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Sito web www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/africheorienti a cura di Fabio Vescovi

E-mail: africheorienti@hotmail.it

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The New Islamic Middle Class and the Struggle for Hegemony in Tunisia

Fabio Merone, Damiano De Facci

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Introduction

During the 2014 legislative elections, the two main political contenders, the nationalist, Bourguiba-inspired¹ Nida Tunis (Tunisian Call) and the Islamist al-Nahda fielded two businessmen as the heads of their list in Sfax, the second largest city in Tunisia. Mohammed Frikha is the first entrepreneur to have launched a privately owned Tunisian airline, Syphax, while Moncef Sellemi is the founder and President of Holding One Tech, the second private exporter in Tunisia. He is also well known for having been the Chairman of the local football team CSS. Frikha decided to run as an independent candidate heading al-Nahda's list, while Mr Sellemi ran with Nida Tunis. It is not a coincidence that two important economic personalities of the city, and the country, decided to run for the two main parties. First of all, there is a struggle for political hegemony that goes through the 'taking over' of the economic sector of society. Second, and most important for the scope of this article, this hegemonic struggle finds a special playing field in Sfax and in its middle class social milieu.

Although the electoral success of al-Nahda and Congrès pour la République (CPR) in 2011 led to the formation of a coalition government (together with Ettakatol), the outcome was not sufficient for the Islamic party to be accepted by the traditional elite of the country, which began denouncing in dramatic and exaggerated terms the Islamization of the country. In order to present itself as a valid political alternative, al-Nahda needs to gain a wider political hegemony, in the sense Gramsci understood the term.² We thus consider the hegemony of the old elites to be the result of the strength of its ideological discourse based over a historical social bloc (Gramsci 1971: 12). The Bourguibian nationalist party Neo-Destour³ interpreted the nation-state project as based on the idea of modernization, and, as a consequence, the Islamists are rejected as anti-modern by the dominant middle class (Hermassi 1994).⁴ In order to reverse this image, al-Nahda needs to propose a new model for the middle class through which a different image of social success and modernity can be presented as a clear alternative. In our case study of Sfax, we show the emergence of a new Islamic constituency that takes the form of a new civil society. Most of the new social entrepreneurs are Islamic, in the sense that their social and individual behaviour is influenced by religious references, but not all are identifiable automatically with the traditional al-Nahda project. Since the scope of this article is limited to the counter-hegemonic strategy of the traditional Islamic political actor al-Nahda, we will focus on the emergence of what we call a 'new middle class', whose political allegiance became the centre of the Islamic counter-hegemonic strategy.

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Hegemony and the Islamic middle class

The process of nation-building in Tunisia has produced an inclusion/exclusion dynamic of social groups. Independence and the institution-building path⁵ of the modern state created a new category of people occupying state institutions (e.g. civil servants, teachers, etc.). This shaping of social groups is a consequence of a unique modernization process, developed according to different cleavages (Anderson 2014). In particular we distinguish between two 'middle classes': the first became the base of the Bourguibian ideological process of nation building; the second, identified politically in the Youssefist movement and mainly located in the south and in the immigrant neighbourhoods of the northern cities, developed a sense of frustration and exclusion.⁶ The first group had its references in the Western Enlightenment-based idea of modernity, while the second referred to a modernity oriented by and interpreted through traditional cultural and religious values. The Youssefist movement is that political trend that developed between the end of the anti-colonial struggle and the beginning of independence in opposition to the hegemony Bourguiba imposed in the Destourian party. Salah Ben Youssef was an important leader of the nationalist movement that interpreted a different vision of the national idea, more oriented on Islam and pan-Arabist references. Zeitunians were those intellectuals and clerics that stood in defence of the traditional Arab system of

education based on the mosque/university Zeituna. They became allies of Ben Youssef in the struggle against Bourguiba that saw them as an archaic system to be erased in order to impose a modernist vision of the nation. The Youssefist movement dispersed after Bourguiba had imposed its authority. In the 1970s the Islamist movement emerged as inheriting the old social cleavages that were translated into a renewed political struggle. Today, two conflicting social groups with different ideological representations are still struggling to conquer the state and claim the right to impose their vision of society (Merone 2015).

58 This article focuses on the strategy al-Nahda is putting in place after its leadership understood that the battle for the realization of an Islamic program, having abandoned the revolutionary vision of the Islamic state (Cavatorta, Merone 2013), cannot be only a matter of electoral success.⁷ During the political crisis between July and December 2013, as a consequence of the Egyptian coup against the Muslim Brothers and a second political assassination in Tunisia, the opposition retired from the assembly and asked for a new government. Within the Islamic party, this new political dynamic started off a debate on whether they should resign and support a technocratic government or insist on claiming the respect of electoral legitimacy. Ghannouchi, the Nahda party's leader, argued that the party should read this particular political juncture as strategic: for this reason the political choices should take into account the benefit of long term democratic institutionalization instead of merely partisan and electoral calculation. Nahda's experience in power (November 2011- January 2014) with a heterogeneous governmental coalition during a process of democratization, has transformed the party into a much more pragmatic actor with a new vision of the 'political' (Guazzone 2013). Analysing their own experience in government, Nahda activists and cadres expressed both frustration and self-criticism for having underestimated the difficulties of the practical side of governing.⁸ Beyond the traditional hostility of the economic and bureaucratic apparatus of the state, the party did not achieve the objective of setting itself up as a new ruling class. During the 2014 electoral campaign, the party tried to offer a different image of itself,⁹ emphasizing in public speeches that Nahda is the party to trust and to which Tunisians should entrust their future, because it had been responsible and pragmatic¹⁰ during the turbulent transition period. In other words, it looks as if Nahda widened its electoral constituency and increased its attention towards a dynamic, entrepreneurial, and socially conservative middle class that is rather competing for power and inclusion instead of trying to overthrow it. Being the traditional middle-class acquired to the nationalistic, Bourguibian ideology, for Nahda it was a matter of establishing a pact with a new, emerging middle class that is closer to its vision of the world and frustrated by its historical exclusion from genuine political and economic power.

There has been a long discussion over middle classes in the Middle East, ever since the article by Martin Lipset *Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy* (1959), which analysed the relationship between democracy

and development.¹¹ Dating back from Aristotle, the argument goes that the making of democracy is more difficult where a large income gap exists between the masses and the elites. This argument holds that the middle class represents the main agent for democratic change. This debate played a role in particular in transitology.¹² The middle class became synonymous of civil society, studied as in the social science tradition dating back from Tocqueville.¹³ Our use of 'middle class' or 'new middle class' draws from Janine Clarck's pivotal study on Islamic middle classes and associative system (Clarck 2004). Clarck considers the Islamic associative system within the frame of social movements' theory. She argues that those social institutions have to be considered as organizations within a larger social movement (Clarck 2004: 21). As such, she highlights the horizontal networking between people of the same social group constituting a 'new middle class'. The concept of new middle class refers to the development of the country's social structure. Following Clarck's analysis, this new middle class is 'new' because of its emergence in the process of modernization and education. Examples are professionals like lawyers, engineers, doctors. In our case study however, we further develop the idea of novelty, because this social class seems to be 'new' even within the same Islamic constituency. The old Nahda generation was in fact belonging to what Clark herself calls "*petite bourgeoisie*" (Clarck 2004: 9). This new middle class is more successful economically, self-confident and less politicized. This diversified Islamic constituency clearly manifested itself in the social context of the Islamic activism in Sfax.

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We chose to analyse a specific case, the city of Sfax, in order to show how the social and political dynamics of this strategy are put in place on the ground. The choice of the city derives from two considerations. First, since independence, Sfax has been marginalized from the central power in Tunis and for that reason it has maintained a feeling of frustration *vis à vis* the traditional power group. As the *de facto* capital of the south, it is seen as the symbol of the political and economic discrimination of the southern part of the country. Second, because of its economic strength, its social conservatism and the sense of marginalization felt by its inhabitants, it has been considered by the Nahda leadership as a laboratory for the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic strategy based on the deal between the party and the large Islamic constituency that appeared after the revolution. In Sfax, the Islamic party is trying to convince the new Islamic middle class to back the Nahdaoui political project as an alternative counter-power to oppose to the traditional elite, linked ideologically and socially to Nida Tunis. In this respect, the Nahdaoui leaders are thinking of the Turkish model, and consider themselves like the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi - AKP) and the Sfaxian region as a counterpart to Anatolia,¹⁴ hoping to become a leader in economic and political success.¹⁵ This research is based on the authors' personal fieldwork¹⁶ and supported by the existing literature.¹⁷

Nahdha and the struggle for hegemony

The three years of the Tunisian democratic transition (2011-14) mark the change from an authoritarian regime to a liberal-democratic one. This was not an easily pre-determined outcome in the region, especially since the countries of the region had already missed the so-called third wave of democratization (Huntington 1993) that began in the 1970s. The main issue in the democratization debate in the region revolves around Islamism and the capacity of these countries to absorb democratic liberal principles into the Islamic cultural and social background (Ozzano, Cavatorta 2013). This is why one important point of interest in analysing the transitional process in Tunisia is the evolution of Islamism in general and its most important representative, the Ikhwani-inspired Nahda party. The approach we apply here considers the integration of the Islamist party into the constitutional political landscape as depending on its capacity not only to win electoral victories, but also to adapt to the official discourse of the nation, until then monopolised by a traditional nationalist-Bourguibian elite. We define this process as a struggle for hegemony.

In looking at the practical political experience of Nahda since the fall of the regime in 2011 to its defeat in the 2014 elections,¹⁸ it is possible to divide this period in three phases: the first starts from the arrival to power and the Ninth, mainly celebrative, Party Congress (2012); the second, the tensions and conflicts while in government (2012-13); and, the third, Nahda's resignation from the government and partial defeat in the legislative election of 2014, which was the end point of a long path of ideological evolution.

The party had already changed considerably during the long years of repression under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, though, since 2009, all its leaders had been freed from prison. Since 2000, the local leadership was active in human rights organizations, sharing with most of the opposition a common negative judgement of the regime and the aspiration to freedom. When the 2011 revolution allowed the leaders who lived abroad to come home, their political experiences were significantly different. Since the 1991 crackdown, the party was no longer a homogeneous group, but they found a way to muddle through and proved to have a solid basis of support, imposing the party as an efficient machine for campaigning and running the country. As said by the party activists in those days of rapid change, the praxis counted more than any theory.¹⁹ However, the transformation of the party remained incomplete, and the 2011 electoral victory was only able to hide it for a short while. A key question remained: to what degree are we preachers and/or politicians?²⁰ The 2012 Ninth Congress, when the party was already in power, tried to handle the issue, but the importance of the historical moment made the leaders decide not to push the party into divisive issues,²¹ such as it had been historically the debate about splitting the party in two different components, Dawa association and political party, such as the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Although such split did not happen, in practice, party militants and party officials

started to engage in two different ways, some choosing associative activities and others focusing on politics, especially since Nahda was now a ruling party. The exercise of power created practical consequences. On one side, in fact, the party became just like any other political party that had to deal with economic and social issues, linked to the governing functions and meeting the expectation of the people. On the other hand, to be Islamic meant to carry a revolutionary idea of transforming society that was still inspiring part of the Islamic public and preachers. The conflict over articles 1 and 45 of the constitution was an example of this struggle,²² as much as issues such as transitional justice and the political future of former regime leaders.²³ For Nahda, a hard trade-off meant postponing the original and inspirational Islamic project of transforming society, thereby deceiving some within its own traditional constituency, so as to enlarge its acceptance within society.

Since October 2012, pressure from the opposition parties became stronger. They complained that the legitimacy of the government had been eroded after the end of the formal one-year mandate.²⁴ Within society, polarization grew stronger, especially for fear of the 'Islamization of the revolution' due to the public presence of radical Salafist movements;²⁵ a general feeling of insecurity spread across the country, adding to a deepening social and economic crisis. Nahda and its partners defended the constitutional and electoral legitimacy of their government until August 2013 when they finally agreed to form a quartet composed of national forces which formed a new technocratic government.²⁶

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The Nahda-lead government finally resigned on January 2014²⁷ and a period of self-criticism started within the party.²⁸ The party members' analysis of the situation brought two aspects to light. First, they mainly blamed themselves for their failure to govern effectively and provide concrete responses to the social and economic needs of the people.²⁹ Secondly, they expressed resentment *vis-à-vis* external factors, and in particular the role of the so-called 'deep state'.³⁰ By 'deep state', in Islamist mindset is intended an immaterial, hegemonic corpus within the state apparatus, but also a political and social elite that controls, for example, the media system. This is very close to the analysis Gramsci made for explaining the historical defeat of communists when the fascist party took power in Italy without any popular opposition.³¹ The deep state was and still is an important part of the political vision the Islamic constituency has of the situation in Tunisia during the transitional period.

After Nahda's resignation from government, its leadership decided, contrary to what the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt did, to change their strategy and tried to persuade the Tunisian public that they left power in the name of the broader national interest rather than the narrower party's one. As Nahda leaders repeated during the 2014 legislative electoral rallies: "Nahda is the only responsible party in the nation, willing to stabilize the political situation and put the country back on track".³² The traditional elite demonstrated very little support for the Islamic party and Nida Tunis, the political party

opposed to Nahda, was busy re-shaping the traditional social front against Islamists. Nahda, however, had another card to play: in a similar move to what the AKP did in Turkey, it envisaged a strategy of co-optation of members of the a new emerging middle class, frustrated by the old and corrupt economic elite and the kind of crony capitalism that had dominated under the last years of Ben Ali. This social group, ethically Islamic and economically dynamic, could represent the starting point of a counter-hegemonic strategy to oppose to the resilience of the traditional, nationalist elites.

Sfaxian capitalism as an alternative

When referring to capitalism in Tunisia it is imperative to discuss Sfax (and Sfaxians) insofar as the city is unique due to its particular model of development (Zghal 1992). Isolated from its hinterland for centuries because of the threatening presence of Bedouins and nomads on the plains outside the city, its commercial growth came from the sea.³³ The expansion outside the city walls began under the French colonization; the people of Sfax came to a deal with the French colonizers, because their campaign of pacification against tribal warriors was seen as a chance. Having liberated the plains from the Bedouin threat, the French protectorate reorganized the land system by encouraging an agrarian expansion: together with the French farmers, a Sfaxian entrepreneurial class emerged.³⁴ From the 1970s on, Sfaxian capitalism developed: important entrepreneurial families emerged by this time, mostly in the construction sector, tourism, and different industrial specializations.³⁵ This economic success story stands in contrast to the city's low level of infrastructure, which contributed to Sfaxian inhabitants' perception of marginalization when compared to the rest of the country, especially Tunis and Sousse. In particular, during the Ben Ali era (1987–2011), Sousse had a disproportionate number of public investments, further fuelling regionalist discontent.³⁶ This situation developed into a sentiment of political antagonism against the centralistic patronage system of power. The symbol of this conflict between a dynamic and laborious bourgeoisie and a corrupted power system was the story of the Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie (BIAT), the first Tunisian private bank, founded by Moalla, a Sfaxian entrepreneur who was forced to step down from his firm after having dared to resist pressure from Ben Ali's family.³⁷

However, not all of the Sfaxian entrepreneurial class was independent and not all demonstrated the same integrity. Part of it in fact rather happily dealt with the corrupt power structures in place, taking advantage of the patronage system, just like the vast majority of the broader national business class.³⁸ This narrative was particularly prominent within the Islamic public, traditionally antagonist to the old regime. According to this version, the entrepreneurial Sfaxian elite was divided between a corrupt segment, not seriously engaged in business and focused on its own interests, and a more dynamic one committed to ethical and traditional values, rooted in the identity of the city and interested in working both for their own business and the

welfare of the community;³⁹ the latter being historically marginalized and in search of further influence in the decision-making process. This narrative of the economic elite was revived by Nahda during the 2014 legislative and presidential campaigns and led to the formation of an electoral and political strategy that saw the famous entrepreneur of Syphax, Mr Frikha heading the party's list in the constituency of Sfax.

A new Islamic constituency

Al-Nahda's political, counter hegemonic-strategy in Sfax is relevant because of the city's strong Arab and Islamic orientation⁴⁰ and its importance as the 'capital of the south' and possibly the country's economic capital. Sfax represents both a different social and geographical Tunisia and a different model of economic success, the ideal place for an Islamic counter-hegemonic strategy. This strategy, however, could not work without a strong and dynamic middle class to support its social legitimization. Sfax proved to be a privileged space of expression of this new Islamic constituency. Although Nahda's success represented, in a sense, one way of assimilating this traditional social group into the nation-state, a feeling of frustration remained. The westernized middle class of Tunis and Sousse and the economic elite continued to despise the Islamic public, exemplified by this Sfaxian bourgeoisie, even after the transition, considering it 'backward' and incapable of producing an effective ruling class.

A new Islamic constituency appeared after the revolution, with no sense of inferiority, and partially crowned by economic success. This new class expressed itself with different social and cultural codes, liberated from the constraints of the former regime. This public was not automatically assimilated to the old Islamic generation directly linked to Nahda, but it became a natural potential Islamic constituency for the traditional Islamic party, especially since the political landscape lacked an alternative Islamic political project.⁴¹ The new Islamic sphere (Hohendahl, Russian 1974) emerged in the form of associations, radio and TV outlets: a new type of 'modern' preachers, entrepreneurs interested in developing the ethical Islamic codes, and a new lobby demanding the opportunity to put forth an Islamic model of development.⁴² We call this large public a 'new Islamic middle class' in the sense that it is different from the traditional Nahda constituency, largely the product of an excluded educated social group emerged in the process of modernization of the country but excluded from power (Merone 2014) and more interested to social and economic affirmation than in the achievement of a specifically political project (Haenni 2005; Rougier 2008). This is the kind of social and economic contest that constitutes in Sfax the base of the Nahda strategy of counter-hegemony.

There exists thus a network of people connecting with each other and acting with a similar social behaviour and a common vision of the public space.⁴³ Their social activity is intertwined with an economic one, where success appears to be an important part of their value system.⁴⁴ For example, the Islamic Economy Association organizes special

meeting for researchers and businessmen interested in knowing more about the Islamic economic system.⁴⁵ The Tunisian Association for Zakat (legal alms), instead, plays an important social role for people interested in the precise calculation of the *zakat*. The members of those two associations are independent professionals, university professors, bankers, entrepreneurs, students, sheikhs, ideological activists, and politicians. These actors come from a similar social and economic environment⁴⁶ and their social activities are located in the centre of a large network of people interested in improving their economic opportunities. For example students of Islamic subjects are interested in the job market, while professionals and investors want to take advantage of the Islamic economic opportunities and networking.

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This large public is an example of the Islamic constituency that emerged after the 2011 revolution. They do not necessarily strive for the same type of political representation, but share a common way of representing themselves in the public space, either sharing economic interests or cultural and religious references (Solie 2014). It is normal that the political attention of Nahda leaders, especially local ones, is focused on this large public; it is both a natural electoral constituency and a social and cultural counterforce – helping the party in presenting itself as a credible ruling class, able to help Sfax and the South to improve its status. The larger national context and the model of reference for Nahda is Turkey. The similarity with the situation in Turkey is often underlined by current and former Nahda militants in Sfax. What they point at is not only the obstacle represented by a westernized elite linked to the state's apparatus, but an hegemonic struggle that only can be achieved through a progressive and moderate action of penetrating the institutions and gaining consensus in key sectors of society.⁴⁷ In order to achieve this strategic objective, only a dynamic business class able to support an economic take-off, can provide strength to the Islamist party and its political project. The famous Anatolian middle class, characterized by a dynamic spirit of enterprise and a conservative Islamic social behaviour seems to be very similar to what is characteristic of Sfax and its economic and social uniqueness.⁴⁸ The importance of the economic and financial Islamic associations, in particular the collection of *zakat* and the development of the Islamic bank system,⁴⁹ seems to confirm the comparison of the Sfaxian milieu with the Anatolian one, at least in the eyes of the Nahda leadership. An array of economic actors may be attracted by this model, which perfectly espouses the Sfaxian work ethic, while the political project of Nahda may be considered an alternative to the old elite power system that is re-emerging and backing Nida Tunis.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The 2014 legislative and presidential elections showed that Nahda has lost some of the appeal it had at the beginning of the democratization process. Although it managed to hold on to most of its constituency obtaining 32% of votes compared to 37% in 2011, it has lost a good part of the fluctuating voters. This is in part natural because any

transition implies quite typically a return of old forces. It may be argued as well that the party lost its appeal because once tested in power it showed its limitations, especially in responding to practical material issues. The Islamic leadership, and its allies such as CPR presidential candidate Marzouki, underlines however that this is not enough to explain the changing political landscape. The Islamic party still has, for them, a specific problem in sharing with other national forces the 'right to govern', pointing out the necessity of a counter-hegemonic strategy.

In this article we gave an example of how Nahda reacted to what it perceives as a hegemonic weakness. The case study of Sfax was in particular intended to highlight what Nahda considered a key tool in their counter-hegemonic strategy. For them it had to come from a new entrepreneurial class able to propose a national strategy of economic growth, far from the traditional 'corrupt' business-class. The confrontation between businessmen in the two Sfaxian electoral districts, running for Nahda and Nida, made clear this reading of the political landscape.

After having accepted to resign from government, the party's strategy has changed and, keeping in mind the successful model of the AKP in Turkey, has started building a counter-hegemonic project. The city of Sfax has become the centre of a new middle-class, which is dynamic, ethically Islamic, and frustrated because traditionally marginalized from the mechanism of power influence. Using a Gramscian approach, this article shows how gaining power is not only a matter of elections, but, more broadly, a process of constructing hegemony. The Islamic Tunisian Nahda party has understood that and tried to set about doing just that.

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Fabio Merone is a PhD candidate at the University of Ghent, Belgium, and he is Senior Researcher for the project *Tunisia as a 'secure state': Salafism and post-revolutionary politics in the aftermath of Arab authoritarianism* funded by the German foundation Gerda Henkel

Damiano De Facci is a PhD candidate at the University of Paris 7 and he is a member of the Observatoire des transformations du monde arabe (INED/IRD).

NOTES:

1 - The Bourguibian ideological trend is the one which refers to the national modernist project of the independence identified with the personality of Bourguiba, the independence hero and the first President of the new state.

2 - For a Gramscian reading of the Ikhwani movement see Campanini, Mezram (2010).

3 - The neo-Destour was the party founded by Bourguiba and the younger nationalist generation in 1934, in opposition to the 'old' Destour party. In 1964, after opting for a socialist program the party was called PSD (Socialist Destourian Party) until it was dissolved in 1987 by the new President Ben Ali, that in this way wanted to mark an opposition with the past.

4 - Hermassi proposes a political and sociological explanation to the birth and rise of the Islamic movement in relation to the development of the nation-state.

- 5 - Pierson (2000: 251) defines path dependence a "social process grounded in a dynamic of 'increasing returns': "Path dependent arguments based on positive feedback suggest that not only 'big' events have big consequences; little ones that happen at the right time can have major consequences as well".
- 6 - According to Camau and Geisser: "youssefism became the paradigm of all those who did not accept Bourguiba's victory and the seizure of his cronies. He simbolized a perennial divide between outsiders and insiders of a polity held illegitimate" (Camau, Geisser 2003: 144).
- 7 - Salma Sarsut, Nahda's PM, *interview with authors*. Hammam Lif, 4/4/2014.
- 8 - Mohammed Rachid, historic leader in Kasserine, 11 June 2014 and Salma Sarsut, Nahda MP, Hammam Lif 4 June 2014 among others. *Personal interviews with the authors*.
- 9 - In the electoral leaflets distributed during the campaign, the party has placed faces of 'normal people', representing all strata of society, on the first page.
- 10 - We attended two Nahda electoral rallies in Manouba, in the north, and in Djerba, in the south. In the first one, Lotfi Zitouni, an important national leader, gave the speech; in the second Rached Ghannouchi, the President of the party, himself gave the speech. In both speeches the main discourse of the campaign was based on presenting Nahda as the responsible party to trust, in order both to maintain democratic country and to start a new period of economic growth.
- 11 - On the same topic see also the pivotal study by Rueshemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), and by O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986).
- 12 - For a good synthetic overview on the transitology debate and its future perspective see Schmitter (2013).
- 13 - For a reference to an historical critical overview of the use of 'civil society' as a paradigm in political science see Fooley, Edwards (1998).
- 14 - On the phenomenon of the Anatolian Tigers see: Demir, Acar, Toprak (2004) and Hosgör (2011). For the links between the AKP and the bourgeois, financial Islamic constituency see: Gumuscu, Sert (2009).
- 15 - The Nahda hegemonic strategy as being inspired from the AKP's experience has been indirectly unveiled during the fieldwork. In particular, during the interview with Lubna Moalla, human rights activist and close to the local party in Sfax. *Interview with the authors*, Sfax, 23 September 2014. For a comparative study between the AKP's model and the experience of Nahda in Tunisia see: Torelli (2012).
- 16 - This article is part of a larger study on the Tunisian transition that both the authors are pursuing for their PhD dissertations. For this specific topic, fieldwork in Sfax was conducted from 17 to 25 September 2014.
- 17 - The main reference for the historical importance of the Sfaxian entrepreneurial class is: Denieul (1992).
- 18 - For an analysis of the experience of government of Nahda party see: Guazzone (2013).
- 19 - Ziyed, Youssef, Hissam, Nahda militants of the youth section of the party, *interview with the authors*, Tunis, 15 November 2012.
- 20 - As a proof of such debate within Islamist trends, see also: S. Lacroix, *Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism*, Policy briefing, Brookings Doha Center, June 2012: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/6/07-egyptian-salafism-lacroix/stephane-lacroix-policy-briefing-english.pdf>.
- 21 - 9th Conference: Ghannouchi Remains Leader as Ennahda Denies Any Conflict Within the Movement, in «Nawaat» (on-line), 18 July 2012: <http://nawaat.org/portail/2012/07/18/ninth-conference-ghannouchi-remains-leader-as-ennahda-denies-any-conflict-within-the-movement>.
- 22 - The article 1 of the constitution states that Tunisia is a sovereign nation and that Islam is its religion. It was for many Islamist too general concerning the relationship between the nation and their religion. As for article 45, regarding gender equality, Nahda introduced an amendment considering equality between men and women linked to complementarity, which stirred a polarizing debate.
- 23 - For the evolution of Nahda in relation to the constitutional debate see: M.L. Marks, *Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahda Approach to Tunisia's Constitution*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, February 2014: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/02/10%20ennahda%20tunisia%20constitution%20marks/ennahda%20approach%20tunisia%20constitution%20english.pdf>.
- 24 - E. Auffray, *L'ivresse du pouvoir a saisi Ennahda*, in «Libération» (on-line), 9 October 2012: http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2012/10/09/l-ivresse-du-pouvoir-a-saisi-ennahda_852088.
- 25 - For a general overview of the evolution of the emergence of Salafism in Tunisia during the transitional process see: Torelli, Merone, Cavatorta (2012).
- 26 - M. Teyeb, *The winners and the losers in Tunisia's political dialogue*, in «Middle East Monitor» (on-line), 20 December 2013: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/8904-the-winners-and-the-losers-in-tunisias-political-dialogue.html>.

- 27 - I. Mandraud, *Ennahda quitte le gouvernement en Tunisie*, in «Le Monde» (on-line), 10 January 2014: http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/01/10/ennahda-quitte-le-gouvernement-en-tunisie_4345920_3210.html.
- 28 - Salma Sarsut, Nahda PM, *interview with authors*. Hammam Lif, 4 April 2014.
- 29 - Mihammed Rachid, historical Nahda militant and member of the Majlis Shoura, Kasserine, 11 June 2014.
- 30 - Militants would argue that the party didn't have the chance to run the country because of the resilience on the 'deep state'. *Interview with militants*, Tunis, October 2014.
- 31 - Fascism as Passive Revolution (Gramsci 1971: 118-120).
- 32 - This discourse was repeated clearly during the two electoral rallies that we attended in October 2014 during fieldwork. At the first of these meetings (Manouba) was Lotfi Zeitouna, prominent national leader, and the second in Jerba (Medenine) Rached Ghannouchi, the President of the party.
- 33 - The history of the city is commercial and mostly linked to the Mediterranean trade network, linking the city to Alexandria in Egypt much more easily than with Tunis, the capital of the country. The families of big traders used to send their children to Egypt in order to run the family shops and study at the same time. The city acquired historically a cultural identity closer to the Middle East than the other Sahelian cities of Tunisia, Sousse and Tunis (Denieul 1992).
- 34 - This period for the Sfaxian new elite is comparable to the period of the land enclosure in XVI century in England. A very unique circumstance was exploited until economic activity transferred from trade to agriculture, especially olive trees plantations, began in the period, consisting historically in the capitalistic original accumulation. By the beginning of the 1970s, the Sfaxian businessmen were prepared for leading the new era of capitalism building inaugurated by Minister Hedi Nouira. Symbolically, the first industrial zone in the country was developed in Sfax. Interview with Tarek Chaabouni, Sfaxian entrepreneur, 5 November 2014, Tunis.
- 35 - The most famous one is the Pauline group of Abdelwahab Ben Ayed. Other examples include Chakira and Coficab of Mr. Hichem Elloumi and Mr Lotfi Addennadher, former president of the Sfaxian football team (CSS) that diversified its activities in construction and the food industry.
- 36 - *Sfax, interdite de développement?*, «Leaders» (on-line), 6 July 2011: <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/sfax-interdite-de-developpement>. Ben Ali and his family are from the region of Sousse. For more details on the marginality of Sfax compared to Tunis and Sousse see: Zghal (1992) and B'chir (1994).
- 37 - This event is interpreted both as the will of the power to prevent an important private business from becoming too important and an opportunity to teach a lesson to the Sfaxian network that the central government suspected as having a strategy to emancipate themselves from the political system. See: Hibou (2008).
- 38 - The history of the Sfaxian capitalism is not lacking in success stories of large entrepreneurial groups developing in the patronage system of the power, the most notably the Poulina group, the biggest private enterprise in Tunisia. Even the exodus to Tunis of hundreds of Sfaxian entrepreneurs since the 1970s shows the difficulties Sfaxians faced in operating in their own birth town as well as a strategy of proximity to the power centres. There is indeed a gap in the Sfaxian business environment between those that took advantage of the regime and others, new entrepreneurs and the marginalized. See: Nabli (2008).
- 39 - "We have two types of businessmen here in Sfax: on one hand, the founders of the Sfaxian economy, who work according to moral principles and clean economic activities; on the other hand the ones that merged into the Ben Ali system together with the Trabelsi mafia". Interview with Loubna, lawyer and Nahda activist. Sfax, 23 September 2014.
- 40 - It is mainly based on a traditional conservative model of social life, typically organized on the big family religious' values (Denieul 1992; B'chir 1994). Having a strong religious feeling doesn't mean to be immediately elected as an Islamist. Any political project though should pay attention to the importance of certain values especially for the importance they have in social behaviour.
- 41 - For the evolution of Islamism in Tunisia during the transition see: F. Merone, F. Volpi, "Trajectories of Tunisian Islam", in E. Stein, F. Volpi, F. Merone, K. Alfasi, L. Alles (eds.), *Islamism and the Arab Uprisings*, CASAW-AHRC People Power and State Power Network, June 2014: <http://www.casaw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Islamism-and-the-Arab-Uprising-June-2014-Ewan-Stein-Report.pdf>.
- 42 - See: Ben Néfissa (2011) and *Rapport de diagnostic sur la société civile tunisienne*, "UE", 15 March 2012: http://ceas.europa.eu/delegations/tunisia/documents/projets/rapportdiagnostic_stecivile_mars2012_fr.pdf.
- 43 - In our fieldwork in Sfax we met two associations in particular, the Islamic Economic Association and the Tunisian Association for Zakat.
- 44 - Some of the people we met expressed clearly that their view of economic success was not to be

detached by an Islamic behaviour, mainly linked to specific religious precepts. "God loves who can support the community. That is a move for the believer who looks for God's approbation in it economic activity", interview with Ahmed, 16 September 2014, Sfax; "Work's value in Islam is superior to the cult's practice. This Islamic spirit is supporting the economic Sfaxian success. The Islamic movement renews this spirit", interview with Habib, 17 September 2014, Sfax.

45 - For three years, it has organized an International Forum of Islamic Financing in Sfax and it has promoted the first master in Islamic Finance in the country at the University of Sfax.

46 - Ridha, founder of one of the associations, is a professor for the new Islamic finance master (he is also one of the master's creators). Oussama, Sfax's Zeitouna bank director: he also teaches in the master courses. Mohamed, accountant, helps for the *zakat* calculation in collaboration with Habib, expert in religious science, who is the guarantee for the conformity of the calculation to the Islamic jurisprudence. Habib is entrepreneur, an important association activist and one of the leaders of the Nahda local section.

47 - The Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD) is also referred to as an Islamist party. In this chapter however we make specific reference to the relationship between an entrepreneurial middle class and the Islamist political project, which is typical of the Turkish case.

48 - Interview with Loubna, lawyer and Nahda activist, 23 September 2014, Sfax.

49 - The phenomenon of the Islamic finance system was a widespread trend since the 1980s. In Tunisia a limited access was allowed to the Saudi bank Baraka and a new brand Tunisian bank was created in 2009. It lasts limited though until the fall of the regime in 2011, when a new enthusiasm gained the spirits of Islamic economic and financial cadres.

50 - The emergence of a party such as Nida Tunis is considered to be by a part of society as the party under which the old interests are reorganizing themselves.

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