



AFRICA IN MOVIMENTO / AFRICA ON THE MOVE

MACERATA 17 -20/09/2014

TITLE: WHY DOES 'MODERATE ISLAMISM' SOUND A STRANGE NOTE IN POST-JANUARY 14TH TUNISIA?

AUTHOR: HAJER BEN HADJ SALEM, HIGH INSTITUTE OF HUMANITIES OF TUNIS (ben_hajer@yahoo.fr)

ABSTRACT: On January 14th 2011, the world was hypnotized as armless Tunisian citizens managed to put an end to a protracted dictatorship by forcing, for the first time in the modern history of the Arab-Islamic world, their president to leave the country. The aesthetic and civic nature of the demonstrations and the un-Islamist leanings of most the dramatis personae, including the predominantly uncovered Tunisian women, took the world in general and the West in particular by storm, challenging old paradigms and mindsets regarding the Middle East. They highlighted the inadequacy of received wisdoms about the Middle East that proceed from the premise of some sort of Arab or Muslim exceptionalism. The Tunisian uprising 'de-sacralized' the region, questioning the predominant role attributed to religion, where 'Islamic' is applied to every aspect of culture and society, including the immunity Muslim/Arab societies to waves of Democratization, which have transformed other regions. However, this desacralization process was short lived. The aftermath of the uprisings witnessed the dramatic rise of Islamist expatriates who neither participated, nor inspired, nor even supported the popular uprisings, at least at the center stage. Following the fall of the dictator, the leaders of Ennahda, the largest Islamist movement in Tunisia about whose past and ideologies average Tunisians knew almost nothing, were marketed to Tunisians and to the rest of the world as the harbinger of 'moderate Islam' and the most qualified political actors to implement the objectives of the so-called 'Revolution'.

Two years after two successive majority Islamist governments ruled the country, the Tunisians who led the mass demonstrations of 2011 have come to realize that the objectives of what they mistook for a 'revolution' have been hijacked by the transplanted Islamists. More than once they have woken up to the nightmares of political assassinations, corruption, economic decline, and terrorist attacks on their military forces, in which, recent reports have shown that the party of the God-elect is directly and/or indirectly involved.

Against this background, this work attempts to demystify 'moderate Islamism' as an ideological construct and dig into its Western ideological roots by studying some of the works of American political analysts and foreign policy think tank theorizing about possible processes for democratization in the MENA region that would inevitably lead to the rise of 'Moderate Islamists.' Second, it will briefly examine some of the deleterious and distortive effects such displaced ideological constructs (could) have had once implemented in the Tunisian context. It illustrates how reductionist Neo-Orientalist approaches to democratization processes, which singled out the so-called 'moderate Islamists' as the main democratization agents in the region could have contributed to founding one of the worst theocracies in Tunisia had non-religiously-oriented internal democratic dynamisms emanating from a blossoming civil society not given the transition process so far a seemingly democratic twist. The work will conclude with a preliminary balance sheet, looking at the threats and opportunities resulting from the rise of Islamists in Tunisia.

AUTHOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

HAJER BEN HADJ SALEM, IS Assistant Professor at the High Institute of Humanities, Tunis (Department of English)