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Learning mechanisms within an Islamist party: Tunisia's Ennahda Movement between domestic and regional balances

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ABSTRACT

This article stresses the importance of learning in the transformation of an incumbent Islamist party within the context of polity re-configuration. Borrowing from the literature on diffusion and learning, it offers a case study of how Tunisia's Ennahda Movement responded to the interplay of multi-level challenges. Main argument is that Ennahda has significantly re-tailored its positioning since the critical juncture of 2013, not only by taking the route of moderation once again, but also by exercising self-restraint under the impulse of external counter-examples. Based on process-tracing readings, the analysis contained herein demonstrates how key regional and domestic events have helped reshape the party's political discourse and practices, designed to maximise the likelihood of its survival and progressive empowerment in a more markedly hostile environment. The paper thus empirically identifies three main strategies implemented by the party and reflecting learning on its part: readiness to negotiate, a reassuring attitude, and self-containment.

KEYWORDS: Political parties; learning; Ennahda; self-restraint; self-limitation; moderation; political Islam

Introduction

In 2011, Tunisia – the birthplace of the ‘Arab Spring’ – sent powerful new signals beyond its national borders: firstly, to Arab citizens by inspiring protesters across the region; and secondly, to Arab regimes by setting an example for a feasible democratic alternative to the authoritarian systems in place at the time. By 2020, it was the democratic frontrunner within the Arab world, despite the fact that the country was being hit by increasing waves of populism and nationalism, the Tunisian economy was in dismal shape, joblessness was rampant, and corruption remained widespread. While Tunisia has led the way for change, its experience of political transition has not been replicated elsewhere so far. Compromise solutions reached by diverse ideological forces, together with the consensus-driven politics pursued by political elites, stand in stark contrast to the unyielding rivalries and factionalism witnessed in other countries across the region, some of which have since plunged into civil war or seen a resurgence of authoritarianism. After decades of transformation towards ‘moderation’, in the search for public recognition, Ennahda – which describes itself as a party and movement of Muslim democrats – became an integral part of the Tunisian political scene in 2011. Furthermore, since then it has continuously been the incumbent party. Nevertheless, it has continued to adopt an increasingly moderate line, which I believe amounts to self-limitation,¹ despite the movement’s emergence from opposition ranks and clandestinity to take power. I focus on this puzzling circumstance in my analysis in order to shed light on the decisions and outlook of a contemporary Islamist party which, although in a privileged and unprecedented position of power, opted for self-restraint from a given moment in time onwards.

What factors explain the decisions and policies of this Islamist party? Why did it choose to self-limit? What is new and different from the adoption of a traditional moderate line? In trying to answer these questions, the article argues that the party’s self-restraint and abandonment of more orthodox Islamic demands should be seen as a learning process and the outcome of that process. It contends that Ennahda’s learning process was fundamentally driven by observing the regional experiences of other Islamist actors and the post-uprising experiences elsewhere which were even more significant given the fragile, uncertain nature of the domestic context. In formal terms, the paper accordingly focuses on the relationship between three variables: the party’s learning process (which enters the analysis as a mediating variable); the complex, multifaceted interaction of regional and domestic events (the independent variable); and the party’s response in government as the outcome of learning (the dependent variable). The dependent variable is in turn understood in terms of three attitudes: a readiness to negotiate, a reassuring attitude, and a self-containment

capacity. These attitudes, all adopted within the framework of self-limitation, by no means came out of the blue. On the contrary, they represented the continuation and evolution of that ideological and practical moderation which aimed to achieve the movement's integration into the political fold, at a time when such integration had been accomplished, and yet was not being taken for granted. At the same time, they also relate, but cannot be limited to, moderation.

Hence, in order to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced picture, this paper aims to complement previous approaches by including the regional (and international) dimensions, and by systematizing a broader set of behaviour. To this end, the learning approach is a useful lens through which to understand how Ennahda has been reshaping itself in parallel with the re-definition of political authorities and public spaces, both domestically and regionally. By borrowing from the categories first singled out within the literature on learning (and more broadly, that on 'diffusion') the article innovatively applies concepts traditionally used to depict the evolution of social movements and autocratic regimes, to a different category of actors, namely Islamists.

From a methodological perspective, this research relies principally on party statements, press interviews and voting procedures, as well as on information gathered during the course of two rounds of personal interviews and informal conversations with Ennahda MPs and party cadres (a total of 17 interviewees), conducted in November 2015 and March-April 2017. Drawing on all this information, the paper highlights Ennahda's most important declared and implemented decisions, and traces them back to key regional and domestic events. In particular, it identifies two crucial moments affecting the party's decision-making and new outlook, which occurred between 2013 and 2014, and then in 2016 respectively, as detailed further on.

This article proceeds as follows. Section 1 compares the idea of self-limitation with the dominant theoretical framework of moderation and its limits. Section 2 provides an overview of the broader literature on learning and its emphasis on democratising actors and their counterparts. Section 3 discusses the assumptions underpinning the learning approach and how they apply to this analysis. Section 4 introduces the case of Ennahda by tracing each of the three lines of conduct back to the interplay of domestic and external factors. The final section concludes with a reflection on self-restraint as an evolution of moderation, and on the potential reversibility of such self-limitation based on contingent events and the party's leadership.

Moderation or self-limitation? A new theoretical framework

In 2011, Islamist parties won general elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, and they have since been the focus of much scholarly interest, as the introduction to this

special issue shows. There have been numerous studies of Ennahda since then, with works examining its history (Wolf, 2017), the role of its members in keeping the organisation alive during the years of exile and clandestinity (McCarthy, 2018), its unique path to moderation as driven by its exclusion from the political sphere prior to 2011 (unlike other Islamist parties elsewhere: see Cavatorta & Merone, 2013), its economic agenda and policy proposals (Ben Salem, 2020; Cimini, 2017), as well as its record in power (Guazzone, 2013), among many others. While these works have been incredibly important in revealing the behavioural and ideological changes within Ennahda, they have had two limitations: their focus has been almost exclusively domestic; and they have drawn, implicitly or explicitly, on the moderation framework, commonly interpreted as a departure from the original Muslim Brotherhood (MB)'s guiding principles for a shift towards a liberal democratic agenda. The literature has illustrated how Ennahda's journey towards moderation began as a result of its exclusion from power under Bourghiba and Ben Ali's authoritarian regimes, not unlike Egypt's Wasat party which underwent a process of moderation within a context of increased repression and weak incentives while in opposition (Wickham, 2004). In doing so, the literature has suggested that Ennahda represents an exception to other anti-systemic and radical parties in democratising contexts, where it was the political opening that provided the incentives to revise such parties' means or ultimate goals (or both), and to accept the give and take of the new democratic politics or opening (that is, to become moderates), in order that these parties could secure their inclusion and increase their electoral appeal. However, scholars have provided an incomplete picture which fails to offer a true understanding of Ennahda, and possibly of Islamist parties as a whole, as they exclusively relied on the theoretical tools of moderation, be it by exclusion as in the case of Ennahda or by inclusion as more often argued, and considered regime changes alone. Firstly, the literature largely ignores why Tunisia's Islamists opted for self-restraint after the movement's inclusion in the political sphere, and even after it had become a governing party. Secondly, one may wonder whether moderation is the only defining trait of Islamist movements and parties instead of additional, and often complementing, attitudes like their negotiation skills, the attempts at reassurance about their own liberal nature, or a self-imposed censorship to forge an 'acceptable' identity. Thirdly, and somehow paradoxically, whereas comparisons of Islamists abound, little causal weight has been given to the fact that the ways they change also reflect fellow counter-examples. A more fine-grained examination, therefore, ought to expand the framework of analysis by moving beyond moderation (by, for instance, bringing in self-limitation variants) and taking into account broader regional and international trends. On the one hand, this paper is no different from previous studies insofar as it shares the argument that the Islamist parties have abandoned more 'radical' positions to seize new political opportunities and expand

their visibility and influence, just like other 'radical' opposition parties before them. At the same time, however, the article goes beyond other studies in two important ways: firstly, it frames Ennahda's changing discourses and practices not only in terms of moderation but also in terms of readiness to negotiate, reassuring attitude and self-containment, all self-limitation variants; and secondly, it argues that Ennahda has devised its strategy in government by learning from external counter-examples.

Two things ought to be observed at this point. Firstly, the information needed to reconstruct the evolution of learning processes is almost invariably biased as a result of the many possible alternative explanations and intervening variables, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather complementary (in regard to this limitation, see, for instance, Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; Zito & Schout, 2009). One may consider, for example, institutional constraints and organisational development (Wegner, 2011), the generational factor, or the experience of living abroad (Grewal, 2020), as factors shaping different strategies at any given moment. In other words, at the analytical level, while the influence of regional and international factors on domestic scenarios can be easily observed or detected, it is not so easy to identify a stable causal link between foreign-generated influences and various actors' decisions. However, in addition to the evidence produced, the very fact that Ennahda itself acknowledges such connections,² would corroborate my argument. Secondly, the behavioural factors I mention reflect on the party's current leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. For the sake of simplicity, I will generally refer to Ennahda in terms of the party's direction that currently mirrors its historical leader's orientation, although I am fully aware of the many currents within the party, which is anything but a monolithic entity.

Beyond authoritarian and democratic learning

As Hall and Ambrosio (2017, p. 145) recall by echoing Stein (1994, p. 236), there is no 'unified theory of learning' or widely accepted definition of what learning is, as these terms have been employed in political science. This is partly due to the multidisciplinary realm from which the concept originates. In part, it has been conceptually incorporated as one of the modalities of the broader notion of diffusion; in part, learning is also used as a synonym for that same notion. When it comes to the actors whose evolution is under scrutiny, two are of particular importance, namely: social movements demanding stable democracy or greater rights; and their counterparts, such as the political regimes' elites or security forces. In other words, the literature emphasises the dynamics of learning within the framework of contentious politics in general, democratisation, and authoritarian resilience. This paper will expand on that by showing how the learning framework is a useful lens to explain the actions of other political actors like incumbent Islamist

parties and other ranges of behaviour besides the latter's traditional feature of moderation.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, Hall and Ambrosio (2017) distinguish between different understandings of learning which relate to, and often overlap with, one another. In their view, (policy) learning differs not only from diffusion, but also from other notions like isomorphism, due to the degree of voluntarism and agency it enshrines. While all three of these notions share the idea of a transfer, in their analysis, isomorphism entails a certain degree of internal or external constraint while diffusion features a lower level of intentionality, sometimes taking on the meaning of involuntary, unintentional 'contagion'. By contrast, learning implies a greater degree of freedom and a 'peer-to-peer', intentional process (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 147). What is more, policy learning 'focuses on the act of adoption, whereas diffusion focuses on the networks which facilitate that adoption' (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 148). Furthermore, diffusion and learning studies differ in that the former put greater emphasis on structural explanations – such as geography, trading, cultural affinities or political similarities – while the latter focus on agency.

Recent diffusion literature has argued that learning processes act as drivers and mechanisms for the spreading of norms, ideas, policies and ranges of behaviour, among other things. Learning, for instance, belongs to the set of mechanisms for the 'global diffusion' of international norms that Simmons et al. (2006) single out. In their words, learning 'refers to a change in beliefs or change in one's confidence in existing beliefs, which can result from exposure to new evidence, theories or behavioural repertoires' (Simmons et al., 2006, p. 795). Notably, if geographical and cultural proximity makes the learning process more likely to occur, it has to be intended as something more than the influence of simple exogenous factors (Simmons et al., 2006, p. 3). This implies the specific investigation of the impact of external events on the choices made by domestic actors. Likewise, Della Porta and Tarrow (2012) see learning as a composite process underpinning what they call 'interactive diffusion', namely the reciprocal adaptation, thereby coevolution, of social movements and their opposing forces, with the spread of these innovations across national borders. In this regard, one could say that the learning process incorporates both rational and normative elements, in the sense that it is both outcome-oriented and past-oriented, reflective and unreflective, as Searing (1995) would have put it.

When it comes to research on the Arab Spring, a great number of studies have developed the insights offered by the broader diffusion literature (Braun & Gilardi, 2006; Gilardi, 2012; Simmons et al., 2006; Weyland, 2005), to explain the onset of successive revolts in the MENA region, with some scholars referring to 'demonstration effects' (Bamert et al., 2015; Owen, 2012) in terms of diffusion (Herb, 2014; Lynch, 2013, 2014; Mekouar, 2014; Patel et al., 2014; Saideman, 2012), and others, more specifically, in terms of learning (Hale, 2013; Weyland, 2012). Hence,

several qualitative studies, and to a lesser extent quantitative analyses (Bamert et al., 2015), have shown how Arab citizens take the cue from protests in other countries to engage in regime contention. A key way in which they do so is by seeking out examples of 'the same watchwords, slogans, and symbols' (Weyland, 2012, p. 926). Likewise, certain Arab regimes watched and learned from the experiences of their neighbours (namely Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) as the first wave of protests unfolded, and developed new mechanisms of repression and co-optation in order to maintain power. A second strand of literature has therefore focused on the survival strategies that authoritarian rulers adopted in response to the demonstrations of the Arab Spring (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011, 2014), in the wake of learning mechanisms observed elsewhere (Danneman & Ritter, 2014; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; Koesel & Bunce, 2013).

With regard to this literature, this article focuses on learning as distinct from diffusion, in view of its emphasis on agency and its greater degree of intentionality, without disregarding the importance of structural explanations. Learning undoubtedly also enshrines a fundamental aspect of cognitive and voluntary transformation, which a simple, more instrumental, transfer does not possess. This way, one does not run the risk of broadly representing any change connected in some way to a momentarily previous action, as a process of learning. To sum up then, studies examining the evolution of social movements and counter-revolutionary forces advance learning arguments in relation to foreign-generated (counter-)examples. By contrast, insofar as the Islamist movements and parties are concerned, learning is tied to civic habituation or strategic calculations as a corollary of moderation, and is based on domestic considerations. What does learning imply and how can this approach be applied to Islamists? This is exactly what the next sections will be examining.

Learning by doing ... what others do not do.

Theories of learning encompass a wide array of assumptions. These include suppositions concerning: (1) the extent of intentionality at stake; (2) what the main drivers of learning are; (3) who the primary innovators and recipients are; and (4) its being an action rather than an outcome. These four aspects are essential building blocks for any reflection on learning and the subsequent reshaping of ideas, beliefs and agendas, regardless of who the stakeholders are.

First, as the abovementioned scholars underscore, learning is about change. Nonetheless, 'not all change is learning' (Stein, 1994, p. 236 [quoted in Hall & Ambrosio, 2017]). Even though scholars fail to agree on a clear definition of learning, what distinguishes learning from other types of change concerns, above all, its intentionality. Other specialists distinguish between rational and bounded learning,

with the former assuming full rationality while the latter implies cognitive shortcuts (Weyland, 2009, 2012). While in the case of rational learning, decisions are the product of 'unbiased cost-benefit calculations', according to the bounded learning framework they are driven by striking events and information that might also lead to inaccurate assessments, as in the case of demonstrators excited, and then frustrated, by the possibility of replicating the Tunisian example in their own countries (Bamert et al., 2015). Following Herbert Simon's writings on the concept of bounded rationality, perhaps the idea of full, unbiased rationality ought to be dismissed tout court.

Rather, and here we come to the second point, one might wonder whether learning entails a more or less substantive change, that is, a change of tactics or of core beliefs, values and goals, or both. Islamists' behavioural or ideological changes have been mainly explored through the moderation framework, not least in relation to strategic calculations or a process of internalisation of norms and beliefs. For instance, when Wickham (2004) addresses the case of the Islamist Wasat party in Mubarak's Egypt, she sees its ideological moderation as both the result of strategic learning – intended here as rational cost-benefit calculations designed to circumvent new political constraints – and the outcome of political learning implying a non-instrumental commitment to democracy and the internalisation of its core values.

Thirdly, using the jargon adopted in both diffusion and learning literature, we distinguish between innovators (or exporters) on the one side, and adopters (or importers) and resisters on the other side. This means that the change materialises either in the adoption or the rejection of a set of practices and narratives. So, learning is both about what to emulate, and what to avoid. To put it differently, it is about examples and, as I argue here, counter-examples.

Fourthly, following the observations made by Elkins and Simmons (2005) regarding the concept of diffusion, when pointing to the confusion it creates when applied as both outcome and process, the concept of learning also entails this ambiguity. Hence, both the modalities and the process itself, together with its results, have to be taken into account in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

In light of the above, I thereby argue that Ennahda intentionally changed, both ideologically and practically, in response to changing contexts and to new evidence from other Islamist experiences and regional post-uprising trajectories. In particular, regionwide counter-examples leveraging on multiple areas of domestic uncertainty encouraged self-limitation. Indeed, Tunisia can be rightfully considered an 'innovator' insofar as it was the country to trigger political change, setting in motion a series of regional protests. It turned over a new leaf, and in so doing paved the way for the diffusion of new models even in terms of the management of post-uprising settings and governance in the MENA region. At the same time, incumbent Islamists

paradoxically found themselves in a peculiar situation of being both the ‘innovators’ and those learning from the experiences of others occurring concurrently elsewhere. In this sense, Ennahda’s learning – intended as both a process and its outcome – was not designed to replicate a model, but rather to prevent the unintended outcomes of other countries or other Islamist actors’ political developments, namely repression, isolation or condemnation, with the post-2013 Egyptian MB being the most glaring example of such an outcome. In this attempt to preserve its own position, or even guarantee its very survival, within the renewed political arena, Ennahda has been shaping its own model of action and behaviour, mindful of its past repression at the hands of the Tunisian regime, and with an eye on developments elsewhere.

Legitimation by self-restraint: Ennahda’s three-pronged learning approach

As anticipated in the introduction, Ennahda made significant unexpected decisions between 2013 and 2014, which paved the way for a second key moment, namely the movement’s official transformation into a party of Muslim democrats in 2016. These changes reflected a learning process in response to a fast-changing, volatile environment that was increasingly unfavourable to political Islam, both at home and abroad. The 2013 military takeover in Egypt – the focal point of the Arab uprisings together with Tunisia – was undoubtedly a critical juncture in the region’s political development. It marked the triumph of counter revolutionary forces, and showed how easily democratically elected institutions could be toppled. When looking at the evolving sphere of political Islam, the Egyptian coup also exposed the precariousness of the Islamists’ condition, even when in power. In the same year, the authoritarian drift of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) – long praised as the Islamist champion of democratic and economic reforms – became very apparent following the crackdown on the Gezi Park protests. Not least, political Islam had to reckon with the appearance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In Tunisia, Salafi-Jihadi violence escalated, culminating in the 2013 murders of two left-wing politicians, reaching breaking point against the backdrop of growing Islamist-secular polarisation. Subsequently, the deadly terrorist attacks on foreign tourists in 2015, and the 2016 attack carried out in the border town of Ben Guerdane, together represent a further critical juncture in Tunisian politics. Meanwhile, the mounting pressure within the region, exemplified by the revival of the Libyan conflict in 2014, the increasingly impaired reputation of the AKP, not to mention the conflict in Syria and the rise of ISIS, all contributed to Ennahda’s learning vis-à-vis the possibility of renewed repression and chaos. While being strictly entrenched within the contingent situation, Ennahda’s agency, in terms of its informed decision-making – which was anything but self-evident or unavoidable – remains crucial.

Soon after the revolution, Ennahda campaigned on the basis of its status as an outsider that represented a clean break with the existing regime, pursuing the goals of the revolution. Finding itself in an unprecedented position of power, with numerous windows of opportunity opening up, Ennahda's internal debate mainly focused on alliances and constitution-making. The initial attempts made to include religious provisions in the constitution, the ambiguous stance adopted vis-à-vis the Salafists, and the support lent to revolution-inspired legislative proposals such as that of lustration, characterised the early phase of the party's period in government. It was precisely in regard to these questions that the party changed direction, concomitantly with the abovementioned critical events. The interplay of domestic and regional contingencies reinforced, and further legitimised, the accommodating faction linked to Ghannouchi, to the detriment of other less compromising factions represented most visibly by conservative MPs Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou.

Ennahda's three-pronged learning approach – consisting in (1) a readiness to negotiate; (2) the adoption of a reassuring attitude; and (3) self-containment – clearly emerges when looking at the party's changing stances on critical issues, its declarations and the timing of these shifts in position. These aspects all related to a self-limiting formula, not dissimilar to the one adopted by the MB in Egypt, which nonetheless soon abandoned this approach by capitalising on its new prominence, a move which cost it dearly (Azaola-Piazza & Hernando de Larramendi, 2020). For the sake of clarity, such behaviour is not completely new; however, it undoubtedly assumes greater vividness and significance given the unprecedented domestic and regional circumstances.

Readiness to negotiate

Ennahda's compromising attitude – as well as its consensus politics as a way of solving political conflict in Tunisia – may have come as a surprise to many but it had an important precedent in the form of the October 2005 Coalition for Rights and Freedoms. This was an agreement bringing together a variety of opponents to Ben Ali's regime – including Islamists, liberals, nationalists and left-wingers – who pragmatically chose to set aside their ideological differences thus paving the way for future compromises (Ben Hafaiedh & Zartman, 2015). Ennahda's opening to cross-ideological cooperation can thus be seen as an indicator of an on-going change from its initial, more self-referential condition and 'insular' network towards moderation, as evidenced elsewhere among Islamist forces (Schwedler, 2011; Wickham, 2004).

Post-2011 circumstances definitely encouraged the acceptance of the need for dialogue and cooperation across the political spectrum. This was partly out of necessity, since institutional constraints – the pure proportional system above all – made political compromise and the formation of coalition governments almost

mandatory, rather than a preferred option for all political actors. Yet, readiness to dialogue and engagement in compromise are far from self-evident. As soon as it took office, despite having formerly shown its readiness to accept such solutions, and long endorsed even cross-ideological cooperation, Ennahda hardened its position when drafting the wording of the Constitution. This hardening of positions led to a political impasse. By contrast, a number of decisions taken since the summer of 2013 have represented a qualitative shift in the party's position. Most notably, it decided to be party to the crisis resolution negotiations known as National Dialogue, to forego any hard-line stance on constitutional matters, to vote down the lustration law advocated by revolutionary forces it had previously supported, and to formally relinquish power in January 2014 – a one-off in the Arab world for an Islamist-dominated government that has risen to power through elections (Werenfels, 2014).

The exact timing of these transformations from the summer 2013 onwards indirectly suggests a new awareness of how risky alternative choices could be, and points to a thoughtful, intentional change, which can rightly be regarded as a learning process.

At home, Ennahda found itself in a particularly tense situation on many different levels. The delay on the constitution-making timeline, the limited responsiveness on the part of the political class, and the slow economic recovery were frustrating the considerable expectations generated by the revolution, as the continuous street protests at the time demonstrated. Moreover, repeated attacks by Salafi groups, together with the murder of a prominent left-wing politician – Choukri Belaid – not only epitomised the national security vacuum, but also increased ideological polarisation and the mistrust shown towards Ennahda, which was held politically responsible for the general situation and for the soft line it had originally taken towards Salafists. Something similar happened to Morocco's Islamist Justice and Development Party after the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks (Tomé-Alonso, 2021). With protests mounting, calling for the resignation of the Ennahda-led coalition government and the dissolution of parliament, two events in the summer of 2013 were to bring about a decisive change. First was the military coup on July 3 against Egypt's Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, and the corresponding crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the country. Second, at the domestic level, there was the jihadist-perpetrated assassination of another left-wing politician, Mohamed Brahmi, on July 25. The former event energised the wave of criticism against Ennahda by rendering the possibility of reversing democratically elected legislative and governmental bodies. Indeed, its opponents echoed the rhetoric used by Egypt's Tamarrod (Rebellion) movement in the anti-Morsi protests advancing 'a sort of supra-electoral "street legitimacy"' (Marks, 2017a). However, it was Brahmi's assassination that really fuelled public anger and anxiety. For weeks in August, anti-Ennahda protesters backed by opposition parties, met in front of the Bardo, the seat

of the parliament, which consequently was forced to suspend activity. In the middle of that crisis, and contrary to previous arrangements, Ghannouchi stated on TV that the ongoing lustration draft law was not going to be approved. He also met in Paris with Beji Caid Essebsi, founder and leader of its rising challenger, the Nidaa Tounes party, a strong promoter of antiEnnahda demonstrations. In doing so, he signalled a willingness to negotiate at the leadership level, notwithstanding the mutual animosity between their parties, which initially were poles apart. In September, Ennahda finally agreed to take part in the National Dialogue platform and to step down in favour of a technocratic government, subject to the proviso that it would formally step down from power only after the promulgation of the new Constitution under its watch.

By the end of 2013, Ennahda's leadership had also renounced a number of Islam-inspired articles in the Constitution, such as the inclusion of Shari'a (Islamic law) as a source of legislation, women's 'complementary' rather than 'equal' status, and the criminalisation of blasphemy. While it is true that the bulk of these compromises was already written in the third constitutional draft months before the coup, the fourth draft preceding it (June 2013) was still fraught with a number of fundamental divergences, and failed to gain consensus within the parliament and among the party's hawks and doves (Redissi & Boukhayatia, 2015).

Moreover, by the end of the year, Ennahda's leadership had abandoned the prorevolutionary demand for a lustration provision in the transitional justice law, firmly opposed by the old regime elite revolving around Nidaa Tounes. After having voted in favour of lustration at its 9th party congress in July 2012, and confirmed its willingness in a parliamentary vote in June 2013 (Marsad Majles, 2013a), the party changed course. In fact, Ghannouchi now advocated a normalisation strategy and inclusion at all costs (Gobe, 2018; Marks, 2017a, p. 48). Despite significant controversy and criticism within its rank-and-file, transitional justice law finally passed without the chapter on the 'immunisation of the revolution' which would have banned former regime officials from holding political office. In April 2014, when the issue re-emerged during the debate for the electoral law, a specific provision prohibiting former members of Ben Ali's disbanded regime party from contesting Tunisia's 2014 was narrowly rejected. As for the 'immunisation of the revolution' and the lustration provision in the electoral law, Ennahda – known for its strong party discipline and high attendance records – split on the vote (Marsad Majles, 2013b; Marsad Majles, 2014). Some remained loyal to the initial party's stance, a minority clearly expressed a vote against in accordance with Ghannouchi's new instructions, while others within the group either abstained or failed to attend thus indirectly voting down the provisions (Khadraoui, 2013, December).

While certainly not claiming that Ennahda's tangible openings to dialogue and compromises, which materialised in the abovementioned decision changes, are

mere by-products of the Egyptian coup, I nonetheless contend that domestic pressure and the accumulated experience of Islamist fellows abroad, did in fact impact Ennahda's readiness to make concessions as a consequence of the 2013 critical juncture.

Notably, in the concluding statement of its 10th Congress, Ennahda reflected on the region-wide shift towards counter-revolution, by recognising the centrality of 2013, albeit without specifically mentioning it or the coup in Egypt. Before illustrating the exceptional achievements of Tunisia in such a mutated context, and its central role in that process thanks to its consensus-seeking purpose, it states as follows:

Two years had barely passed since the beginning of change brought by the revolution of the Arab Spring when the magnitude of the counter-attack was manifested, as well as the extent of the weakness of the Arab political and cultural scene, the gap between the dream and the reality, and the ill-preparedness of political forces aspiring for change and reform to ensure a democratic transition in their countries. (Ennahda, 2016, May 27)

As further evidence, Ennahda itself acknowledged on several occasions that Morsi's ouster and the following massive repression of the MB, acted as a wake-up call since they pointed to both the vulnerability of Tunisia's transition, and the fragility of the Islamists' own position in the country. In a number of interviews, Ghannouchi clearly expressed his concern about importing a coup from Egypt (Weymouth, 2013, December), as the opposition was in favour of such a development (Pedziwiatr, 2015, March). After all, he repeatedly acknowledged the errors of Morsi's maximalist, exclusionary approach to politics and uncompromising stance regarding old-regime-oriented figures, a counter-example to be avoided. By contrast, Ennahda opted for 'a political path based on rejecting polarisation, monopoly and exclusion' (Ennahda, 2016).

Reassuring attitude

The second outcome of Ennahda's learning process was a proactive, reassuring attitude with regards to the party's genuine, intimate commitment to (liberal) democracy and the rejection of jihadism. In a way, this stance can be conceived as the last manifestation of what has been previously defined as 'defensive' strategy (Marks, 2014) which relates, more properly, to cautiousness and to renouncing 'speaking up in favour of either ideological Islamist or revolutionary justice issues' (Marks, 2015, p. 12).

With domestic and international terrorism on the rise, Ennahda realised the need not only to distancing itself from the association between Islam and violent Islamic militancy, but also to diverge from other unsuccessful Islamist alternatives elsewhere by establishing an innovative new modus operandi. Indeed, Salafi and ISIS-claimed

attacks in Tunisia fuelled the fear of a resurgent Islamist threat which could nullify the gains of a modernist tradition. Abroad, the Caliphate's advance in Syria and the ISIS-backed attacks in Europe, increased the mistrust of Islamists in power. The primacy of the oversimplified, reductionist approach whereby the broad spectrum of political Islamist forces is equated with its most radical and violent forms thus had a major bearing on Ennahda's learning process, as shown by its shifting discourse and policy.

To be fair, since its legalisation in March 2011, the party has been working on reassuring international and national opinion about its democratic values on two fronts: through its mainstream official discourse and, in practice, by tailoring its internal organisation and key operating procedures in such a way as to corroborate such claims of democracy (Cimini, 2020). However, it is especially from 2013 onwards, that it more convincingly embraced Tunisia's cultural heritage and uniqueness, by distancing itself from other 'experiences of Islam' and models, like in Turkey or elsewhere. At the same time, Ennahda more explicitly adopted vocal positions on counter-terrorism and against Salafists, after previously overlooking them. Lastly, but not least, it opted for the more neutral label 'Muslim Democrats'.

After the revolution, when the Islamist party – largely unknown to an international public – came to power, it was not uncommon to find appreciations of Turkey's much more popular AKP, explicitly acknowledged as a model by virtue of its successes in the field of economics, human rights and democracy (Medini, 2013, May; Abedin, 2011, January). Following Erdogan's crackdown on internal dissent during the 2013 Gezi Park protests and increasing Western criticism – also intensified after the silencing of the Gulenist movement in 2016 – Ennahda distanced itself from the Turkish model it had originally praised (on this point, see also Marks, 2017b). Discursively, this was especially clear from the renewed emphasis on the party's home-grown dimension and its Tunisian roots and specificities, as embodied by the notion of *Tunisianité*. In other words, Ennahda more vocally portrayed itself as a very context-specific experiment, based on Tunisian Islam, namely the traditional reformism and tolerance of the Zitouna mosque in Tunis, regardless of its doubtful historical attachment to this school of thought (Ayari & Brésillon, 2019, p. 97). In one of his interviews on the occasion of the 32nd anniversary of the establishment of the Ennahda movement, Ghannouchi fully recognised Tunisia's pioneering experience as an Arab Muslim democracy based on religious coexistence, and presented this as a model to be replicated by other countries (Al-Hamrouni, 2013, June). Interestingly, in the same interview, he quickly dismissed the public protests unfolding in Turkey as an 'ordinary matter in democratic regimes', leaving it up to the voters to assess Erdogan's 'Turkish model'.

While increasingly playing down any associations with the AKP in favour of the unique Tunisian model, Ennahda also began to take up anti-Salafi jihadism positions.

Salafi attacks had been mounting for two years, and Ennahda had been widely criticised for delaying condemnation of such attacks. It was only in August 2013 that the government officially declared the Salafi jihadi group of Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organisation. The reversal of the initial inclusion-driven approach to it (Cavatorta, 2015) to a more securitised approach (Marks, 2017a) offers an example of Ennahda's learning within the context of growing domestic hostility and the changing regional and international environment.

Moreover, skimming through official party statements from 2011 onwards, the increasingly reassuring posture becomes clear.³ While the reiteration of the party's commitment to democracy is, not surprisingly, a constant, statements issued between 2011 and 2012 emphasise the notions of dignity and social justice as the cornerstones of the revolution, together with the democratic achievements of the country. In 2013, condemnation of terrorism first makes its appearance in the party's rhetoric, despite the fact that violence perpetrated by Salafists had already been on the rise. It was on the occasion of the anniversary of the movement's formation, that Ghannouchi (Al-Hamrouni, 2013) made it clear how terrorism 'is fighting a losing battle' in the country. Likewise, the pervasive lexicon of the 'martyrs of the Tunisian Revolution', and the nationally unifying message it conveyed, came to include the soldiers and security officers who had died at the hands of jihadi Salafi groups. Furthermore, from that period onwards, every time there was a terrorist attack nationally or abroad, Ennahda was particularly zealous in clearly condemning it by promptly issuing statements through its official channels and social media, with translations in multiple foreign languages. Ghannouchi pushed the message even further. In the run-up to the 2014 elections, he explicitly stated that the party represented 'the alternative to the Islamic State' and a bulwark against it, as a purveyor of a moderate Islam based on the 'Tunisian model' which combines Islam and laïcité, democracy, and women's rights (L'Orient Le Jour, 2014 October). Declarations like this combine both those liberal values supposedly under threat, and the reference to moderation and Tunisianité, the hallmark distinguishing Tunisia's Islam from that of other deviant forces.

The image of Islamists was damaged to the greatest degree when the targeted political violence between 2011 and 2013 morphed into wide-scale, shocking terrorist attacks on civilians, and on foreign tourists in particular in 2015, which represented another critical year for Tunisia. Following the first mass attack on the Bardo museum in March 2015, for example, Ennahda immediately released a statement backing the adoption of a long-awaited new anti-terrorism law (Ennahda, 2015, March 18). It repeatedly condemned terrorism by calling for national unity and pointing to the somehow exogenous nature of it, considered as a 'cross-border phenomenon feeding from regional and international contexts and benefiting from [...] polarisation, and social and political tension' (Ennahda, 2015, March 22). The

reputation of political Islam further deteriorated when terrorists struck again in June and November 2015, at a beach resort and against a bus of the presidential guard respectively. Equally striking was the insurgents' attack on Ben Guerdane in March 2016, when a commando of jihadists entering from Libya attempted to seize the town and make it a stronghold of the Islamic Caliphate in Tunisia. And it was in this very context, two months later, that Ennahda hold its 10th congress, a landmark in its history for it specialised as a civil (madani) party officially abandoning the preaching activities. On that occasion, Ennahda also renamed itself as Muslim Democratic party. There appear to be two reasons underlying this change. Firstly, this shift was intended not least to preempt criticisms and misunderstandings about the party's identity, as declared by MP and international spokesperson Saida Ounissi (see, for instance, Ounissi & Marks, 2016). Secondly, to enhance the party's respectability at home and abroad at a time when the jihadi violence had unavoidably cast a shadow over the broader realm of Islamism. In a famous interview with *Le Monde* on the transformation represented by this congress, Ghannouchi recalled how political Islam had been transfigured by the idea of violent extremism associated with Al Qaida or ISIS, hence the need to distance his party from that notion through a new self-definition of Muslim democracy that recalled the experience of Christian democratic parties in Europe (Bobin, 2016, May). I maintained that learning featured an intentional, thoughtful and cognitive process above all. And indeed, by fully acknowledging on that occasion the salience of the terrorist challenge, and the failures of other experiences as opposed to the Tunisian exception, Ennahda highlighted its 'readiness to opt for rational solutions and make concessions to fellow citizens in order to save the country from the brink of disaster' (Ennahda, 2016). At the same time, it clearly expressed its focus on the importance of self-criticism for renewal and of learning in regard to the choices the party made, with an eye to the domestic, regional and international contexts, all contexts described as being 'characterised by instability and tension' (Ennahda, 2016) in stark contrast to the earlier 'revolutionary historical' environment (Ennahda, 2012, July 18).

Self-containment

Ennahda's third attitude also reflected learning on its part. Whereas 'containment' usually refers to prevent other actors from expanding their influence, the party opted for self-containment with regard to public office, that is a deliberate renunciation to maximise its presence in official positions of power. Albeit in completely different circumstances from those of past exclusion, Ennahda preferred not to rush matters and openly capitalise on its unprecedented position of strength.⁴ Ennahda's decision not to field its own candidate for the presidential race, at least

until the 2019 elections, and to step down from power in favour of a technocratic government in 2014 are evidence of this self-containment. Likewise, is the deliberate renunciation of an appropriate number of seats within the postTroika coalition governments, despite electoral results.⁵ It is not uncommon to find Ennahda's declarations in which such decisions are portrayed as a deliberate move designed not to monopolise political power in the wake of a minimalist and inclusive strategy, pursued to avoid other Islamist parties' mistakes above all. Notable among such was the counter-example of Egyptian Islamists illustrated by Ghannouchi (Weymouth, 2013), and an earlier precedent, from which the party had learnt. From the very beginning of the revolution, and following the party's electoral success, Ennahda's leader had warned against repeating the mistakes of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front in the early 1990s (Lynch, 2011, December), and advised Morsi about the perils of monopoly power (personal interview with an Ennahda MP, Tunis, November 2015). Ghannouchi's words regarding the significance of learned lessons – in other words, learning – in influencing attitudes to power-sharing, are also very telling: 'It doesn't matter if Ennahda comes first or second at the polls, the important thing is that when I step down from power I don't go to jail or into exile' (Mandraud, 2014, June). In these decisions and declarations, one thus finds recurrent characteristics typical of a learning process, namely a rational, deliberate change resulting from the exposure to new evidence which materialises in rejecting, rather than adopting, third-party behaviour.

Self-containment – a building block of what I more broadly referred to as self-limitation alongside the readiness to negotiate and the reassuring attitude – is a new pattern insofar it relates to the assumption of office or, more broadly, to the party's unprecedented position of power. At the same time, it manifested in addition to Ennahda's gradual playing down of Islamist ideology and credentials in both discourses and policy platforms. This latter attitude, by contrast, is not new in the history of the party (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; Haugbølle & Cavatorta, 2014; Sadiki, 2018) but was more clearly defined in the post-2011 period, and reinforced since 2013 through the agreements on the new Constitution and the renunciation of including Islam-inspired articles. Central to the argument of this paper is that major changes in the party's approach occurred in the context of specific critical moments defined as such by the cumulative effects of domestic pressure and external counter-examples. It is therefore worth noting that the functional separation, or rather 'specialization', of the religious movement (*haraka*) and the party (*hizb*) – which is the clearest indicator of the party's distancing from its religious identity and marked a milestone in Ennahda's history as a two-in-one entity – had been rejected at the General Congress held in 2012 (Ben Salem, 2019). Instead, it was only agreed upon in the 2016 Congress, that took place in a completely different setting from the pre-

2013, both domestically and regionally, as described in the paragraph on the reassuring attitude.

Regardless of the fact that self-containment and this diluted Islamist identity can be seen as a tactical or ideological change, learning is evident inasmuch as Ennahda absorbed external influences, adapted them to its specific context and eventually developed a new model, to paraphrase Della Porta and Tarrow's (2012) three-stage process.

Conclusion

After the favourable momentum enjoyed during the post-revolutionary period, Tunisia's main Islamist party had to pursue a delicate balance involving pressures, opportunities and constraints, as events unfolded both domestically and regionally. While demonstrators and autocrats – as much of the literature argues – modify their actions in response to new developments, by learning from others' experiences in terms of those examples to follow or those counter-examples to avoid, incumbent political parties also learn during processes of democratisation. Driven by fast-moving, continuously changing national and regional scenarios, Ennahda changed course and adapted its positions and policy. Specifically, it acknowledged the failures and risks it might have encountered in a precarious and fragile scenario, and consequently acted to avoid, or at least circumscribe, the possibility of returning to its pre-2011 status. This learning process resulted in a threefold approach characterised by the party's readiness to negotiate, its reassuring attitude and self-containment. These attitudes displayed, in a number of the decisions made, the outcome of a process of learning, that is, of an intentional, cognitive, thoughtful transformation process.

In this paper I have argued that the misfortunes of Egypt's MB in particular, and the troublesome examples of political Islam region-wide, alongside Ennahda's awareness of the risk of societal rejection within a domestic and international context of increasing delegitimization, drove its learning process. What makes this case-study particularly interesting is the fact that the party adopted a self-limiting scheme when it finally came to power. Thus, it was that Ghannouchi's leadership pushed moderation even further, both ideologically and procedurally. In this sense, and in a country where democracy had never existed before, self-limitation was seen as functional to the maintenance of the newly established status quo together with enduring moderation.

Although it is always difficult to generalise from one single case, the strategies of Ennahda point to significant trends within political Islam. According to moderation theory (or, theories), Islamists may internalise – more or less profoundly – a democratic narrative in order to enter the political field or to avoid further

repression. The case of Ennahda provides evidence that this process might not necessarily end once they enter the political sphere, or even when they come to power. Moderation may also evolve into self-limitation, when external ‘models’ offer a clear warning of what has to be avoided. In other words, when such models indicate the worst practices to be shunned rather than shared.

The dilemma for Islamist parties in authoritarian regimes – whether to enter the political game by relinquishing a number of founding principles, or to remain in opposition due to the ‘participation-legitimacy’ trade-off (see, for instance, Wegner, 2011) – is replicated when in power, as the example of Ennahda in newly democratised Tunisia shows. Constrained by constant negotiations both within and outside the party, Ennahda oscillated between integration and legitimation. The immediate payoff was uncertain at best. On the one hand, this trajectory helped the party guarantee its political survival; on the other hand, it also corresponded to a looser identity and a departure from those revolutionary stances which alienated part of its base, and created friction within its rank and file.

Ennahda has been increasingly paying the price, in terms of its popular support (as expressed by its declining share of votes) and negotiating skills, for its current strategy as embodied by Ghannouchi’s leadership, to the extent that some observers openly refer to a double crisis, both programmatic and strategic, within the party. Moreover, the rebranding process has encountered occasional setbacks, and Ennahda’s inclusion and presence in the political arena as witnessed today, is far from consolidated. If the opportunities arise, Ennahda will change again. It remains to be seen how it will change in a more favourable, or an even more hostile, regional and national environment.

Notes

1. Self-limitation and self-restraint are here used as synonyms.
2. Direct acknowledgments of the impact and correlation between Ennahda and third-party experiences are mainly drawn from party leader’s interviews or party statements whenever they refer to, for example, to the international context, president Morsi, the AKP model or terrorism. See on these points the section on the three-pronged approach.
3. A useful source for these statements is the party’s official Facebook page, or alternatively, its own website.
4. Many of its detractors have considered this attitude as constituting implementation of taqiyya – that is, the temporary, prudential dissimulation of real beliefs and nature (and thus intentions by extension), while waiting for more opportune moments to arise. But it nonetheless sowed a certain discontent within the party and its entourage, which too often has been wrongly considered as a monolithic bloc.
5. Despite being the second largest party in parliament, Ennahda’s share of ministries and state secretaries in the first post-2014 election cabinet (February 2015 – August 2016) was far lower than that allocated to the other two minor governmental allies. It got only one minister out of 27 and three state secretaries out of 14.

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