempted coup of 15 July 2016, raises serious doubts as to whether the word democracy can still be used to describe the Turkish regime.

30 Rached Ghannouchi during a conversation with Monica Marks on 22-08-2011 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf Accessed on 22-06-2016.

31 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/turkey-tunisia-ennahda-emulating-akp.html> Accessed on 06-08-2016.

People can vote, that is true, but practically all the other basic conditions required for a democratic system are called into question. So, how far can the term be stretched? Especially when the political order is headed by a charismatic leader with a cult of personality and in whom more and more power is concentrated, where the separation of powers, judicial independence and freedom of expression and academic freedom, among other fundamental rights, are in dispute.



Image 4: Photo: Recep Tayyip Erdogan, giving a speech during Ramadan in June 2016. Yasin Bulbul/Presidential Palace, via Reuters

This was not the first time we saw a regime like this in Turkey or the Middle East, though it was called by other names at the time.

What seems clear is that in Turkey today a president and an Islamic government are purging a fellow Islamic faction (*Hizmet* led by cleric Fethullah Gulen) which is, moreover, a former ally and, indeed, it is not the only group being purged. And this is in contrast to what has been happening for years, not only in Turkey, but also in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, etc., where secular regimes have persecuted Islamist movements (and it is still happening today in Egypt, for example). It was also in Turkey that in 1996 the army ousted from power the first Islamic government, that of Necmettin Erbakan, which had attempted to incorporate religion into the state.

Religion and its relationship with the state are neither at issue, at the centre or the motive behind the current political situation or the actions of Turkey's government and president. These are taken for granted; the struggle now concerns something else. To paraphrase a statement by the Tunisian leader Ghannouchi, quoted earlier in this paper: religion should be kept separate from political struggles, although this was

probably not what the founder and leader of Ennahda had in mind when he uttered these words.

In any event, it may be a little premature to assume that Islamism is sufficiently established in the Turkish state, given that the so-called Kemalists, supporters of a secular state, still have a presence and certain degree of influence that should not be underestimated. This is despite the fact that they sided with Erdogan against the Gulenists. The common perception of the Turkish Islamist leaders is that they were more moderate when weak but turned autocratic after consolidating power. In short, The AKP of today is a far cry from the AKP of the early 2000s that was widely praised for its reforms and efforts to improve the economy, and which served as a model for Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party³².

After years of persecution, the AKP (inspired by the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, as mentioned earlier) came to power in 2002 under the leadership of the party's founder, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The group aimed to place Islam at the centre of Turkish society and politics, was progressive and reformist and sought to put an end to the military's meddling in politics (they had staged several coups since the 1960s) and «democratise» the country. They promised to promote freedom, end poverty and end corruption³³.

In 2004, economic growth and negotiations to join the European Union gave the AKP government the momentum to launch an assault on military power and the old Kemalist guard (let us not forget major operations against them in the past, such as *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer*). In addition, the Kemalists commercial power in industrial conglomerates and the media were seized and redistributed to AKP allies³⁴.

As the years passed, the AKP government made more enemies. One such enemy was its erstwhile ally, the Gulen movement, without whose help it probably would not have been so successful. Known as *Hizmet*, the followers of cleric Fethullah Gulen had focused on education and social action, while the AKP had centred on political action.

Clear advocates of political Islam, and disciples of Said Nursi (a cleric who built a movement that engaged in civil disobedience against the secular government and which played a decisive role in the revival of Islam in Turkey), Gulen offered his followers a different path from other Islamist parties to achieving their ultimate goal, which was to subvert secularism. That path avoids confrontation and entails working through education, gradually and from within the system, to place Gulen supporters at the highest levels of Turkey's institutions³⁵. And the AKP was its first true ally. For

32 *Ibid.*

33 <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/turkish-politics-return-meromictic-form> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

34 *Ibid.*

35 http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/05/fethullah-gulen-race-top-over-turkey-erdogan-secularism-schools/?utm_content=buffer88c14&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer Accessed on 07-08-2016.

more than a decade under AKP rule, Gulenist educational institutions thrived and its presence in the police and judiciary also rose to unprecedented heights.

In 2010, the AKP government became concerned about *Hizmet's* growing influence and in 2013 the two openly split. And Erdogan hit the Gulenists where it hurt most—by targeting their influence over educational institutions—. However, the Gulenists hit back by releasing audio recordings implicating senior government figures, and even Erdogan's son, in corruption, bribery and money laundering, among other crimes.

With war already declared and with Erdogan as president, the consolidation and concentration of power in the head of state began. Bit by bit, the Gulenists are feeling the consequences but, at this point, in the aftermath of the attempted coup of July 2016 and the state of emergency, many suspect that the government may start to purge non-Gulenist political opponents and minority groups³⁶.



Image 5: photo: government supporters seize a tank on the night of the coup d'état, 15 July 2016. Tumay Berkin/Reuters

It was as if, in his zeal to remain in power, Erdogan had resorted to a textbook solution that never fails in such situations—good old authoritarianism. But then, this is nothing new for Turkey or indeed the región—. Back in the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, hoping to stave off decline, launched a series of internal reforms, known as the *tanzimat*. A policy that hastened the evisceration of the *sharia*. In an attempt to control what had been an organic and constantly evolving body of law,

36 *Ibid.*

the state was strengthened and centralised, its authoritarian tendencies exacerbated, and the clerics weakened³⁷.

Today, Ghannouchi and Erdogan's personalities and leadership styles are as different as night and day. The first practises concession and compromise. The second has not forgotten the fate of some of his predecessors or his childhood selling sesame seeds in the street and is willing to stop at nothing to hold onto his power.

Ennahda has made peace with secular parties and together they have agreed on a constitution that is one of the most advanced in the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the AKP is pursuing a new constitution intended to maximise the number of AKP deputies in parliament and which will involve the introduction of the presidential system that Erdogan so eagerly desires.

THE CASE OF THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (PJD) IN MOROCCO, THE MAVERICK

Meanwhile, the situation in Morocco is taking a different course. In Rabat, the king maintains some control over all branches of the government and has the military's support. In the context of the protests in the country in August 2017, Abdelilah Benkirane, a veteran PJD prime minister removed by the king, did something radical. Although the king's move was not questioned in the country, at the convention of the party's youth wing in Fez, Benkirane criticised the king in public, declaring «the king is not God. He is a man, and as a man he sometimes is right and sometimes is



Image 6: photo: Abdelilah Benkirane when prime minister on 28 October 2015. Agencias

37 [Http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/islam-politics-exceptional/485801/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/islam-politics-exceptional/485801/)
Accessed on 22-06-2016.

wrong. We can criticise him with respect because he is the chief of state and a symbol of national unity... My duty is not to please the king, my duty is to please Allah and my mother»³⁸.

During the reign of King Hassan II, such statements would draw harsh punishment. However, today the king is tied down by political restraints that do not let him directly challenge his critics in the political establishment. Restraints that were introduced by the king himself in a bid to avoid an Arab Spring in his country.

The king also instituted constitutional reforms to reduce his powers and gave more power to the government. He can no longer dissolve parliament, but still controls the military and foreign policy. In addition, the king's popularity is a protector of stability³⁹. This is one of the reasons, but by no means the only one, why it is difficult to publicly criticise the country's supreme authority.

Morocco's official and popular forms of Islam come from the Maliki School of the Maghreb. The present-day Alawite monarchy dates back to the 17th century and claims to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. The monarch is the supreme religious authority. This gives the institution the necessary religious legitimacy and leaves political Islam with only two alternatives (at least up to now): either become part of the system or remain outside, on the sidelines.

Especially, but not solely, because in 2004 the Mohammedia League of Moroccan Ulama was created through which the king controls more mosques and madrasa. Clerics are required to swear «loyalty to the sacred institutions of the nation»⁴⁰. In addition, each new mosque that is built comes under the control of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which has the privilege of appointing the centre's imams and management.

Therefore, unlike what happened in Algeria in 1992 when the Islamic Salvation Front was banned, in neighbouring Morocco, the main Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party, tactically supports the monarch, to whom it is subordinate. Thus, the PJD becomes an authorised, if limited, way of channelling the aspirations of the most vulnerable (which, among other things, avoids the rise and increase of the power of influence of the more radical Salafi jihadis and, in addition, curbs the rise of jihadist terrorism in the country)⁴¹.

The PJD was formed out of the defunct Chabiba Al Islamiya (Islamic Youth), a radical organisation inspired by the writings of Muslim Brotherhood ideologists Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Chabiba sought direct confrontation with the

38 <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/1.806306> Accessed on 14-10-2017.

39 *Ibid.*

40 http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Geopolitico_Conflictos_2016.pdf Accessed on 15-10-2017.

41 *Ibid.*

regime; however, police repression and the lack of strategic success meant the remains of the organisation split.

A significant number of the surviving members dissented from the organisation and founded a more political movement under the name of the Jamaa Khayria Association. In the 1990s, the movement changed its name to «Reform and Renovation» and joined the Popular Constitutional Democratic Movement. In 1998 it adopted the moderate stance of the Justice and Development Party led by Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane.

By 2011, with the Arab Spring already under way, the PJD, unlike Morocco's other major political group, Justice and Charity, had become much more pragmatic and the only party that accepted the religious legitimacy of the Alawite monarchy. It took part in the «political game» and managed to form part of the government for the first time in history.

In 2015, in what was its first electoral test in four years, Benkirane's PJD did well in local elections and was the most voted party in the regional council elections, garnering 25.6 % of the seats⁴².

Now that we have mentioned them, it seems fitting to pause and take a brief look at Justice and Charity. Though also an Islamist group, unlike the PJD, the former has chosen to remain on the political sidelines. As mentioned previously, the structure of Morocco's system only provides for two alternatives; you are either «inside» or «outside» the system and Justice and Charity is currently outside.

Although Justice and Charity is officially banned, it is in fact tolerated de facto by the Moroccan authorities. However, the members of the group see it the other way round: they believe they are inside the law but not tolerated and denounce the harsh convictions, crackdowns and torture they are subjected to⁴³.

Al Adl wa Al Ihsan (Justice and Charity) was founded in 1981 by Abdesslam Yassine, who died in 2012 at the age of 84. The group boycotts election after election because it believes that the real power is vested in the king and it does not recognise the king as the highest religious authority in the country or the Commander of the Faithful (in the 2011 Constitution). It is therefore openly, but peacefully opposed to the monarchy.

During the Arab Spring of 2011, it supported the secular reformist February 20 Movement; when they left it, the movement lost momentum. And it did so because it believed it impossible to tackle the reforms by peaceful means, according to Fatah Arsalan, deputy secretary general and spokesman for the Justice and Charity party⁴⁴.

42 *Ibid.*

43 https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/07/01/actualidad/1498913505_591918.html Accessed on 15-10-2017.

44 *Ibid.*

In terms of ideology, the organisation has its roots in Moroccan Sufism, but disassociates itself from Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. Its long-term strategy is to create a caliphate based on democratic principles and respect for human rights. Justice and Charity is pragmatic and flexible and more politicised as a result of the Arab Spring. It seems to be able to adapt to the context, as demonstrated by the group's recent backing of the protest movement that originated in the Rif region.

According to Mohamed Salmi, a member of Justice and Charity's political secretariat, they do not consider themselves close to Fethullah Gulen's movement in Turkey but, rather, to the Turks who took to the streets during the coup; having said that, they see no justification for the crackdown launched by President Erdogan following the revolt. In addition, they are convinced that they will ultimately triumph in Morocco, but are in no rush, and do not feel pressurised by election results⁴⁵.

Justice and Charity is the only organisation in Morocco that can challenge the PJD from an Islamic perspective. They are patient and, in view of the Justice and Development Party's considerable success in the recent election, they will need to be. PJD emerged victorious with 125 seats, 18 more than in the previous election.

The results suggest the consolidation of the PJD party within the Moroccan political system and not the «historical exceptionality» that many anticipated initially. Therefore, the PJD seems to be yet another player in the country's political game⁴⁶. A player, moreover, that does not seem to be affected by the Moroccan public's disaffection with their political system and which has shown what can be accomplished with a cohesive, disciplined party and an electoral and ideological machine that works, that is to say, a fully-fledged political party that behaves as such.

At this point, however, we must stress that not everything hinges on the PJD. Its leverage capacity is restricted by the other parties in the coalition government and, of course, by the Palace, where major decisions and strategies are made. And, as mentioned previously, the king, in addition to reigning, still holds the reins of some branches of government, acts as a referee in the political arena and watches over Morocco's main resources. An institution which, up until now, has demonstrated its ability to maintain the stability and plurality of the system⁴⁷.

Thus, the monarchy and a share of Moroccan Islamist actors are compelled to get along. As a result, the PJD has had to make some concessions such as abandoning its request for a parliamentary monarchy and playing a subordinate role to the royal institution. This has already triggered an internal crisis which was resolved by accepting that «Islamist opposition has nothing to do with the king, with whom we work and

45 *Ibid.*

46 <https://www.esglobal.org/marruecos-vuelve-triunfar-partido-islamista/> Accessed on 04-11-2017.

47 *Ibid.*

in whose direction we are also moving, but with the *Makhzen*, who want to remain in a stasis»⁴⁸.

The *Makhzen* is a parallel power structure, a clientelistic tradition with the king at the top. We have spoken of the Moroccan monarch as the Commander of the Faithful and a descendent of the Prophet, but he is also the head of a bicephalous organisation comprised of a traditional *Makhzen* and a modern administration, as pointed out by Mohamed Tozy, political scientist and professor at Mohammed VI University⁴⁹.

Dâr-al-Makhzen, or the royal palace, is the central location where the culture of power is formed. From here, codes of obedience and command are transmitted, and the labels imposed on the other institutions are prepared, according to Tozy. Thus, *Makhzen* is a characteristic Moroccan structure for the governance of man. As pointed out earlier, it acts as an arbitrator between the parties and permits dissidence and conflict but always within certain limits. There is room for controlled dissidence behind the backs of the state security forces.

According to María Angustias Parejo⁵⁰, professor of political science and administration at the University of Granada, the *Makhzen* creates and drives the political changes needed for its own survival, with everything limited to the country's elite. To use her words: «the king maintains his supremacy by constantly sowing seeds of dependence between him and the chosen sectors of society». It is precisely this flow of material and honorary rewards to the elite that keeps the system going.

In his writings, Mohamed Larbi Ben Othmane, a professor at the Faculty of Law in Rabat, has also spoken of the *Makhzen's* ability to devour opposition and turn it into an instrument to attain its own political ends.

The Moroccan constitution defines the country as a democratic and social constitutional monarchy. The king is placed above the division of powers because his position derives from being a descendent of the Prophet, as stated earlier. And, from this position, he has demonstrated an ability to prevail over other political actors by making a few —small— concessions.

Based on this structure and going a step further, the Moroccan strategy focuses on preventing a single political force from having majority control of government bodies. And this has proven highly effective for maintaining internal stability. Indeed, it is a unique achievement by the Alawite monarchy.

Therefore, unlike the two previous cases, Morocco's political system is not as advanced as Tunisia's (even though, as seen earlier, the two Islamist parties have taken similar paths), nor is access to power to change the system from the inside as easy as

48 *Ibid.*

49 [PDF]El sistema político marroquí: el factor islamista (I) Accessed on 04-II-2017.

50 *Ibid.*

in Turkey, which has resorted to traditional authoritarian solutions. However, it has demonstrated its strength in confronting the challenges sparked by public unrest. Or at least that has been the case up to now. We will have to wait and see what happens with the protests in the Rif and their spread to other parts of the country.

To paraphrase Lampedusa in *The Leopard*, the king has changed a few things so everything more or less stays the same. The PJD has adapted itself and achieved a degree of—albeit limited—power, while the more orthodox members of Justice and Charity barely have a say in the matter because they have chosen to remain outside the system. By making a few minor tweaks, the Moroccan political system appears to have quashed Islamist opposition (but has allowed a degree of criticism, even of the monarch, such as Benkirane's statement at the beginning of this section).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Therefore, we find ourselves on the cusp of a new era, in search of a new equilibrium whose determinants will depend more on the level of modernisation of a society than on strictly religious historical and regional factors.

Abdelmajid Charfi⁵¹.

For this article, three cases were selected from societies that are considered quite developed for the region, particularly Tunisia and Turkey, Morocco to a lesser extent. Each country has strong Islamist parties in their political systems that have opted for pragmatic solutions. The parties have their roots in political Islam and have evolved, in the case of Morocco, along the path of democracy (to use Western terminology) with many nuances, given the power the king still holds and the country's clientelistic system. The parties in Turkey and Tunisia have taken similar paths, towards a Muslim democracy in the case of Tunisia, and a self-proclaimed conservative democracy in the case of Turkey. And yet, the latter two are currently at different stages of development, key stages for shaping their future and that of their respective countries. Ennahda is in no rush to govern and is willing to compromise. AKP is sliding towards authoritarianism.

Although five years have passed since Tunisia's «Arab Spring», it cannot be said that the country is out of danger yet. On the one hand, there is the threat of Daesh and, on the other, the old political and economic elites that have regained a large part of their power, in addition to serious inequality, unemployment and the difficulty of building a prosperous economy. The Tunisian President's recent appointment of a family member to the post of prime minister caused outrage among many Tunisians⁵² and does not bode well.

⁵¹ <http://www.pensamientocritico.org/charfi0209.pdf> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

⁵² <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/outcry-tunisian-president-proposes-relative-pm-160802142650355.html> Accessed on 02-08-2016.

Meanwhile, Ennahda, a victim of its own inexperience after losing support due to its failures in government, is in no rush to return to power. It has instead opted for negotiation and compromise as a means of riding out a tumultuous and unstable period of transition fraught with uncertainty. And yet, Tunisia is a paradise compared to how other Arab Spring uprisings have panned out. And, for the sake of achieving its political objectives, as any other party would do, Ennahda's heart remains Islamist, although not so much as before, and is now focused more on its own sphere of action. Without mixing religion and politics. In this process, religion is just another factor, and an important one, but it is far from being the only one or the most important one today.

In this regard, the case of Morocco's PJD is similar to that of its Tunisian counterpart. The most notable difference between the two, as researcher Bruce Maddy-Weitzman points out, is that the Moroccan regime has been a relatively successful «modernizing monarchy», if we can use such a term, and Maddy-Weitzman uses quotation marks because it should be viewed with caution. Going back to the similarities, when they encountered stiff resistance from the regime and bureaucratic apparatus, as happened in Tunisia, the two Islamist parties opted for a more pragmatic and peaceful solution, primarily because they did not have sufficient institutional capability to change fundamentally the way their national political systems are run⁵³, as pointed out by Mohammed El-Katiri, researcher at the British Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC). And in the case of both Morocco and Tunisia the issue lies, not in the religious aspect, but the political one, in the lack of capacity required to turn values into realistic policy, into government action, something that is generally acquired through experience. We can therefore conclude that the two parties still have a long way to go before they are capable of achieving their political goals.

The case of Turkey is different. To quote AKP member of parliament, Talip Kucuckan: «We respect him (Ataturk) very much, but today we have a country in which the army no longer decides, nor academia, nor the media. This is a different kind of democracy today. His decisions were right for the 1930s and Ataturk must be seen in the right context – not to use his memory or ideology to frighten us into using the army and forcing secularism (on people). Ataturk was always the excuse, but we have to move on (...). What people outside of Turkey are not willing to understand is that while it's true that there is a conservative thread in our party, it reflects more than half of our society. We have conservative and Muslim values – but we are also different from Muslims in other places because our Islam is more moderate, being mixed with Sufism and influenced by our close contact with the West and the

53 <http://www.rubincenter.org/1997/07/weitzman-1997-07-07/> Accessed on 20-11-2017.

54 https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2014/ssi_el-katiri_140721.pdf Accessed on 20-11-2017.

minorities that live among us»⁵⁵. Thus, among other things, the AKP believes that Turkey has «overcome» the secular republican regime and sees its «democracy» as different. So, the question at this point would be: What will you call the regime that emerges after the process initiated by Erdogan in 2013 has been completed? Only «presidentialist»?

And there are more questions, such as: What will happen to all the supporters of a secular state, and those who are not convinced by present-day Islam? And what will Erdogan do with all the power he has amassed when the numbers for the democracy, the votes, do not tally with the plan he has devised? When something similar happened during the general election of June 2015, the president steered his party towards extreme nationalism and invoked the threat of a violent internal and external enemy. And it worked; at the snap general election in November that year, AKP had a landslide victory. This came with a price, however; as British journalist and commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, Christopher de Bellaigue, has pointed out «the combination of nationalism and religiosity is like nothing I have seen in twenty years of following Turkish politics»⁵⁶. In addition, Metin Gurcan, a Turkish security analyst has underscored how, as a result of the recent coup attempt «Turkish civilian-military relations have become a new domain for political conflict on the nature and extent of secularism, Kemalism, and religion, which is not good»⁵⁷.

Thus, in this case, although religion is part of the DNA of the political system that Erdogan has designed, its action is fundamentally and primarily political; motivated by his intention to make his political plan a reality and to personally direct it for as long as possible. This raises many questions about the future of the regime and the country. What seems clear, however, is that the charismatic Turkish leader is not lacking popular support.

Therefore, it appears that, not only in order to survive, but also to achieve its political goals, political Islam is willing to adjust to the rules of the political system in each country. Morocco's PJD has had to make greater concessions and adjustments and, while Tunisia's Ennahda has made greater progress, it has also had to make major concessions, and AKP has resorted to traditional and, if I may be so bold as to say, «very *alla turca*» authoritarian solutions.

The impression is that, despite the obvious ideological similarities, in practice, just as religious practices and societies vary from one Muslim region to the next, the same occurs with political solutions. On the one hand, we have the tendency towards authoritarianism that is in Turkey's DNA and something it shares with its neighbours

55 <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-1.732749?v=7AE770EFD8B39F18421631B3A92A36D5> Accessed on 24-07-2016.

56 [Http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/08/06/turkey-chooses-erdogan/](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/08/06/turkey-chooses-erdogan/) Accessed on 15-08-2016.

57 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/military-shake-affect-turkey-future-160814031324825.html> Accessed on 15-08-2016.

of the Mashreq and Central Asia, while the Maghribi Islamist parties we looked at (excluding the case of Algeria, which is very different from its neighbours) have chosen another solution that involves a greater tendency to compromise with the system, to adapt to it.

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